

Worlds of Fantasy Box Set

Brian S. Pratt

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Thank you for appreciating the hard work of this author.

Forward

Herein you will find the complete, full length novels of the first book in each of Brian S. Pratt's three of most popular series. At the end of each will be the first three chapters of the second book. The author always dreaded buying a series that he wasn't sure if he would like. In giving the first book away in these three series, and giving a glimpse into the second, he is enabling readers to decide if they will enjoy further works by him prior to spending their hard-earned money. If you find these works enjoyable and entertaining, all he asks is that you pass this free box set on to friends and family who may enjoy them as well.

***The Unsuspecting Mage* of *The Morcyth Saga*
Shepherd's Quest of *The Broken Key Trilogy*
Jaikus and Reneeke Join the Guild of *The Adventurer's Guild***

About the Author

Brian S. Pratt began writing March 2005, a year after his wife walked out on him and their three children. Being a single parent hadn't been easy, but he wouldn't have had it any other way. Family has always been his first priority and he worked hard to make a good life for his children. Prior to setting words to page, he worked as an Avionics Specialist on the F-117A

Stealth Fighter, a Pizza Hut Delivery Unit General Manager, taxi driver, and Driving School instructor for teens. As of this publication, he has 18 books, including the three free ones found in this compilation, selling at the world's major eBook retailers such as: Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Apple, Kobo and more. His most popular series continues to be *The Morcyth Saga*, with *The Broken Key Trilogy* next in line. Most of the '80's were spent shielded behind a Dungeon Master's Screen and his writing reflects his love of the game. He now writes full time and lives in the Pacific Northwest USA with his three children.

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

[Facebook Fan Page](#)

Maps for these series can be found at
Brian S. Pratt's Official Website

www.BriansprattWoF.com

*The Fantasy Worlds of
Brian S. Pratt*

The Morcyth Saga

The Unsuspecting Mage
Fires of Prophecy
Warrior Priest of Dmon-Li
Trail of the Gods
The Star of Morcyth
Shades of the Past
The Mists of Sorrow*
**(Conclusion of The Morcyth Saga)*

Travail of The Dark Mage
Sequel to The Morcyth Saga

1-Light in the Barren Lands
2- Tides of Faith
3-Fall 2014

**Improbable Adventures of
Scar and Potbelly**

Ice Terraces of Crystal Crag

The Broken Key

#1- Shepherd's Quest

#2-Hunter of the Horde

#3-Quest's End

Qyaendri Adventures

Ring of the Or'tux

Dungeon Crawler Adventures

Underground

Portals

*Islands**

**Coming in the Future*

The Adventurer's Guild

#1-Jaikus and Reneeke Join the Guild

#2-Caravan to Kittikin

#3-coming Winter 2014/15

Above all others, this 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 made 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.

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Here follows the complete version of

The Unsuspecting Mage
Book One 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 puttering 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 slight 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 Garrett 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 shooed 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 shooed 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. Thelonus 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 Kinderling 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 castor 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. "It's 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."
Nooooooooooooo!*

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 pulsed, 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 sodden 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 kings' 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

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 hamstrung 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 halfway 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, tries 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 cowled 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 blossomed 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.

Here follows the complete version of

Shepherd's Quest
Book One of *The Broken Key Trilogy*

Chapter One

Riyan looked out over the landscape, his position on the ridge afforded him a commanding view of the valley. The moonlight overhead painted the world in shadows, among which who

knew what sorts of beasts may lie. Undaunted, he turned to his companion and directed his attention to the castle nestled in against the backdrop of the far side of the valley. "Look," he said, "there across the valley."

His companion, a man like himself who had seen many a battle, nodded. "We'll find her in there for sure."

The lady in question had been snatched from her home by person's unknown. Her family contracted Riyan and Chadric to track down those responsible, rescue their daughter, and slay her captors. After several days of following their trail, it has led them here.

"Let's go," Riyan said and then headed out. Chadric followed close behind.

They worked their way down from the ridge and soon found themselves in the shadowy darkness of the valley floor. Heavily forested, this area gave off a less than comforting feel as they made their way closer to the castle.

Howrrrrrrrr!

Not very far off a wolf's howl split the night. Riyan and Chadric came to an abrupt stop as they turned their attention toward the direction from which the sound had originated. The moon's light did little to dispel the shadows as it was unable to effectively reach this far below the forest's canopy.

"What...?" began Chadric when Riyan held up his hand to silence him. Becoming silent once more, Chadric focused his attention on the shadowy boles of the trees before them.

Then all of a sudden, one of the mountain wolves that infested these parts launched itself out of the shadows. Moving straight for Chadric, it snarled and its teeth became pale shadows in the darkness.

Riyan pulled his sword from its scabbard just as his companion was bowled over by the beast. "Chadric!" he hollered.

On the ground, the wolf had one of Chadric's gauntleted forearms in its mouth and was shaking it furiously. "Ahhh!" he cried out. With his other fist, Chadric began hitting the beast alongside the head but the blows did little in persuading it to release his arm.

Then Riyan came to his aid. Striking out at the back of the wolf with his sword, he cleaved the beast almost in two by his thunderous blow. Kicking out with his foot, he knocked the wolf from off his friend.

"You okay?" he asked. Offering a hand, he helped his friend to his feet.

Chadric nodded. Then he took a look at the gauntlet covering his forearm and saw where the wolf's teeth had indented the metal. "Yeah," he replied.

"We better hurry and reach the castle," Riyan said. "Wolves never hunt alone." No sooner did he say that than another howl split the night not very far away. Wiping his sword off on the wolf's hide, he gave Chadric a hand up and then they were back on their way to the castle.

They passed among the trees much more quickly now, the howling of the wolves driving them onward. Despite the frequency and close proximity of the howls, no other wolf made an appearance.

At last they reached the far side of the valley. Here the forest became less dense and it wasn't long before the outer wall of the castle appeared through the trees. High on the upward slope of

the valley where the mountains began, its dark edifice loomed hauntingly. The wall ringing the castle rose high from the valley's floor, beyond which climbed a spire even higher into the sky. A single light broke the darkness as it escaped from a window high in its upper reaches.

When they reached the edge of the forest across from the wall, they paused for a moment. "Something's not right," observed Chadric.

"I know," agreed Riyan. No guards were present upon the battlements and the gate stood open. "It can't be this easy."

"Could be they didn't expect anyone to have trailed them back here," suggested Chadric.

"You may be right." But deep down inside, Riyan didn't think so. "Come on," he said. Moving quickly and quietly, he raced towards the open gate. Other than the normal sounds one would expect while in the forest, nothing else could be heard.

Upon reaching the gate, they pressed themselves against the wall and peered through its gaping maw. The inner courtyard looked clear. A courtyard stretched forty yards from where they stood to the door leading into the castle. The tower they saw with the light was but one of three that extended upwards from the main body of the castle. Two shorter ones extended upward at either end while the one with the lighted window towered to twice their height out of the castle's central keep.

Riyan raised his hand which bore the Ring of Evil Detection. Calling upon its power, it took but a moment before a glow began surrounding a three foot statue that stood on a short column situated between them and the door leading into the castle. Exactly what the statue was couldn't be readily determined in the moonlight from this distance. "I thought so," stated Riyan. He glanced back to see if Chadric had seen the glow.

"Now what?" Chadric asked, he too had seen the glow.

"I'm all out of protection scrolls," he replied. "The ring will afford me some protection against whatever it is." He glanced back to the statue and drew his sword. "Stay here." When he heard Chadric say, 'Alright', he moved into the courtyard.

Working his way around the statue, he kept one eye on it and another on the rest of the courtyard. As he came closer, he could tell the statue was of some demonic beast. There were wings on its back and a single spiraling horn protruded from out of its forehead. The head had a cruel visage with what looked like two dagger-sharp fangs extending upward from out of its lower jaw.

Then all of a sudden he felt a vibration in the ring, one he always felt when evil was near. The eyes of the statue flashed a dark red and the head slowly turned towards him. As the statue came to life, he now understood why there were no guards on the walls or in the courtyard. This was the castle's guardian.

Coming out of its sitting position, the demonic creature stretched upright and raised its head. Then it gave out with an ear-piercing screech. Growing silent, the creature launched itself off the column and towards Riyan.

With a war cry of his own, Riyan raised his shield to ward off the creature's attack. Bringing his sword into position, he waited.

Beating its wings, the creature flew through the air and struck out at Riyan with the claws of its feet. Riyan raised his shield and felt the creature strike it with jarring impact. Then he retaliated with his sword, striking out at the creature with a resounding blow.

The blade of his sword rebounded off the creature, doing little more than chipping away a small piece of the marble it was constructed of. The jarring impact of the sword on the marble left Riyan's arm tingling.

With wings flapping, it rose into the air only to turn and strike once more.

By this time, Chadric had reached his friend's side and used his mace. He smashed the creature as its attack was thwarted again by Riyan's shield. The mace did more damage, being a bashing weapon such as it was. But it still did not do enough to stop the creature.

As the creature made ready for another attack, Chadric came up with an idea. He reached into his pouch and pulled out a small crystal vial. Then as the creature again moved to attack Riyan, he threw it. When the vial struck, it shattered upon the hard marble surface and the fluid it had contained began burning the creature.

Shrieking, the creature fell to the ground and started thrashing about as dark smoke wafted from where the liquid had touched it. Chadric and Riyan moved forward quickly and began laying into it with sword and mace. They soon had it reduced to a pile of broken marble. When at last its movements stopped completely, Riyan stepped back and looked to his friend.

"What was in that?" he asked.

"Holy water," Chadric replied. "Got it before we left Rynwall."

Riyan nodded his head and grinned at his friend. "That was fortunate," he said.

"Turned out that way," agreed Chad.

Leaving the shattered remains of the creature behind, they ran toward the door leading into the castle. Upon reaching the door, Riyan flung it wide and strode fearlessly into the castle. Dark and ominous, the interior was full of shadows as the moonlight made its way in through the many windows.

The hall they now found themselves in had the appearance of having been left unattended for some time. Cloth covered many of the pieces of furniture, spider webs hung in the corners of the room, all in all the place gave the feeling that no one's been here for some time. If that was the case, then why did the trail of the woman's captors lead them here? And what can it mean that a light shone from the window at the top of the tower?

Riyan glanced around the hall for a brief moment before crossing over to the stairway leading up. Taking the steps quickly, he and Chadric ascended up to the landing on the second floor. "We have to find the entrance to the tower," Riyan said.

Chadric moved down to the entrance of a hallway that headed in the general direction of the tower. "Could be down here," he suggested. He saw that it extended further into the castle.

Riyan nodded and then moved to join him at the hallway. Taking the lead, he left the landing and headed quickly down the hallway with Chadric right behind.

The hallway itself was rather wide with several doors lining both sides. Moving past them, Riyan walked quickly towards the end of the hallway where he hoped to find the entrance to the tower. When he reached a little over halfway to the door at the end, his ring all of a sudden began

vibrating to tell him evil was close. He no sooner paused and was about to tell Chadric to be on his guard than the doors lining the hallway opened. From out of the opened doors, skeletons bearing swords and shields rushed forward to attack.

Immediately, Riyan and Chadric formed up back to back to face the onslaught. Easily a dozen skeletons boiled from the adjacent rooms. Striking out, Riyan's sword removed the head from one only to see its body continue the attack. "We have to go for the arms!" he hollered to Chadric. His next swing severed the sword arm from the headless skeleton. Kicking out with his boot, he knocked the one armed headless stack of bones backwards. It broke apart when it struck the wall.

"Yeah!" Chadric yelled as his mace smashed through the ribcage of another.

Laying about them, they quickly destroyed the skeletons. Having only received a few minor cuts, they left the pile of bones behind and hurried to the door at the end of the hallway. So far, what they have faced hasn't been all that challenging.

Upon reaching the door, Riyan grabbed the handle and pushed it open. On the other side they found a room where the staircase leading up into the tower began. A roar filled the room as a fur covered creature leaped from the stairs. Taller than either of them, it must have stood over six and a half feet. Naked other than the covering of fur, it's only weapons appeared to be a pair of nasty looking claws and the razor sharp teeth filling its mouth.

Shouting his war cry, Riyan raced forward with sword drawn to meet the attack. He raised his shield as one of the creature's massive paws struck out at him. The force of the blow upon his shield knocked him backwards several steps. As he saw Chadric moving past him to engage, he yelled, "It's stronger than it looks."

Chadric nodded that he heard then attacked with his mace. Impacting the creature's side, the hit elicited a roar of pain. Then another of the creature's paws swung forward. Chadric raised his shield to block the blow and sailed backwards through the air when the blow connected. Slamming into the wall, he slid down and settled to the floor.

"Yaaaaa!" screamed Riyan as he thrust his sword toward the creature. The sword's point struck the creature's side and sank in several inches.

The creature tilted its head back and howled at the pain Riyan's sword inflicted. Then the creature struck the sword with one of its paws and knocked it from Riyan's grasp. As the sword flew across the room, the creature struck Riyan with its other paw and sent him sailing. He hit the wall with an 'oof' and settled to the floor.

From across the room, Chadric was getting back to his feet. He saw the creature moving toward where Riyan was lying on the ground and hollered, "Hey you!" When the creature turned, he threw his mace and smashed the creature right between the eyes. The force of the blow was such that it caved in the creature's skull, smashing the brain within. Falling backwards, it hit the floor and twitched for a few seconds before becoming still.

Chadric rushed to his friend's side and asked, "Are you okay?"

Riyan opened his eyes and nodded. "I think so." Glancing over to where the creature lay he said, "Hope there aren't many more like that one."

Offering his friend a hand up, Chadric helped him to his feet. Then he went over to the dead creature and recovered his mace.

“Hey, would you look at this?”

Turning around, he saw Riyan standing before a closed chest sitting against the wall. “Wonder what’s in it?” he asked.

Riyan shrugged then turned back to face the chest. “Only one way to find out,” he said. Grabbing hold of the lid, he lifted it up.

Chadric crossed the room and stood beside him as he swung the lid all the way up. Inside, the gleam of coins and gems could be seen. “Must be a fortune!” he exclaimed excitedly.

They both reached in and started removing the coins and gems. A few gold coins mixed in with a handful of silver, the majority of the coins the chest held were that of copper. They filled their pouches with the treasure and in so doing, discovered a secret compartment hidden in the bottom of the chest.

Riyan took out his knife and pried it open. Within they found a plain, brass key. He held it up and said, “This could be useful.”

“Better take it with us,” agreed Chadric.

Putting it within his belt pouch, Riyan then turned and headed towards the stairs leading up. The steps rose as they wound their way around the outer wall of the tower in a spiraling fashion until finally disappearing through the ceiling. With Chadric following closely, Riyan moved onto the stairs and quickly began moving to the next level.

“Wait a second,” Chadric said as he pulled one of his torches out of his pack. Once he had it lit, he indicated for Riyan to continue.

For a brief moment the stairs passed through a narrow section as it went from the first level to the second. Then it opened up again as it reached the second floor landing. Here they found boxes and crates stacked neatly in various spots across the second floor.

As it turned out, the tower itself wasn’t very wide and the light from Chadric’s torch was able to reveal it in its entirety. With nothing here other than boxes and crates, they continued following the stair as it wound its way along the outside wall up to the third floor.

Just as it had between the first and second floor, the stair entered a narrow area when it passed from the second floor to the third. When Riyan entered the narrow area between floors, his ring once more began to vibrate. He paused a moment as he informed Chadric that something was ahead, then took the torch from him as he resumed his forward progress.

Now with the torch held before him, Riyan stepped cautiously as he neared where the stairs opened up onto the third floor. First the torch, then his head cleared the opening as he slowly crept his way forward. The light from the torch cast shadows in the room as he completely emerged from the opening.

The room as it turned out looked to be someone’s bedroom. A bed, dresser, and table all gave this room a rather homey appearance. Another chest similar in nature to the one they found below sat at the foot of the bed. Riyan moved forward into the room toward it as Chadric began to emerge from the opening leading from the second floor.

“Be careful,” he warned when he saw what Riyan was moving toward.

Riyan came to a stop before the chest and placed his hand upon the latch. Gripping it tightly, he pulled the lid open. Inside, he found another pile of coins. Nestled in among the coins were two bottles that were normally used in conjunction with potions. He moved his torch closer and saw that both bottles contained liquid.

He reached in and took one of the potion bottles out. "Hey, look what I found!" Always excited when finding potions, Riyan turned back to Chadric. "Wonder what they do?"

Chadric moved closer to the chest and reached inside to pull out the other one. Looking closely at it, he saw a feather inscribed upon a wax seal. "Maybe this is a flying potion?" he guessed.

"Possibly," stated Riyan. "Mine has the sign of the healer."

"A healing potion," nodded Chadric happily. "Can always use one of those."

"You got that right," replied Riyan.

They then removed their packs and set them on the floor. Once the potions were secured within their packs along with the coins from the chest, they slung them again across their backs.

"There can't be too many more floors remaining to this tower," observed Chadric.

"I know," replied Riyan. "Need to be extra careful from this point on. My ring indicated evil was present but there's nothing here."

"If what it sensed is on the next floor," said Chad, "it must be powerful indeed."

Riyan just nodded his head.

The two friends then went to the stair and began climbing up to the fourth floor. Before they reached the narrow area between floors, they saw light coming from above. "Better put that out," Chadric told Riyan as he indicated the torch.

"Good thinking," he replied. Then putting the burning end against a step, he rolled it until the flame went out. Leaving it smoking on the step, Riyan looked up at the light coming from the fourth floor. Removing his sword from its scabbard, he resumed moving into the narrow area between the third and fourth floor. His ring began vibrating once more.

When he came to the end of the narrow area, he slowed down and continued until he was just able to gaze into the fourth floor.

"Come in gentlemen," said a voice.

On the far side of the room sat a man hunched over a desk with his back to them. Over the desk were two shelves lined with books. Sitting at the right end of the lower shelf was a gilded cage containing a small creature. Upon closer examination, it was revealed that the creature within the cage was almost an exact duplicate to that of the statue creature they destroyed down in the courtyard below.

Riyan exited the narrow passage and entered the room. "We've come for the girl," he said.

"I know," the man replied. Turning around, the man looked to where Riyan stood with sword drawn. "But she's mine." He then glanced towards Chadric as he emerged from the narrow passage behind Riyan. Grinning he said "And now so are you."

"I think we'll be a bit more difficult to deal with than a girl," countered Riyan.

The man scooted his chair back and stood up. Turning to face the pair, they saw that he was dressed in a robe of some sort. Could possibly be a magic user of some kind.

Moving his hands in arcane gestures, the man began speaking words neither of them could understand.

Realizing he was casting a spell, Chadric threw his mace in an attempt to disrupt the magic user's concentration. Unfortunately the man finished his spell in time and bolts of reddish energy lanced from his fingertips, striking both Riyan and Chadric. The man then easily dodged aside to avoid the mace.

When the bolts struck them, it felt like fire. Indeed, where one bolt had struck Riyan's ring mail armor, the rings in that area were slightly melted. Giving out with a cry, Riyan charged the man as another round of fiery bolts left his fingers. This time, the bolts were directed solely at Riyan. His shield bore the brunt of the attack though two made it through and knocked him back a step.

Then the magic user began chanting another series of magical words and a shadow formed before him. Roughly man-shaped, it began moving towards them.

"Get the magic user!" yelled Riyan as his sword lashed out at the oncoming shadow. His sword seemed to have minimal effect as it passed right through.

As the magic user began another chant, Chadric drew his knife and rushed him. He made it to within a couple feet before the man finished his spell and a green glob formed before him. Unable to stop, Chadric ran right into the acidic green glob. Pain flared as the green substance began eating his flesh away. "Riyan!" he cried out as his momentum carried him forward into the magic user.

Then the magic user began crying out in pain too as Chadric gripped him in a death grip. The green substance that covered Chadric was now beginning to eat away at the magic user.

With his concentration now broken from the pain of the green goo, the shadow that was moving on Riyan disappeared. Riyan ran forward to where Chadric gripped the magic user only to find both men were beyond his help.

Most of the exposed skin of Chadric's body had melted away to expose the bones underneath. The screams of the magic user continued to ring out as the green goo ate his flesh away.

Riyan knelt down by the side of his lifelong friend. He could see that his friend was still alive and in great pain. Chadric's eyes looked up at him beseechingly and he knew what he was asking.

With tears in his eyes, he took his sword and plunged it into the chest of his best friend to end his suffering. The magic user's suffering, he allowed to continue until the end came.

When he pulled his sword free from Chadric's body, he found the blade pitted by its brief contact with the goo covering Chadric. No longer serviceable, he cast it aside. He collapsed on the floor for some time, grief over his friend's death heavy upon him. But then he remembered why they had come. The woman.

"Bye Chad," he said then moved to the stairs and hurried up to the top. The stairs ended at a locked door with a small window set into it. Going to the window, he put his mouth near it and said, "Hello?"

"Go away!" a woman's voice yelled at him from the other side.

“Lady,” replied Riyan, “I’ve come to rescue you. Your father sent me.”

Then he saw the face of a most beautiful woman appear in the window. “My father?” she asked.

“That’s right,” he said. He tried to open the door only to find it to be locked. Remembering the key he had found in the chest on the ground floor, he took it out of his pouch and placed it in the keyhole. Turning it, he nodded satisfactorily when the lock turned. Then he opened the door wide and stepped within the room.

Barely dressed in anything, and looking all the more sexy because of it, the woman rushed forward and clasped her arms around him. “Thank you gallant knight,” she said. Then reaching her lips up to his, she gave him a most passionate kiss. Her breasts were rubbing into his chest and...

“Wait a second right now,” Chad demanded.

“What?” asked Riyan.

“Here you have me dead on the floor below,” he stated with dissatisfaction, “my skin eaten away by acid, and you’re about to get it on with the woman?”

“So?” his friend said with a grin. “It’s just a story.”

“I know it’s just a story,” Chad remarked. “But I always seem to be the one to die.”

The two friends were sitting upon a hillock under a bright sunny summer day. Down the hill a ways grazed the flock of sheep that Riyan was supposed to be keeping an eye on.

“You’re one to talk,” replied Riyan. “Don’t you remember the time before last when you were telling the tale?” When he saw his friend get a grin on his face, he knew that he did. “You had me lying on a torture rack with an arm and a leg missing, hot lead being poured into my eye socket and where were you? Off having a little fling with the daughter of the man who was torturing me!”

“Okay, okay,” he said. Then they both broke into laughter.

This was one of their favorite pastimes. On the days Chad could get away from his father’s mill, he was usually to be found out here with Riyan as he minded the flock. They would spend hours telling each other stories of adventures they wished they could have. Being stuck in a small town such as Quillim all their lives has allowed them little chance for such experiences.

For Riyan whose family was poor shepherds that barely made a living from their sheep, and Chad who detested being a miller’s son, life in this border town was dull and uneventful. The only time adventure came their way was when one of Riyan’s sheep managed to wander away and they had to go track it down, which was more often than not.

Baaaaaaa!

“Not again,” Chad moaned as Riyan got up and began scanning the area.

“Looks like Black Face got stuck in the thicket again,” Riyan told his friend.

“Isn’t that the third time this week?” asked Chad.

Nodding, Riyan began making his way down the hill as he replied, “Something like that. Give me a hand.”

Shaking his head, Chad pushed himself off the ground and went to help his friend. “Can’t wait until shearing time,” he said.

“You got that right,” agreed Riyan. “It’s his wool, it keeps getting snared by the thorns.” Sure enough, they found Black Face trapped within the thicket. Sometimes he wished that he could just leave him there for a day or two to teach him a lesson, but his mother would skin him alive if he did. So working very carefully, he and Chad spent the next half hour working the thorns from out of Black Face’s coat.

Chapter Two

Later that day when the sun began its trek to the horizon, Riyan and Chad gathered the flock and started the return journey to Riyan’s home. It wasn’t safe for the herd to be left out in the hills at night. Aside from wild animals, there’s always the chance that the goblins might be in the area and will help themselves.

The village of Quillim, which both lads call home, sits on the border where the lands of Duke Yoric abuts that of the mountains whose other side marks the beginning of the goblin territories. Peace between the two races has lasted for over a century, ever since the goblins were pushed back across the mountains during the War of the Three Clans. Now, it’s only the occasional raid here and there by goblins that has the people in Quillim worried. Those living in the area have found that if you keep your flock in close to your home at night, there’s less of a chance one will turn up missing in the morning.

“My father has me helping with the mill tomorrow,” Chad informed his friend. “Seems my brother is down in Wardean on business.”

“Oh?” asked Riyan. “What takes him down there?”

“A friend of father has a mill there and may be interested in apprenticing Tye,” he explained. “He wants Tye to stay a week so he may see what kind of person he is.”

“If he gets apprenticed, won’t that mean you’ll have to help your father more?” Riyan asked.

Chad sighed. “Unfortunately, yes. As long as Tye was helping with the mill, he didn’t need me. My whole family knows of my dissatisfaction with the life of a miller, and they are okay with me pursuing another trade. But if Tye gets apprenticed, there’ll be no one to help out. At least not for a few years until Eryl gets a little older.”

“Tough break,” said Riyan with a pat on his friend’s back.

“If I had settled on a trade by now,” Chad told his friend, “I wouldn’t be in this mess.”

Just then from up ahead, four young men who were a little bit older than Riyan and Chad appeared over the crest of the hill. “Great,” complained Riyan.

When Chad spied who was coming towards them, he too gave out with a groan.

“Well, well, well,” one of the approaching young men began to say as the two groups came together. “I thought I smelled the foul odor of sheep dung.”

Only two years older than Riyan and Chad, the one who spoke has been a thorn in their sides all their lives. Being the son of Quillim’s magistrate, not to mention the fact that his family holds title to most of the lands the local shepherds use to graze their flock, has given him the idea he’s better than everyone else. His father was a nice enough person, but the son is a right nasty piece of work.

“Good evening Rupert,” Riyan said.

“Didn’t I tell you not to use this area for your stinking sheep?” Rupert asked.

“We pay your father for the use of this land,” argued Riyan. “He’s the only one who can tell us not to use it.”

“Sounds pretty uppity for a sheep dung boy,” one of Rupert’s cronies said.

“I don’t care what you think you can and can’t do, sheep dung boy,” Rupert asserted with a scowl. “You aren’t to use this area.” He moved to stand in front of Riyan and poked him hard in the chest with his finger. “Do you understand me?”

When Riyan failed to respond quickly, Rupert slaps him across the face. “I asked you a question!”

“I understand you all too well,” replied Riyan. Face beginning to turn red, he stared at Rupert with undisguised hatred.

“Scatter ‘em boys,” he said to his cronies. As the three young men with him began scaring off the sheep, he added, “Maybe this will help you to remember.” Then he too started yelling and waving his arms to scatter Riyan’s flock.

Riyan and Chad stood there in the road and did nothing. They had long ago learned that if they tried to stop Rupert and his friends, that things would only get worse. So they stood there and waited for them to stop. When at last Rupert and his cronies ceased chasing Riyan’s sheep, they laughed and continued along their way.

“I hate him,” Riyan said with great feeling.

“I know,” replied Chad. “Everyone does. I don’t know how a nice man such as his father, could spawn such a person.”

From the surrounding area, the sound of bleating sheep rang out. “We better go find them before the sun goes down,” Riyan said.

So while the sun sank further to the horizon, Riyan and Chad combed the neighboring hills until all the sheep were accounted for. Then they resumed their way to Riyan’s home.

It was a small house with only three rooms; one for his mother, one for himself, and the outer living area. His father had died several years ago while out watching the flock. One of the mountain spiders had attacked and bit him. The venom quickly worked through his system and before he could return, had passed into unconsciousness. He was dead when they found him the next day.

Riyan still blamed himself for his father's death. Had he been with his father that day, he could have gone to Old Glia for one of her potions which would have cured the poison coursing through his father's veins. Instead, he and Chad had gone fishing.

Mountain spiders such as what attacked his father were rare in these parts. At most they were sighted once or twice a year. In the last five years, his father had been the only one to have encountered one.

"We better hurry, or my mother will be getting worried," said Riyan. Then with Chad's help, they herded the flock along the trail leading to Riyan's house. By the time Riyan's home came into view, the stars were already beginning to appear.

Chad helped him get the flock into the fenced area where they spend the night. Then he said, "I better hurry along too, or my father will get on me again about not being home on time."

Riyan patted him on the back and said, "Thanks for the help."

"You're welcome," he replied. "Don't know when I'll be able to join you in the hills again. With Tye gone for a week, I'll be stuck at the mill."

Riyan shrugged. "What is, must be," he waxed poetically. "Next time it'll be your turn to tell the tale."

"Already figured out how I'm going to kill you off," he replied with a grin.

Laughing, Riyan gave him another good natured slap on the back. "Can't wait." Then Chad hurried home.

Riyan turned toward the door just as it opened to reveal his mother. "Everything okay?" she asked, worried.

"Rupert again," he explained.

"I'm going to talk to his father in the morning," she said as she stepped aside to let him enter. "He has no right to do such things. We pay them good money to graze our flock on their land. We should not be treated in such a manner."

Riyan went to the table and sat down. "It'll do no good," he said. "The last time you went to his father after something like this, all that happened was that I got a beating the next day." He reached out for the ladle in the stew pot and began filling his bowl.

His mother sat across the table from him and looked at her son with sad eyes. She wanted something better for him than a life as a shepherd, especially one around here. It wasn't so bad before Rupert grew to adulthood, but now things for her son were not so good. But there was little hope of improving their lot in life.

"He can't do anything serious," he said to his mother between bites. "If he does, then his father would be forced to intervene. He'll not risk that."

Throughout the rest of the meal, they talked about more inconsequential things in an attempt to put Rupert out of their minds. Afterwards, Riyan headed off to bed as he must be up with the dawn to once again shepherd the flock.

The following morning he was up well before the sun crested the eastern horizon. The place where he planned to take the flock to graze was a bit further into the hills than where he took them yesterday. But as his father taught him, if the sheep were allowed to graze too long in one

place, it would eventually ruin the area for grazing. His father once related an experience he had while a young man. He was just learning the art of shepherding and had allowed his flock to graze one area for several weeks in succession. Such constant grazing had left the area unusable for many weeks. So now Riyan always made sure that he rotated the flock between the various pastures among the hills.

It took him well over an hour to bring the flock to the desired pasture. Nestled in among the hills such as it was, it had always been one of Riyan's favorite places to take them. The quiet and tranquility of this area of the hills was accentuated by a stream that worked its way from one end to the other.

Once the flock was situated where he wanted them, he made himself comfortable under a tree while he kept an eye on them. Off to the west rose the mountains that separate these lands from that of the goblins. He often wondered what they looked like. Oh sure, he heard tales of them all his life. Supposedly they were about half to two-thirds the size of the average human with a slight greenish hue to their skin. But he's never seen one and always wanted to. Though from a distance, as they're reputed to be rather antisocial creatures and prone to attacking anything that came near.

The day went by as every other day of his life has, boring and dull. Most of his time was spent simply doing nothing but sitting and watching his flock. Other times he took out his sling and pretended that he was a fighter in one of the stories he and Chad tell one another. He would run around the hill and 'kill' enemies with stones slung from his sling. Of course the plethora of enemies he killed was in actuality small plants, trees and the occasional rock. His aim has improved greatly over the years. Even at a run he could hit his target more often than not.

He always carried a staff with him as well as his sling while out watching his flock. There had been times over the years when between his staff and sling, he was able to fight off predators that tried to make off with one of his sheep. When not spending time 'killing monsters' with his sling, he worked on his staff. He's become pretty decent at twirling it, but not so good that it hummed when he spun it. In the stories the bards always tell, the great staffers could cause their staves to hum. There were times when he believed some of the tales the bards told were a bit overexaggerated.

Baaaaaaa!

"Now what?" he asked himself. He had been dozing under the tree, basking in the warmth of the morning sun. Looking over the flock, he tried to ascertain which one of them was bleating. Black Face, the trouble maker, was nowhere to be seen. "Of course." Leaving his staff leaning against the tree, he got to his feet and followed the sound of the bleating.

The sound was coming from over the far side of a nearby hill. He walked quickly towards it, dreaming of the time when they would sell off some of the flock. He's going to make sure Black Face is one of the ones to go.

He hurried up the side of the hill and when he crested it, looked down the other side. "Black Face!" he cried out as he took his sling from his belt.

Baaaaaaa!

Black Face again cried out in fear as one of the predators of the mountains circled it. A small animal barely half Black Face's size, yet with a strong jaw and sharp teeth they were a constant threat in these parts.

Riyan placed a stone within the cup of the sling and quickly got it up to speed. Then he launched it at the animal just as it readied to attack. The stone flew straight and true towards the small dog like creature and struck it in the side of the head. The blow sent it reeling to the side before collapsing to the ground.

He raced down the hill and when he reached Black Face, shooed the sheep back up the hill towards the rest of the flock. Then he turned his attention back to the predator and saw that it was still breathing. Riyan stepped closer and pulled out his knife. With a quick strike, he killed it.

Quillim's city council has posted a two silver piece bounty on the animal due to the menace it posed to the community. Many sheep have been lost to them over the years. Riyan picked the animal up by the scruff of the neck and carried it back to where he's been keeping watch over the flock.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully and when he returned home with the flock later that night, showed the dead animal to his mother. "I'm going to go in early tomorrow and collect the bounty," he said. "Then I'll take the flock out in the afternoon."

His mother took the carcass and cut the animal's head off. That's all that was required by the Council in order to receive the bounty. The rest of it she dressed and began to prepare it for the next evening's dinner.

The following morning an hour or so after they finished their morning meal, Riyan walked into town with the sack containing the animal's head. Quillim's not much of a town. It has the essentials required of every town; a chandler's shop, baker, butcher, etc. All the places the neighboring townsfolk needed in order to survive.

The building housing the Magistrate's Office and the Council's meeting hall sat prominently in the center of town. It was to this building that Riyan took the animal's head. He slowed down when he saw the three young men who were Rupert's cronies talking with one another near the town hall's front entrance. When they noticed Riyan approaching, they grew quiet and turned toward him. Just then, Freya and her father exited the building through the front door.

"Freya!" he exclaimed quite happily. He and Freya have been friends for as long as either one could remember. In his heart he has always cared deeply for her and even had thoughts that they may one day be married.

His mood quickly sobered when she failed to meet his eyes. Her father nodded his head in greeting and gave him a curt, "Riyan." Then they brushed past him without speaking. He turned to look at them as they left and Freya glanced over her shoulder back to him. Their eyes locked for a brief second before she broke the contact and turned her head forward once more.

He came to a stop as he watched her leave, puzzled by her reaction. Usually she was quite excited to see him. After all, with him out in the fields with the sheep most of the time, there was little opportunity for them to spend any time together.

“What’s the matter?” one of Rupert’s friends asked as the three of them came and surrounded him.

“Maybe she doesn’t like him anymore?” another one quipped.

“Could be she found a better man, one that doesn’t smell like sheep dung,” the third one said. At that he and the others started laughing derisively.

Riyan ignored their taunts as he knew that to respond in any way would only egg them on. He tried to continue on to the town hall’s entrance but was blocked when the first one stepped in front of him and put his hand on Riyan’s chest.

His eyes went down to look at the sack Riyan held in his hand. “What do you have there?” he asked.

“Nothing you’d be interested in,” replied Riyan.

“Oh yeah?” asked another of them. Then he snatched it out of his hand.

“Give it back!” demanded Riyan.

Holding the sack before him, the young man asked, “Or what?”

Before Riyan had the chance to reply, Rupert and his father the Magistrate exited the building. The Magistrate quickly grasped what was going on by the way the three young men had Riyan surrounded and how the one young man was holding the sack out before him.

“What’s going on here?” he asked.

The three young men turned toward him quickly, startled by his sudden appearance. “Uh, nothing.”

Riyan turned to face the Magistrate and said, “I killed a kidog. I was bringing it to collect the bounty when they took the sack containing its head from me.”

The Magistrate’s face darkened as he turned to face the one holding the sack.

“Was nothing like that your honor,” the young man explained. “Just having a little fun is all.”

“Give it back Girg,” the Magistrate ordered.

“Sure thing,” Girg replied. Then he handed the sack back to Riyan. “Here you go.”

Riyan snatched the sack out of his hand and then said to the Magistrate, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcomed my boy,” he replied to Riyan. “Go inside and Ceci will take care of it for you.”

Riyan nodded and as the young man stepped out of his way, he walked towards the door. Behind him he heard the Magistrate begin to berate his son about the conduct of his friends. Riyan doubted it would do any good, more than likely would cause him to get a beating the next time he and Rupert met.

He walked through the entrance and then entered the first door on his right. Within he found Ceci, the lady who looked after the town hall as well as paid for the bounties and various other duties. She looked up from her desk and saw him standing there just within her doorway. From the blood stains on the sack, she knew what he was here for.

He held up the sack and said, “Bagged a kidog yesterday.”

She motioned for him to come forward and then took the sack from him when he offered it to her. Opening it up, she saw the severed kidog head and then nodded. She set the sack on the floor

behind her and then opened a strong box that was resting on the floor next to her desk. After removing two silver pieces, she handed them over to him. "Good work Riyan," she praised.

"Thank you," he replied as he took the coins.

"Did you hear?" she asked with a smile.

"I haven't been in town lately," he explained. "Something going on?"

"Oh yes," she replied. "Rupert and Freya are to be married."

"What?" he exclaimed loudly.

"Sometime last night Rupert asked her father for her hand and he said yes," she explained. Then she saw the look in his eyes and realized something was amiss. "Are you okay?"

Dazed, his mind numb and heart breaking, Riyan paid her question no heed. Instead, he turned around and rushed from the building. Once outside, he searched for Freya and her father but they were no longer in sight. He then began running towards their home that set on the edge of town.

How could she be marrying Rupert? All his life he had thought that one day they would get together and be married. He just hadn't worked up the courage to ask her father as yet. Now there was no longer any time, he had to state his intentions and get him to change his mind.

Several people hailed him as he ran through town, but so intent on his own inner turmoil was he, that he didn't even know they were there. Finally, their house appeared down the street before him. He could see the front door was just closing. Running up to the door, he gave it three firm knocks.

When it opened, Freya's father stood there before him. "I thought you might show up," he said.

"You can't let Freya marry Rupert," he said. "He's a terrible person."

"I know you care for her," her father replied. "But I have to think of what's best for Freya. This marriage will assure her of never having to worry about what tomorrow will bring. His family is wealthy and well connected."

"But..." Riyan stammered. When Freya's father looked questioningly at him, he blurted out, "But I love her and want to marry her!"

Her father's eyes turned sad at that. "I know son," he said. "I've known for awhile now that you've felt this way."

Then behind her father Riyan saw Freya appear from the back room. "Freya!" he hollered to her. "You can't marry Rupert!"

Her father turned around and said, "Get back in your room Freya. Riyan and I need to have a little talk."

She looked with deep sadness to Riyan and then replied, "Yes father." Then turning around, she went back into her room.

Freya's father stepped outside and joined Riyan before shutting the door. "I like you boy," he said. "I always have. But I can't let that get in the way of making the best match I can for my daughter."

When Riyan tried to break in, he held up his hand and stopped him. “You are a poor shepherd,” he continued. “You don’t even own the land on which your sheep graze. What life could you give her?”

“But I love her,” he asserted.

“Son, in life, love simply isn’t enough.” He laid his hand on Riyan’s shoulder. “My daughter cares for you, I would hate for her to lose your friendship because of this.”

Riyan snapped his eyes to his and replied, “She’ll never lose it. I just...”

“Go home Riyan,” her father said. “Go home and work to get over it.” He then turned and opened the door. He paused there a moment before saying, “It might be best for all concerned if you don’t have any contact with my daughter until after the marriage.” Without waiting for Riyan’s response, he went back into the house and shut the door.

In the instant it took for her father to enter the house and shut the door, Riyan saw Freya there in the hallway. Their eyes locked for a moment before the door shut.

With the shutting of the door, his heart fell. Sadness overtook him and it was all he could do to simply keep his emotions under control. Then as he turned, he saw Rupert standing there across the street. Anger and hate burned in his heart when he saw the smug smile of satisfaction appear on Rupert’s face.

Riyan almost crossed the street to wipe it off with a well placed blow, but then he realized that would solve nothing. So he turned his back on him and walked home.

Chapter Three

Once back home he told his mom what had happened. “How could her father agree to this union?” he asked with great emotion. Then he flopped down in a chair.

“I’m sure he’s doing what he thinks is best for her,” his mother replied.

He looked at his mother with hurt filled eyes. “Don’t tell me that you agree with this?”

She shook her head negatively then walked over to him. “Sometimes parents do the wrong thing for the right reason,” she explained as she wrapped her arms about him to offer comfort.

“Rupert is a swine,” he said. “Someone needs to do something about him.”

“But not you,” she insisted. “Respect her father’s wishes and do nothing.”

Riyan abruptly came to his feet and started pacing. “I can’t stay here,” he said as he came to a stop. “I need to get away for awhile.”

“That’s a good idea,” agreed his mother.

"I'll take the flock out for a few days to the edge of the mountains," he told her. "Chad will be working at the mill for the next week so this would be a good time for me to be alone."

"Are you sure you want to go that far?" she asked. "There have been rumors of goblins."

He turned his face towards hers and smiled. "There are always rumors of goblins," he replied. "So far I have yet to come across one and we live as close as anyone."

"Still, be careful," she cautioned.

"I will," he promised.

She insisted on cooking him a good lunch before he started off. Outside, the sheep have already begun their bleating. According to their schedule, they should have been heading out to greener pastures long before now.

They shared a meal of cooked mutton, potatoes, and bread. Then she packed enough food for him to last several days, even though he planned on using his sling to hunt for food while he was gone.

As he slung his pack over his shoulder and prepared to head out, she placed her arm on his. "Just think on this while you're out there," she began. "Freya has no choice in this, such is the fate of all girls. She'll need friends like you to lean on." When he turned his head to look at her, she added, "Lord knows being married to Rupert will not be an easy life."

He nodded and hung his head. "I will mother," he replied. "Why can't her father see that?" He then gave her a peck on the cheek.

His mother handed him his staff before he stepped out the door. She went with him to the sheep pen and gave a hand with removing the flock. As he herded the sheep away from the house, she waved goodbye to her son.

"See you in a few days," he hollered to her as he left.

"Be careful," she cautioned with another wave.

He then continued herding the flock away from the pen and towards the distant mountains. This wasn't the first time he had taken the flock towards the mountains on an overnight excursion, usually he would return a day or two later. But this time he planned to go further than he ever had before and didn't plan on being back for at least four days, maybe longer. He needed time to get over the hurt in his heart.

For the rest of the afternoon, he continued pushing deeper into the hills. When nightfall came, he stopped the flock near a small stream and settled in for the night. He made sure the flock was accounted for before darkness came. Then he spread out his bedroll and fixed himself a quick bite to eat.

Later that night as he laid there under the stars, he sobbed.

"Riyan!"

Early the following morning, Chad came running down the lane towards the home where Riyan and his mother lived. "Riyan!" he hollered again and then saw that the sheep were not in the pen.

The front door opened before he reached the house and Riyan's mother stepped out. "Good morning Chad," she said.

“Have you heard?” he asked as he came closer.

“About Freya and Rupert?” she asked in reply. When he nodded his head, she said, “Yes. Riyan told me about it yesterday.”

“Was he upset?” he asked.

“You could say that,” she replied sadly. “He’s taken the flock up near the mountains for a few days. Said you were working at your father’s mill.”

“I am,” he said. “When I heard about Freya getting married to that piece of trash, I got angry. So my father gave me an hour to come here and talk to him about it.”

“Sorry you missed him,” she said.

“So am I.” He turned his gaze towards the mountains. “Tell him to come see me as soon as he gets back will you please?”

“The minute he gets back,” she assured him.

“Thank you,” he said then turned and headed back to the mill. Worry for his friend weighed heavily on his mind. So heavy in fact, that once he was back in town and moving down the main street, he failed to notice the individual coming towards him. He almost walked into him.

He looked up at the last minute and saw his and Riyan’s friend Bart a scant foot in front of him. Bart was a recent arrival to their little town of Quillim. He showed up about a year and a half ago and has worked odd jobs at various farms in the area since. Currently he’s out at old Rebecca’s place helping with tilling her fields. Ever since her sons married and moved away, she’s had a hard time making it.

At first when Bart had tried using that horse drawn plow of hers, it was a disaster. He couldn’t get the horses to go in a straight line to save his life. But now that he’s been doing it for about a week, he’s started to gain a modicum of proficiency. From what he’s told them, he could do a little bit of everything, the result of having no trade and forced to live on what work he could get here and there.

The one thing Bart could do that really impressed Chad was how well he threw darts. Now we’re not talking about the darts people used for sport, no. These were the deadly darts that could do some serious damage if they hit you. A few inches longer than the regular darts, these had barbs at the end that became embedded in whatever they hit. If you were to pull it out of your flesh, it would take a chunk of it with it.

Once when the three of them were out on an overnight camping excursion earlier this summer, he took down a rabbit with one. From that point on Chad’s been calling him Bart the Dart off and on which has annoyed him to no end. Recently though, Rupert and his friends have begun to use the term and not in a friendly manner. Ever since they took to calling him ‘Bart the Dart’, it lost the friendly nuance it once held so he stopped using it.

Coming to an abrupt halt, he noticed the smile playing across Bart’s face.

“Was wondering if you were going to see me,” Bart said.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “Just thinking about Riyan.”

“You heard?” Bart asked.

Nodding, Chad said, “Yeah. His mother said he took it rather rough.”

“I can imagine,” replied Bart.

“He’s taking the flock up into the hills at the base of the mountains for a few days,” he told him. “I think he needed time to come to grips with it.”

“Will do him good,” stated Bart.

Chad looked up the street and groaned, “Oh no.”

“What?” Bart asked as he turned to look. Coming toward them down the street was Rupert, alone this time. Dressed in his fine clothes, he appeared to be strutting down the street as if he owned it. Which, truth be told, isn’t too far from the truth as his family owned quite a bit of the town.

He came directly to them and stopped a few feet away. “Either of you seen Riyan this morning?” he asked.

They both shook their heads and Chad said, “No.”

“Well if you do, tell him I’m looking for him,” he said.

“We’ll do that,” Bart assured him.

“Did you hear I’m getting married?” he asked. When he saw their faces turn into scowls, he grinned. “Guess so. Lovely girl Freya.”

“You’ve never been interested in her before,” said Chad. “This seems rather sudden.”

He shrugged. “My father pestered me to pick a bride,” he explained. “So I chose her. One’s as good as another if you know what I mean.” Then he laughed and moved past them as he continued on his way.

“He doesn’t even care for her,” Bart said with barely controlled anger.

“Six will get you ten that he’s doing it more to anger Riyan than anything else,” Chad said.

Bart turned and gave him a mischievous grin. “What say we do Riyan a favor then?” he suggested.

“What do you have in mind?” Chad asked hesitantly. He saw the twinkle in Bart’s eye that always foretold that what he had on his mind would usually land them in trouble. Once when just such a twinkle came to him, the three of them had wound up spending a whole week working in Bocker’s shop. The details leading up to it were far too embarrassing for him to dwell on.

Bart simply turned and gazed at Rupert’s departing back and smiled. “Can you meet me back here after sundown?” he asked.

“I think so,” Chad replied. “Need to finish my chores, but I shouldn’t be too long after sundown.”

“Good,” he nodded. “Riyan’s going to be gone the better part of a week.” Turning back to Chad he continued. “That should give us plenty of time.”

“Plenty of time for what?” Chad asked.

“To make life for Rupert a merry hell,” he replied with finality.

That night after the mill closed, Chad had raced home and flew through his chores. Then after a quick meal with his family, he was out the door on his way into town. He found Bart already at the town square waiting for him. “Sorry I’m late,” he said as he approached his friend.

“You’re not that late,” he replied. “Didn’t really expect you for another half hour.”

Chad noticed the bag Bart had slung over his shoulder and asked, "So what are we going to do?"

Bart directed his gaze to the Sterling Sheep, the only inn and eatery Quillim has. "Rupert and his father are in there having dinner with Freya and her father," he explained. "They just sat down, so with any luck will remain in there for some time." Patting the bag slung over his shoulder he added, "Now let's get to it."

"What's in there?" asked Chad.

"Just some things I borrowed from a friend of mine," he replied.

Chad had thought they were going to the Sterling Sheep, but instead Bart headed off in another direction. It didn't take him long to realize where he was headed when the estate Rupert called home came into view. "Are you crazy?" he asked.

"Don't worry," Bart assured him. "This will only take a minute or two."

The estate was one the largest in the area, three stories tall and the envy of the entire community. It had been in Rupert's family for years, each generation adding their own touch. The grounds that surrounded it were meticulously kept by a score of servants whose combined wage was more than some families earn in a year or more.

Upon reaching the lane leading up to the manor house, Bart stopped for a brief moment while he made sure there was no one about. When he saw the coast was clear, he gestured for Chad to follow.

They ran across the lawn as two shadows in the moonlight. Bart angled towards a vine covered lattice that extended from the ground all the way to the roof's edge on one end of the house. Once they reached the base he paused and scanned the area one more time. Not seeing anyone, he whispered to Chad as he pointed to the window near the top of the lattice. "That's Rupert's room," he explained.

Chad nodded and then Bart stepped to the lattice and began to climb. "Be careful," he warned, "this isn't very strong." After he had climbed up several feet, Chad followed.

He worked his way up to the window and when he came abreast of it, pulled out his knife. Then while gripping the lattice with his left hand, he leaned over and slid the knife blade between the two halves of the window before gently sliding it up. The blade moved up along the crack between the two sections until it met resistance. Pushing harder, he felt the latch that was locking the window from the inside come free.

He then used his knife to pry the window open. When it swung open, he replaced his knife in its sheath and used his hand to swing the two sections of the window wide. "Come on," he said as he climbed in through the window. Once inside, he turned and helped Chad through.

Just as Bart had said, Chad found himself in Rupert's bedroom. "Now what?" he asked.

Bart set his bag down on a chair and opened it. "Now we make it look like he's got a girlfriend," he replied. From within the bag, he pulled out two pieces of clothing no betrothed man should have in his possession. Rather intimate articles that women wear beneath their clothes.

"Rumple the bed a little," he told Chad. "Make it look like he and a girl had a tumble before he left for dinner."

Chad grinned and nodded. While he was doing that, Bart laid one of the pieces of clothing on the floor just under the bed. He situated it in such a place that a casual look wouldn't immediately reveal it. But when the servants came in to clean the room, they would most assuredly discover it. The other he put at the very foot of his bed under the sheets.

"Toss me his pillow," he said to Chad.

Chad took it off the bed and tossed it over to him. "What do you want that for?" he asked.

Bart grinned and went back over to his bag. He pulled out a small vial with a stopper. Setting the pillow on the table, he opened the vial and rubbed the stopper across the pillowcase.

From where Chad was standing, he could smell the unmistakable odor of perfume. "That smells like what Mirriam wears," he observed. Mirriam of course was a very beautiful girl here in Quillim who's had her sights on Rupert for some time. It's well known that she's been after him for years.

"I know," he replied with a chuckle. "Let him explain this." After putting the vial of perfume back in the bag, he pulled out a small jar of rouge, the type girls put on their lips to make them look rosy. Unscrewing the top, he set it on the table next to the pillow.

Chad came to stand next to him as Bart flipped the pillow over and ever so carefully dipped his finger into the rouge. He watched as Bart used great care in drawing what looks like two lips on Rupert's pillowcase with the rouge. Once he was done, it looked just like a woman with rouge on her lips had made the mark.

"What do you think?" Bart asked as he wiped his finger off on a cloth that he had in his bag.

"He could find all this and get rid of it before someone else discovered it," Chad said.

"We're not done yet," he replied. After replacing the pillow back on Rupert's bed with the imprinted lips' side down, he walked over to a chest of drawers sitting against the wall. There he pulled open the top drawer and began rummaging through it.

Chad came over with him and saw him take something out of the drawer and place it in the bag. "We're not thieves!" he insisted quietly.

"Relax," Bart replied as he put another item in his bag. "I'm not taking anything of any great value, and I'm sure not going to keep it."

"What do you plan to do then?" Chad asked.

He took one more item then closed the drawer. "Mirriam is going to receive a present from a secret admirer," he explained with a grin.

Suddenly, footsteps from the hall beyond the bedroom door came to them. They both froze as they listened to the footsteps draw closer. Only after the footsteps passed by the door and continued down the hallway did they relax.

"Let's get out of here," urged Chad.

"Alright," agreed Bart. He took but a moment to make sure everything inside the drawer was exactly like he found it before pushing it closed. When he turned for the window he found Chad already climbing out to the lattice. Moving to join him, Bart swung the bag across his back and reached within his tunic. He pulled forth a thick piece of rolled leather and untied the leather thong that bound it closed.

He unrolled the piece of leather and then removed one of the small tools secured within the leather. The tool in question was three inches long with a curved hook at the end. Placing the tool between his teeth, he rolled the leather back up and tied it closed once more with the leather thong. He then replaced the rolled leather within his tunic and begun making his way through the window.

Once out on the lattice, he looked down and found that Chad had already made it to the bottom and was standing there waiting for him. Turning his attention back to the window, he closed it almost all the way. But before it completely shut, he took the tool he held in his mouth and hooked the end around the arm of the latch used in locking the window.

He moved the latch upward until it was above the eye ring it latched into. Then he carefully closed the window the rest of the way. Once closed, he lowered the arm of the latch until he felt the end touch the eye ring. With just a quick yank, he sank the latch into the eye ring, thus securing the window from the inside.

Placing the tool once more between his teeth, he started climbing down the lattice. At the bottom he removed the tool from between his teeth and set it once more within the rolled piece of leather.

“What’s that?” Chad asked when he saw the tool as Bart was putting it back with the others.

“Just something my father gave me some time ago,” he replied. “I’ve found they come in useful every now and then.”

“I’ve never seen anything like them before,” he said.

Bart nodded at that. “Not too surprising. Now, let’s head back to the Sterling Sheep.”

“You mean we’re not through yet?” asked Chad.

“Good heavens no,” replied Bart with a grin.

Chad followed Bart as he again ran across the lawn to the lane leading back to town. He wondered about his friend. Bart had never gone into very much detail about his life before coming to Quillim, though of course he and Riyan hadn’t been all that curious in the first place. But now he wondered who this Bart could be and what had driven him to choose this area to live in. He was pretty sure he knew what those tools in the piece of leather meant. Though he had never seen their like before, he would bet anything that they were lockpicks.

Back at the lane leading into town, Bart picked up speed. “Have to get there before they leave,” he said.

Not understanding the hurry, Chad didn’t really care. This was the most adventure he had ever been a part of. They made their way through the darkened streets until the inn appeared ahead of them.

When they drew close, Bart had Chad stay back as he went to the window and looked in to the dining area of the Sterling Sheep. He stood there a moment peering inside before turning around and rejoining Chad. “They’re still in there,” he said. “Wait here.” Then without an explanation, Bart returned to the window. While he stood there, Chad saw him remove the jar of rouge and do something with it. In the dark he couldn’t see just what he did. After a few minutes Bart closed the jar and replaced it within the bag.

Another five minutes passed as he stood there looking in through the window. Then he abruptly turned towards the back of the inn and signaled for Chad to join him. "Whatever you do, don't make a sound," he said in a hushed whisper when Chad joined him. "Understand?"

Chad nodded and then followed him to the rear of the inn. They reached the rear courtyard just as a figure exited from the back door. Even in the shadows of the courtyard, Chad recognized Rupert's silhouette. He was walking across the courtyard to the jakes along the rear wall.

Bart motioned for Chad to stop while he continued toward Rupert. Chad was amazed at how silently Bart was able to move. Other than Rupert's footsteps and the music coming from the inn, no other sound disturbed the quiet of the courtyard. Then just as Rupert opened the door to the jakes, Bart grabbed him. Putting one hand alongside his throat and the other on his back, Bart pushed him into the jakes and shut the door.

Chad saw Bart motioning for him to hurry and join him. He hurried over and Bart indicated for him to keep the door closed.

Bang!

Rupert struck the door from the inside and Chad almost failed to keep it closed. "Let me out!" he hollered.

Chad looked to Bart who was now on his knees before the door and looked to be sliding something between the door jamb and the door about a third of the way up from the ground.

Bang!

Again Rupert hit the door and the force of the blow knocked out whatever Bart had been sliding into place. Picking it up off the ground, he again worked to get it into place.

"Help!" yelled Rupert. "I'm being attacked!"

Then all of a sudden, Bart stood up. In the moonlight Chad could see he was holding a string that was attached to whatever it was he placed within the crack between the door and the door jamb.

"Come on," Bart whispered as he began moving away from the jakes.

Bang!

As they hurried to the side of the courtyard that was deep in shadows, Rupert again hit the door in an attempt to get out. And to Chad's amazement, the door held.

Bart brought them to a stop as soon as the string he held had reached its end. They stood there in the darkness as Rupert continued hollering for help and trying to break his way out. Fortunately the music within the dining area of the inn was loud enough to drown out his cries.

They waited for at least five minutes before another person left the inn on their way to the jakes. When Bart saw the man leaving the inn, he pulled the string. The wedge he had keeping the door to the jakes' closed came free and the door swung open.

Chad about laughed when Rupert came stumbling out and crashed down into the dirt before the jakes. The man who was leaving the inn rushed over to help him but Rupert knocked away his hand and got to his feet. What he said to the man couldn't be heard, but they saw the way he stalked back to the inn.

The following morning when Chad was at the mill working the giant grinding stones that turned grain into flour, his younger brother Eryl came running in all excited. "Did you hear?" he asked his brother.

"Hear what?" replied Chad.

"Last night at the Sterling Sheep..." his brother began but was forced to stop and catch his breath. Obviously he felt that what he had to say was so good that he ran the whole way to tell him. By this time their father had moved closer to hear.

"The magistrate and his son Rupert were dining with Freya and her father," he continued. "Apparently Rupert had gone out back and dallied with some girl." He turned to his father. "And with his betrothed there waiting for his return." His eyes gleamed, every kid in Quillim hated Rupert and any story that showed him in a bad light was like gold.

"He claimed someone locked him in the jakes," Eryl said in a tone that said he didn't believe it. "But when he returned to the inn, there was rouge on his neck that people say looked just like a woman kissed him." He laughed. "As it turned out, Freya wasn't wearing any that night."

Their father smiled as he too didn't care much for Rupert. He did feel sorry for Freya though, it must have been a humiliation.

"Rupert is still saying he didn't do anything and is sticking to his story," Eryl explained. "But really papa, who is going to believe such a story?"

Chad grinned to himself as the grinding wheel continued to turn grain into flour. Who indeed? Bart had explained to him last night after they left the vicinity of the Sterling Sheep how he had put rouge on his hand in the shape of a girl's lips. So that when he grabbed Rupert by the neck and threw him in the jakes, it would come off and leave the tell-tale mark.

"Are they still betrothed?" asked Chad.

"I hadn't heard," his brother replied. "But her father took it hard."

"I can imagine," their father said. Then to Eryl he added, "Don't you have chores at home you should be doing?"

"Yes, papa," he replied and turned to head out the door.

"Another hour or two and the flour will be ready," Chad's father said before he too left.

Chad nodded in reply. The rest of the afternoon was spent in grinding flour. How he hated doing this. Last night when he and Bart were, as Bart said 'making Rupert's life a merry hell', he had felt more alive than ever before. But all in all, he'd rather be doing this than be in Rupert's shoes right about now.

Chapter Four

The evening of the second day found Riyan deeper into the hills than he had ever been before. Ahead to the west the mountains raised high into the sky. With the crystal blue sky above and the rolling green foothills below, the mountains were a breathtaking sight. A cool breeze blew across the hills to help alleviate the heat of the day. If only he could get Freya off his mind, he would be able to enjoy it all so much more.

The first day out, he railed, shouted, and screamed at the injustice in the world. That actually had helped to rid his soul of the worst of the feelings the situation in Quillim had instilled in him. Now it was more a sense of loss that continued to plague him more than anything else.

If he couldn't change the situation he must make the best of it. His mother was right in that Freya was going to need a friend in the coming years. And he decided that if that was all he's going to be able to be to her, he would at least be that.

Near the end of the day he and his flock crested another of the many hills in this area. On the far side was a small lake that stretched outward from the base of the hill for quite some distance. A truly scenic place with the mountains as a backdrop, he decided to stop here for the night. While the flock grazed nearby, Riyan began collecting sufficient firewood to last him through the night.

Baaaaaaa!

The sheep cried out to him whenever he disappeared out of sight in his hunt for decent fuel for the fire. They continued to cry out until he reappeared again. Now that they were in unfamiliar territory, they didn't want to be very far from him. Even Black Face hasn't strayed off since they left behind the lands they usually grazed upon.

He built his fire and then hunted for a small animal to roast for dinner. Though he had plenty of food from home to last him, there was nothing like the taste of a fresh kill roasted over an open fire. Moving off from the campsite, he held his sling ready with a stone in hand. He worked his way through the trees until he came across a rabbit out for a last bite before returning to its burrow for the night.

With a quick twirl, he launched a stone at the rabbit and struck it in the head. The force of the blow knocked it backward over a foot. As the rabbit laid there twitching its last, he walked over and picked it up. It didn't take him long before the rabbit was skinned and roasting over the fire. The smell of roasting meat made his all but empty stomach growl.

The flock remained close for the rest of the evening and was still nearby when he stoked the fire before turning in.

Baaaaaaa! Baaaaaaa!

The panicked cries of many sheep woke him in the middle of the night. He tried to get to his feet to see what was going on but was thrown back to the ground. The earth was shaking violently.

An earthquake! He'd been in a couple during his life, but none with the force of what he was experiencing right now. The ground itself seemed to roar as it shook. Off in the distance came the sound of a tree crashing to the ground as it no longer could withstand the forces assaulting it.

The best Riyan could do while the shaking continued was to get to his hands and knees. All around him the sheep bleated in fear, he could tell they were no longer together. In their fear they had ran off across the hills.

When the ground finally stopped its shaking and calmed down, he stood up and looked around. The light from his fire didn't extend all that far, and only three of his sheep were in sight.

Putting two fingers in his mouth, he whistled loudly. Three long, loud bursts then he stopped to listen. From all around he could hear the sound of his sheep change from that of fear and panic to a more normal baaing.

One more time he put his fingers in his mouth and whistled another three long, loud bursts. When he listened for the sheep's response, he could hear them crashing through the underbrush back towards the camp. One by one they made their appearance and Riyan was sure they were relieved to once more be back with him.

He counted the flock after the night grew quiet again and as the last one making its way through the bushes arrived. When he finished, he realized he was still two sheep short. He whistled again and then listened for the tell-tale sound of them making their way through the underbrush. But the night remained silent.

"Damn!" he cursed. Two sheep gone! There was no way he was about to go searching for them in the dark. Aside from it being way too dangerous to move around in unfamiliar territory at night, he would also risk the chance that more of his sheep would become lost.

Mad and upset, he counted the flock one more time in the hopes that he miscounted the first time. But the count remained the same, two sheep missing. That's when he noticed one of the sheep who was missing was Black Face. "Of course," he said to himself.

Unable to do anything until the sun came up, he placed several more logs on the fire and laid back down. In the morning he was going to have to find the wayward sheep.

The first rays of the sun upon his face woke him. First thing he did was to recount the sheep on the off chance that the others had made their way back during the night. To his surprise one of them had returned. Of course it wasn't Black Face. At least he has only one to find now which should make his job that much easier.

He left the flock where they were grazing and went to the top of a nearby hill. There he whistled loudly and scanned the forest for any movement. When he failed to see or hear any indication which direction Black Face lay, he returned to his camp. He had half a mind to simply forget about it, his life would be a whole lot easier if Black Face were to be lost forever. But he and his mother needed every copper that Black Face's wool, and ultimately meat, would bring them.

So after having a quick breakfast of food his mother had packed for him, he left the flock in the small area between the hills and set out in search of Black Face. He didn't feel there was much of a threat to the flock where they were, and he wouldn't be going very far from them. He

mainly was planning to do a circuit around the immediate area as he didn't think Black Face would have wandered that far. Of course, if after that time there was still no trace of him, he would give up. He had to at least make the attempt.

For the next several hours, he worked his way in and around the hills. Once he reached as far as he dared to go from the flock, he would pause and whistle. Then he would listen for a moment. When he didn't hear Black Face's bleat, he continued. Every once in awhile he would return to the flock, only to find them still grazing contentedly.

He was searching the area closest to the mountains, and had almost completely blanketed the area where he felt Black Face could have wandered to, when he heard a very faint, frightened bleating. Relieved to have found him, he rushed forward toward his wayward sheep.

Following the sound of Black Face's cries, he headed further west towards the slopes of the mountains. After fording a stream, the trees opened up on a clearing wherein a large expanse of berry bushes lay. He nodded to himself when he saw them for they were just the type Black Face always seemed to gravitate towards back home.

Pausing just within the clearing, he looked around but couldn't see Black Face. Raising his fingers to his lips, he whistled loudly for a second then stopped. He stood still as he waited for the bleating to come and after a moment, it did.

Baaaaaaa!

The cry was coming from the right side of the berry patch but the sheep was nowhere to be seen. "Black Face!" he hollered. "Where are you, you stupid sheep?"

Baaaaaaa!

Again the cry came. Shaking his head, Riyan moved towards the sound. As he drew closer to the edge of the berry bushes he saw a snatch of sheep's wool dangling from one of the vines. He walked quickly to it and plucked it from the vine just as the cry came again. This time, it sounded close, and was coming from just before him. Yet there was no sign of Black Face.

Baaaaaaa!

When it came again, he looked more closely and saw a fair sized hole in the ground hidden beneath the berry vines about four feet in. It was from out of that hole Black Face was calling from.

"You really got yourself in a fix this time didn't you?" he asked.

Baaaaaaa!

"No use complaining at me," he said to the sheep. "You've got no sense whatsoever." He then took a moment to figure out how on earth he was going to get him out of there. The hole in which Black Face had fallen was covered in a thick layer of thorn laden vines. He was sure that he could get him out of there, but it wasn't going to be easy.

Turning his attention to the vines, he contemplated his best course of action. Pulling his knife from his belt, he sighed and began cutting away segments of the vines. Almost a quarter hour later, his hands were covered in dozens of pin-prick sized holes, some of which were still welling blood. He had managed to clear a good portion of the vines away and reached the edge of the hole. His attitude towards Black Face continued to deteriorate every time another of the thorns pricked his skin.

Baaaaaaa!

“Oh shut up,” he yelled down to the hole. When he at last reached the edge of the hole and had cleared the vines back enough to look down, he saw Black Face moving down below. The side of the hole sloped down a steep embankment until reaching where Black Face stood.

He gauged the angle of the slope and determined that it was inclined sufficiently that he could possibly make it back up if he went down to get the sheep. Though with Black Face in his arms, it would be a little trickier. So after another few minutes of pruning the branches back a little bit further, he went to the edge of the hole and began climbing down.

Baaaaaaa!

When Black Face saw him coming down towards him, he started baaing excitedly. “Yeah, just wait until I get you out of here,” threatened Riyan, “then we’ll see how happy you are.”

Baaaaaaa!

The threat of possible repercussions for being down here didn’t seem to worry Black Face any. He was just happy to be with someone familiar again.

Sliding down into the hole was relatively easy. Once he hit the bottom, Black Face immediately came to him and practically jumped into his lap. “Calm down,” he said as he got to his feet.

He glanced around and was quick to realize that this was not just some hole in the ground. The light filtering down from above revealed that he was in what looked to be some kind of passage. It was roughly ten feet high, half that wide, and extended into darkness to his left and right.

Excitement filled him as he saw the unmistakable signs of human construction. Though the sides of the passage were worn with time, they still showed where stone blocks were used in its construction.

“What did you find?” he asked Black Face. Visions of treasure and adventure raced across his mind as he wondered what wealth may be hidden down here. Then, from down the passage to his right, something caught the light from above and glittered. Turning his head towards it, he tried to see it but had lost it in the dark.

Unwilling to give up on it, he moved slowly down the passage until the glitter came again. Then he rushed forward and discovered that the glitter came from a tarnished coin almost completely buried in the dirt covering the floor. “Treasure!” he exclaimed excitedly. Never in his wildest imagination did he ever think he, a shepherd boy, would find something like this.

Dropping to his knees, he reached down and picked up the coin. He couldn’t see it too clearly and got back to his feet. Returning to just beneath the hole, he held the coin in the light from above and saw that it was made of copper. It was roughly the size of the coins he’s used to using, but the impressions on both sides were nothing like he had ever seen before.

On the one side was a bust of what could have been a man, but it wasn’t easy to make out as the coin was quite worn. The other side bore a symbol the likes of which he’s never seen before. “This has to be old,” he said to himself. Looking down the passage that extended into darkness in both directions, he wondered just how many more such coins could be down here.

Then he turned his gaze to Black Face. "I guess I can forgive you," he said. Rolling the coin through his fingers, his mind began churning with possibilities. He slipped the coin into his pouch before removing two short lengths of rope. "Sorry about this old boy," he said.

Taking one of the pieces of rope, he tied Black Face's rear legs together and then the front. "**Baaaaaaa!**" complained Black Face. The sheep didn't care for being treated like this, but Riyan couldn't have his legs loose and thrashing about as he tried to return him back to the surface.

Once the legs were tied, he picked up Black Face. He placed him over his shoulders and around his neck. He held onto the legs with one hand as best he could while using the other to maintain his balance as he maneuvered up the slope.

Black Face wiggled, baaed and kicked the whole way up. Riyan lost his grip a couple times due to the sheep's thrashing and was thankful that he had the forethought to bind the legs or it would have been much worse. When he at last reached the top, he braced his feet securely before launching Black Face up and out of the hole with a mighty shove. After Black Face hit the ground and began baaing pitifully, Riyan climbed the rest of the way to the surface.

Once out, he untied Black Face and then turned back one more time to look at the hole. If it wasn't for the fact that the flock was some distance away and unattended, he would have tried to explore the passage further. But without a source of light such as a torch or a lantern, he wouldn't have been able to go very far anyway.

As he returned with Black Face back to where the rest of the flock was grazing, he made sure to set the landmarks and the lay of the land in his mind. He wanted to be sure he could find this place again. For when he returned home, he planned to get some supplies together and come back.

He immediately got the flock moving once again back towards Quillim. As they set out, he removed the coin from his pouch and looked at it. A grin spread across his face at the adventure it promised.

The day after the debacle at the Sterling Sheep, the town was simply abuzz with rumors and gossip. Of course a couple of the more juicy ones were started by Bart. He's simply enjoying himself to no end.

Still though, the betrothal between Rupert and Freya had yet to be called off. Bart really had no expectations for it to be called off for Freya's family, even with the humiliation the events were giving them, could ill afford to not go through with it. He felt bad for her, but he despised Rupert more.

To up the ante, he dropped off the necklace he took from Rupert's drawer the night before at Mirriam's door. He didn't leave a note with it, instead he twined it around several beautiful flowers and laid it upon a finely embroidered kerchief. That by itself wouldn't have led people to believe that it was from Rupert. So right afterwards, he went into town and stood near the window of the biggest gossip in town.

He could hear her inside talking with a couple other ladies as they worked on their needlework. Every year she and her circle work on a quilt which they give to one of the more

underprivileged families in the area. This year they planned to give it to Clara Jenis and her family. Clara has been ill for the past few months and her husband was having a hard time keeping things together. Between working, their three children, and her illness, he was about worn to a frazzle.

From his position by the window, he heard them talking about somebody or another. Then he said sort of loud, but not too conspicuously so, "I tell you I saw him!"

Then in another voice like he was another person he replied, "Rupert?" From within the house, all talking ceased.

Bart grinned to himself as he said, "Yes Rupert. You would think he'd leave well enough alone after his problems of the night before."

In his second voice he asked himself, "What happened?" The inside of the house was as quiet as a tomb, he knew every ear within was straining to hear what he had to say next.

"I saw him placing something at the door of Mirriam's home," he said in voice one.

"Mirriam?" voice two asked. "Isn't she the one who's been trying to get her hooks in him for years?"

"That's the one," voice one replied. "Looks like she finally hooked him."

"What did he leave?" voice two asked.

"I'm not exactly sure," voice one explained. "Some flowers for sure though I thought I saw something glittering among the stems."

Then as he started to say, "We'll have to see what..." he began moving away from the window and let his voice trail off. After he became quiet, he snuck back to the window and listened. Inside it remained silent for only a few seconds before the women all started talking at once. Now, if Mirriam would just find the necklace and put it on, it would lend credibility to the seed he just sowed.

He hung around town for a couple hours and sure enough, Mirriam appeared wearing the necklace. Her eyes were aglow and she walked briskly through town. By this time the rumor he planted had circulated widely. Two people already had approached him and told him about it, each telling seeming to add some new detail. As she passed through the people on the streets, they would grow quiet. Then after she went by, their eyes would follow her as they talked in hushed whispers.

Bart watched as she continued along the street, her hand would at times go to the necklace and rub it as if she didn't really believe it was there. She paused at the corner for a second before her eyes lit up. Across the street, Rupert and his three cronies had just appeared.

She waved and hurried across the street to meet him. Bart followed her at a discreet distance to see what would happen. He wasn't alone, many of those on the street saw where she was heading and followed too.

Rupert came to a stop and his eyes turned dark when he saw the necklace around her neck. He recognized it as one that had been in his drawer. Bart was too far away to hear what was said, but after just a couple exchanges between Rupert and Mirriam, Rupert ripped the necklace from around her neck. Then Mirriam turned and fled, tears in her eyes.

Bart stood there a moment too long, for Rupert noticed him. His face turned darker and he began moving quickly towards him. Bart remained where he was until the four young men came to him.

Rupert held out the necklace and demanded, "Do you know anything about this?"

"Why no Rupert," Bart replied innocently. "It looks to be a necklace of some sort."

"Someone's been messing with me," he stated, "trying to get my betrothal with Freya annulled." Rupert glared at him and added, "I can only think of one person who would want that."

"Freya?" guessed Bart.

Rupert's eyes narrowed and his face turned red in anger. "Don't play with me, Bart!" he warned. "I know Riyan is behind this and you two, along with Chad, are tight as thieves."

"Riyan has been out with his sheep since just after your betrothal," he replied. "I don't see how he could be behind anything."

Rupert glared at him. "This betrothal is going to continue," he said. "If there are any further 'occurrences' like this," he continued as he held up the necklace again, "Riyan will pay the consequences."

It was Bart's turn to get a dark look. "Be sure you know with whom you're messing with before you act," he warned.

"Is that a threat?" Rupert asked. "Are you daring to threaten me?"

"Merely offering a piece of advice," he answered.

Then Rupert became aware of the people who had gathered to watch the drama unfold between himself and Bart. To Bart he said, "This isn't over."

Bart merely remained silent as Rupert and his three cronies quickly left the street. Once they've gone down the street a ways, Bart turned and left in the opposite direction.

Moving through town, his mind churned over the encounter. What had started out as a prank has developed into something a bit more serious. He feared that Rupert was planning on taking out his anger over what's been happening on his friend Riyan. Thankfully Riyan isn't due back for several more days. Hopefully by then all this will have blown over.

He hurried back across town to old Rebecca's place to finish the work she wanted done. Along the way, he came to the decision to lay low for awhile and leave Rupert alone. At least until Riyan returned, then he would see how things turned out.

Chapter Five

The night of the earthquake rocked the town badly. Several businesses were damaged in one way or another, but the worst was Chad's father's mill. The quake had cracked one of the two grinding stones.

"Can't we continue with it like it is?" Chad asked his father the following morning.

Shaking his head, Chad's father turned to him, "No. Once they get a crack in them, it's only a matter of time before they break altogether. Not only that, but pieces of the stone will find their way into the flour." His father sat down with a worried expression.

"What can we do then?" Chad asked.

"If we wish to continue to operate, we have to obtain another grinding stone," he told his son.

Chad looked to his father and saw the worry in his eyes. He knew that his father didn't have all that much gold stashed away and grinding stones didn't come cheap. "Are we going to be able to purchase another one?" he asked.

His father turned to him and smiled a sad smile. "Things will work out," he replied. "But it will be a week or more before a new stone can be brought here and put into place."

Just then, the Magistrate stepped through the door. "Heard about your grinding stone," he said. "Too bad."

"Chad, could you go see if your mother needs anything?" his father asked.

Chad knew that he wished him to leave for some reason, then it dawned on him why. His father was going to ask the Magistrate for a loan. The Magistrate was the only person in town who could possibly help. "But..." he began.

"Please son," his father insisted, "go help your mother."

Nodding, Chad got up and said, "Yes sir." Then he headed for the door. He gave the Magistrate a respectful nod of the head before he passed from the mill and to the lane outside.

He thought of what his father was about to do. There was no way they would ever be able to repay the Magistrate for the grinding stone. Most years they barely made enough to pay the taxes, feed their family, and buy other essentials they required. His father must know that, and so will the magistrate.

As scenarios played out in his mind, he came to realize that it wasn't so much a loan his father would be getting from the magistrate, but more like selling the mill. All his life, his father's one pride was that he owned that mill outright. Now, it's likely he was going to have to work for the magistrate for the rest of his life. The thought angered Chad.

He wasn't exactly sure where it was he was heading, he just put one foot in front of the other while his mind was preoccupied. Then Bart came into view as he rounded a corner up ahead. When he saw Chad, he hurried towards him.

"Hey, did you feel that quake last night?" Bart asked.

Chad came to a stop and nodded his head. "I think everyone felt it," he replied.

Bart noticed something was wrong so asked, "You okay?"

Shaking his head, Chad said, "The quake cracked the upper grinding wheel. We're going to have to buy a new one before we can turn any more grain into flour."

"That's tough, man," he said condolingly.

Then Chad noticed one of Rupert's cronies appear behind Bart. The young man stopped when he saw Bart and Chad talking before ducking quickly behind a building. A second later, he peered around the corner at them.

Chad nodded to Rupert's crony. "Are they keeping an eye on you?"

"You could say that," replied Bart. "Yesterday when Mirriam appeared, I was there when he accosted her and took back the necklace."

A worried look came to Chad as he lowered his voice and asked, "Do you think he suspects?"

"I think so," Bart told him in a quiet whisper of his own. "As long as all he can do is suspect, we'll be fine. He thinks Riyan is behind it."

"But he wasn't even in town," said Chad.

"I know." Bart glanced behind him and saw the crony peering around the corner again. "We'll have to let Riyan know what's going on as soon as he gets back. But right now, I need to return to the farm. She's got me removing an old tree stump near the house. She wants to plant flowers there." Rolling his eyes heavenward, he sighed.

"I feel for you man," Chad said.

"If she was rich I would tell her to get a scroll from Phyndyr's," he said.

"Phyndyr's?" Chad asked.

"Yeah," nodded Bart. "He sells scrolls down in Wardean. One of the better scroll merchants if you ask me."

"Like what?" Chad asked, a glimmer of hope coming to him.

"Oh, all sorts of stuff," he explained. "Take this stump I'm going to be spending the next several days digging out. One scroll from him and it would be gone."

"You mean vanish?" Chad looked at his friend in disbelief.

Bart shrugged, "Maybe if I wanted to pay that much for it. But a simple burn spell would probably do the trick. Or maybe one that would dissolve it."

"Do you think he would have one that could fix the crack in the grinding wheel?" he asked with newborn hope.

"I would think so," he replied. "But some of the scrolls get pretty pricy."

"Thanks," he said, not really hearing him. If he could get a scroll cheap that would fix the crack, then his father wouldn't have to sell. "How much do the scrolls go for?"

"I've heard that some can go as cheap as two silvers," he explained. "Others, though, could go for over a hundred golds, or more."

"I hardly think a scroll to fix a crack would cost very much," he said. "I have almost a gold of my own saved."

"Maybe," Bart agreed.

"We could be there and back by nightfall," he said.

"I think it's a bit further than..." Then realization hit. "What do you mean 'we'?" he asked.

"Yes," he nodded. "You and I could ride down and be back after dark."

"I...I don't know if I could get away," he said a bit nervously. "I, um, really have to get that stump out."

Chad looked to his friend and saw something in his friend's face he hadn't seen before. "I'm sure she wouldn't mind," he assured him. "You go ask her and I'll tell my father what's going on."

"But..."

"This is great!" Chad exclaimed. "Meet me at the mill after you talk to her." Then he turned around and hurried back to the mill.

Bart stood there for a minute watching the excited steps of his friend. Not nearly sharing his friend's enthusiasm for going to Wardean, he swallowed hard. Only be there a short time, he said to himself. Then he began walking down the lane to tell old lady Rebecca that he would have to start on the stump tomorrow.

"No!"

"But father," argued Chad, "this could save us."

"No!" his father repeated. When Chad had gone to tell his father that he and Bart were going to Wardean and why, he found his father emphatically against it.

"Why?" he asked.

"I will not take the chance on magic to save us," he explained. "Nothing ever good came from such things."

"But Bart said this Phyndyr was a master scroller," insisted Chad. "He guaranteed that we could get this fixed without having to borrow from the Magistrate."

His father gave him a look he's seen many times over the course of his seventeen years. "I wouldn't trust anything that friend of yours says," he told his son. "What do you know about him anyway? Just up and rolled into town a year ago. Where did he come from? What drove him to come here?"

Chad could only stand there as his father railed at him. He didn't know the answer to these questions. Bart had never been one to talk about his past. He and Riyan had always respected that and never pried into it.

"I think it's a good solution," Chad insisted.

His father turned to him and said, "No! You are not to think about this any more. The new grinding wheel will be here by the end of the week. All the arrangements have been made."

"So you've already sold the mill to the magistrate?" he asked.

"I'm not selling the mill," his father replied. "Merely getting a loan to cover the cost of the new wheel."

"You'll never be able to pay him back," Chad said. "It amounts to the same thing."

His father's face turned red in anger. "I'm through talking about this," he said with finality. "The subject is closed." He glared at his son until Chad finally left the mill.

When Bart finally arrived, he found his friend still in the vicinity of the mill. Chad didn't see him right away, so engrossed was he with his thoughts. "You ready?" Bart asked him.

Chad's eyes turned to his friend. "He won't even consider it!" he exclaimed.

"Your father?" guessed Bart.

Chad nodded. "He said, 'Nothing ever good came from magic'."

“So what do you intend to do now?” he asked. He could see the hard set of Chad’s jaw. “You aren’t planning on going against the wishes of your father are you?”

Nodding, Chad replied, “Yes I am. If this can save our mill, we would be fools not to do it.” He saw the look in Bart’s eyes. “What?”

“Maybe you should respect your father’s wishes,” he said. “It’s his mill after all.”

“It’s our family’s mill,” Chad corrected him. “I’m not about to stand by and do nothing when there’s a way to save it.” When Bart failed to comment, he asked, “Are you still coming with me?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I doubt if you would be able to find Phyndyr’s place otherwise.”

“Good.” Leading Bart to where he and his family live, they bypassed the house and headed directly to the barn out back. They quickly got a couple horses saddled and Chad left Bart in the barn while he went up to the house. Secreted in his room was his stash of money that he intended to use in purchasing the scroll.

The sound of his mother in the kitchen reached him as he entered the front door. He closed it carefully so as not to alert her to his presence. He moved through the front room towards the hallway leading further into the house. The first doorway he came to led into the kitchen area and he paused there a moment. Peering around the corner, he saw that his mother’s back was to him as she worked on dinner.

Hurrying past the doorway, he moved down the hallway and entered his room, closing the door behind him. His secret stash was hidden under a loose floorboard that one of the legs of his bed rested upon. He pushed his bed over a few inches until the leg was off the board, then bent over and pried it up.

In his secret hiding place was a sack containing his life savings. Nestled in the compartment with the sack were several other items that held value for him. Chad took the sack out and placed it in his shirt before replacing the floorboard. Once it was set in flush with the floor, he pulled his bed back to its original position with the leg once again on top of the floorboard covering his stash. He got back to his feet, crossed the room, and opened the door.

“What are you doing?” His brother Eryl stood there in the hallway looking very curiously at him.

“Nothing,” he replied. “Doesn’t mother need help with dinner or something?” He stepped out of his room and closed the door behind him.

“No,” he said, “and father’s busy at the mill getting it ready for the arrival of the new stone.”

“Go bother someone else, Eryl,” Chad said as they stood there in the hallway. He turned to retrace his steps back down the hallway when he realized Eryl was following him.

“You’re up to something,” Eryl said with a grin.

Coming to a stop, Chad turned to his brother and said quietly so his mother wouldn’t hear, “No I’m not. Now go away.”

“Can I come?” he asked.

“What?” Chad replied. “Of course not.”

“Aha!” exclaimed Eryl in victory. “I knew it!”

“I’m not doing anything,” he insisted in a quiet voice.

“Then why are you talking so quietly,” countered Eryl. “Why don’t you want mother to hear you?” Then raising his voice loudly, he asked, “Because you’ll get into trouble?”

“Shhh!” urged Chad as he glanced down the hallway towards the kitchen. When their mother failed to make an appearance, Chad sighed.

“I’m coming too,” Eryl said. “Or I’ll tell mother.”

Chad gazed into his eyes and could see the mischievous look that always foreshadowed him doing something that Chad would hate. Little brothers, sisters too for that matter, always have a way to annoy their older siblings. Giving in, Chad said, “Alright. But you have to do what I say.”

“You bet,” agreed Eryl. Happy and excited now that he wrangled his brother into taking him along on whatever adventure he was planning, Eryl practically danced in anticipation.

“Just be quiet until we get out of the house,” Chad told him. When he received Eryl’s nod, he began heading back down the hallway. At the entrance to the kitchen, he paused momentarily to make sure his mother was still busy, then he and Eryl hurried past.

Bart looked questioningly at him when he and Eryl showed up at the barn together. “He’s coming with us,” Chad explained.

“I don’t think it’s wise to take him all the way to Wardean,” Bart said.

“Wardean?” Eyes alight with the prospect of going to such a large town, he turned to his brother. “Is that where we’re going?”

“With just you missing,” Bart said, “your parents would only be a little worried. But him?” Indicating Eryl he added, “They’ll be positively frantic.”

“If we don’t take him, he’ll tell my mother and then the whole thing would be off,” Chad countered.

Bart rolled his eyes heavenward. “Sibling blackmail.” Then he turned his attention back to Chad and said, “At least leave them a note or something so they won’t worry.”

“Alright,” agreed Chad. Getting a fairly smooth board from the scrap pile, he wrote in charcoal:

Went for a ride with Bart, took Eryl. Back after dark.

When he showed it to Bart he asked, “Will this do?”

Nodding, Bart replied. “Yes. But there will still be hell to pay when you get back.”

“Not if the stone is fixed I won’t,” he said.

“What’s going on?” asked Eryl.

Chad turned to his younger brother and said, “I’ll fill you in on the way.” Then he and Bart mounted the horses then Chad gives his brother a hand in swinging up behind him. They rode quickly from the house and entered the hills surrounding Quillim until they intersected the road.

Once on the road heading out of town they were soon up to a canter and Quillim disappeared behind them. Eryl was having the time of his life riding behind his brother. In all his seven years, the times he had been more than a couple miles from home could be counted on one hand. And to top it off, his parent’s were not with them. All he had to deal with was his brother. Chad, even

with all his older brother bossiness, was still a whole lot better to deal with than his mother and father would be. They rarely let him have any fun.

Chad filled him in on what they planned to do soon after they were on the main road that traveled north and south along the foothills of the Western Mountains. This road was very well maintained and they were able to make good time.

As the sun arced overhead, Bart knew they were never going to make it to Wardean and back by sundown. Or even remotely close to sundown. But that wasn't what was on his mind as they drew ever closer to the city of Wardean. His past was a tangled skein, and some of the worst of it had to do with the city they were heading toward.

Before he came to live in Quillim, he had vowed to himself never to set foot within the walls of Wardean again. Yet here he is, on his way. With any luck, they'll be able to get in and out without anyone the wiser.

It was an hour away from sundown when the walls of Wardean came into view. They had pushed their horses hard to try and reach the city before the sun went down. For that's when Bart said Phyndyr closed his shop.

"There she is," Bart said as they rode closer.

"Wow," said Eryl in wonder. He had never been to a city this large. Whenever his father had business here, he always took either Chad or his other brother Tye. "Isn't this where Tye is seeing about his apprenticeship?"

"That's right," Chad replied. "I wish we had time to visit."

"Why don't we?" his brother asked.

"Need to return home before mother and father worry too much," he explained. "We're already away longer than I had anticipated."

"Too bad," he said.

Beyond the wall they saw the Keep of the Border Lord where it sat like an indomitable fortress. Wardean is the Seat of Duke Yoric, the Border Lord given the task of keeping the goblins on their side of the mountains.

Bart took the lead when they reached the gates leading into the city. "Unless there is trouble nearby they keep the gates open throughout the night," he explained.

"What kind of trouble could there be?" asked Eryl.

"Oh, goblins for the most part," he replied. "Though ever since Duke Yoric became the Border Lord hereabouts, they've been fairly quiet. Haven't been seen on this side of the mountains for years."

Once through the gates, Bart led them quickly through the streets. The light was fading fast and if they didn't get there in time, they risked the unpleasant choice of either staying the night or returning home empty handed. "It isn't far," Bart said as they turned off the main thoroughfare and down a side street.

Half a block down, Bart indicated a two story building coming up on their left. It looked rather formidable, with only slits for windows that were far too narrow for even a small child to squeeze through. The face of the building had but a lone door that stood open. Thick and strong, it would take a lot of punishment before it failed.

Bart noticed the way they were looking at the building. He cracked a smile and said, "It's protected by magic too," he replied. "Only one thief has ever tried to sneak in since it was built."

"And what happened to him?" Chad asked.

"The exact details no one talks about," he told them. Dismounting, he turned to glance at them and said, "But there's a skull over the door on the inside that is rumored to belong to the thief."

"Really?" asked Eryl.

"So the story goes," Bart replied. He wrapped his horse's reins to the post out front and then waited for the two brothers to dismount and do the same. Then he turned and led them up to the open door.

Just as they reached the door, a middle aged man appeared from the other side. "Oh I'm sorry," the man said when he saw them approaching, "but I am closing now. You'll have to come back in the morning."

"Couldn't you stay open for just a few more minutes?" asked Bart with a grin.

Phyndyr turned his head towards Bart and was just about to tell him 'no' when he stopped. "Well, Bartholomew Agreani, as I live and breathe," he said in astonishment as a smile came to his face. "I haven't seen you for over a year."

"Good to see you too Phyndyr," replied Bart. He then indicated Chad and said, "My friend here is in dire need of a scroll to fix a cracked grinding wheel for his father's mill up in Quillim."

"Quillim?" he asked. "Is that where you've been?"

"Sort of," he replied. "Now, can you help him?"

"Oh, very well," he said. Stepping back into the building he allowed Bart, Chad and Eryl to enter. Then he closed the door and locked it. With a single word he caused a dozen candles set about the room to burst into light.

"Wow," exclaimed Eryl. "Are you a magic user?"

Phyndyr smiled at the boy. "Not really, no. I just know a few simple cantrips."

They found themselves in an average sized room with three wooden tables, each surrounded by six chairs, spaced evenly around the room. Another door leads from the room across from the one they had just passed through. Eryl turned to look above the front door and saw a human skull mounted there. His eyes widened then he glanced to Bart who just grinned.

Phyndyr indicated the closest table and said, "Have a seat." He sat down on one side of the table while the three boys sat on the other. Turning his attention to Chad, he asked, "What exactly do you require?"

"Last night there was an earthquake," he explained. "It was pretty bad and when we went to the mill in the morning, we found a crack in the upper grinding wheel. Bart told me you might have a scroll that would repair the crack?"

Phyndyr nodded. "I have several such scrolls that could possibly help you young man." He then began asking questions about the size of the wheel, the length of the crack, and so forth. When he finished the questioning, he grew silent for a moment.

"Can you help him?" Bart asked.

"I think so," he replied. "You three stay here," he told them as he got to his feet.

They watched him cross the room and pass through the door leading further into the building. “Phyndyr’s pretty nice,” Bart said as they waited.

“He seems to know you fairly well,” Chad replied questioningly.

“I’ve known him since I was no older than Eryl,” he explained. “He and my father go way back.”

Chad looked to him to expand further on the details, but he remained silent.

Just then, Phyndyr exited from the back with a scroll in his hand. “You’re in luck,” he told them as he came and sat back down at the table. “Usually it takes a day or two to have a specific scroll ready. But seeing as how I am training a new apprentice, I have a few scrolls lying around. He’s been practicing on various different Peasant Scrolls.” He placed the scroll on the table between them.

“Peasant Scrolls?” asked Eryl.

Phyndyr smiled and turned to the young boy. “There are three types of scrolls young man, Peasant, Noble, and King,” he explained. “Don’t ask me why they are named that, they just are. Been that way for as long as there has been a Scriber’s Guild.”

Bart turned to Eryl and said, “Peasant Scrolls are the simplest types of scrolls there are.”

Phyndyr nodded. “That’s right.”

“So what does it do?” Chad asked as he looked at the scroll lying on the table before him.

“It’s quite simple really,” Phyndyr said. He taps the top of the scroll gently. “This scroll is designed to repair cracks in masonry, such as bridges, walls, or anything else made of stone.”

“How do you use it?” Eryl asked. His eyes were wide and full of wonder at the magic scroll sitting before him.

Phyndyr turned his attention to Chad and said, “First you place it on top of the cracked grinding wheel then say the word to activate it.”

“What’s the word?” asked Chad.

Phyndyr looked at him and smiled. “I can’t tell you the word or it will activate the scroll.”

“Then how am I to learn what the word is?” he asked.

“I will tell it to you in two parts,” he explained. “First I will tell you the last half of the word, then I will tell you the first half of the word. When you are ready to activate the scroll, you simply put the two parts together in the correct order and say the word.” He glanced to Chad and asked, “Understand?”

Chad nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. The last half of the activation word is, -nyx,” he said.

“-nyx?” replied Chad, trying to pronounce it just like Phyndyr did.

“That’s right,” Phyndyr said. “The first half is crit-.”

“Crit-,” pronounced Chad.

“Critnyx?” asked Eryl aloud. Suddenly, the scroll before them flared with a yellow glow, it lasted for half a second then went out. As the glow disappeared, the scroll crumbled into dust.

“Eryl!” cried Chad. “You wasted our scroll!”

“There, there,” interjected Phyndyr in a calming manner. “I do have another.”

Eryl turned towards the others with eyes aglow with excitement. He had activated the scroll. He had done magic! “That was so cool!”

“Do it again and I’ll leave you here in Wardean,” threatened Chad. Then he looked to the table and noticed that it appeared the same as it had before the scroll was activated. “Nothing happened to the table,” he observed.

“Of course not,” replied Phyndyr. “The scroll was for stone, not wood.”

“Oh, right” said Chad. “How much is this going to cost me?”

Phyndyr put his finger into the dust that once was the scroll as he said, “A gold and three silvers.”

“For one scroll?” asked Bart. “I didn’t think it would be that much.”

“The price is for two,” Phyndyr clarified for them as he picked up a pinch of the dust on the table.

“Very well,” Chad sighed. After giving his brother a stern glare for making him pay for an additional scroll, he pulled out his coin pouch and removed the required coins. Once they were on the table, Phyndyr collected them and then returned to the back for the other scroll.

Chad turned to his brother while they were waiting for Phyndyr and asked, “I trust we won’t lose another scroll? I don’t have enough for a third.”

“I promise I won’t say Critnyx,” Eryl assured him.

“Don’t say that!” exclaimed Bart and Chad at the same time.

Another minute went by before Phyndyr returned with the scroll. “This is my last one,” he told them. “Be a bit more careful with it than the first one.”

“Thank you,” Chad said. “We will.” He took the scroll and put it in his tunic for safe keeping. Standing up, he said, “I appreciate you staying and helping us.”

“Not at all,” Phyndyr replied. “Always glad to help out a friend.” Then to Bart he said, “Don’t be such a stranger. Stop by from time to time.”

“I will,” Bart assured him. “But we need to be going. It’s a long road home.”

“Surely you’re not going to ride back to Quillim tonight are you?” he asked.

“We have no choice,” replied Bart. “They need to get the grinding wheel fixed as soon as possible.”

“Good luck to you then and safe journey.” Standing up, he walked with them to the door.

“Thank you again Phyndyr,” Bart said and then they left him at the door. Once out at their horses, they were soon in the saddle and headed down the street towards the gate.

Phyndyr watched them ride off before he turned and locked the door. When he turned back to the street to head home, he saw a figure detach from the shadows of the building across the street. Once the figure left the shadows, he readily recognized the man. He also understood why the man was crossing the street towards him.

“Good evening to you,” Phyndyr said as the figure approached.

“And to you, Master Scriber,” the man replied.

“My shop is closed,” Phyndyr said. “I am on my way home.”

“I’m not interested in your scrolls as well you know,” the man told him. “I saw Bartholomew leave your shop?” It was less a question than a statement of fact.

Phyndyr sighed and nodded.

“Did he tell you where he was going?” the man asked.

He gazed at the man and decided whether he should tell him or not. To cross the man before him, or rather the people he represented, wasn’t conducive to a long and happy life. If it were but himself on the line, he wouldn’t have cared. But with a wife and three children at home, he couldn’t afford the trouble such defiance would bring them, even if it meant betraying a friend.

Then slowly, he nodded.

“Where did he go?” asked the man.

It was almost more than he could do to say the word, “Quillim.”

Chapter Six

By the time they made it back to Quillim, the night was almost gone. Off to the east, dawn’s first light had begun to creep back into the world and the town lay quiet in the burgeoning morning. As they made their way through the streets to the mill, the only sound to disturb the silence was the clip-clop of their horses’ hooves and the occasional cry of a dog.

Chad reached around and shook his brother awake, he had fallen asleep behind him some time ago. “We’re back,” he told him. He felt his brother pull himself up from where he had been lying against his back for the last few hours.

“Hope it works,” Eryl said sleepily.

“It will,” he replied.

As they continued to work their way through town, Chad thought about how worried his parents had to have been. His note only said they would be back a little after dark, not the next morning. But once the stone has been fixed, all would be forgiven.

Out of the dark ahead, the giant arms of the mill came into view. They turned slowly in an early morning breeze. “Want me to come in with you?” Bart asked.

“Yeah,” replied Chad, “I’d like that.”

Bart nodded and together the three of them rode to the mill and dismounted before the front door. “Eryl,” Chad said, “watch the horses.”

“But I want to come in too,” he pleaded.

“Just stay out here,” his brother told him. Eryl didn’t look too happy but nodded and did as his brother wished.

Then with Bart, he entered the mill. Chad lit a candle that was sitting on a small table just within the doorway to dispel the darkness. When the light filled the mill, he saw where his father had already begun to dismantle the frame that held the upper grinding stone in place. Wooden sections of the frame were stacked in a neat pile against the side of the mill.

He took out the scroll and walked to the grinding wheels. “Place it over the cracked area,” suggested Bart.

“Yeah, I was going to do that,” he replied. Moving around the stones, he located the area with the crack and placed the scroll on top of it. Stepping back, he glanced to Bart with a grin. Then he turned his attention back to the scroll and said the activating word, “Critnyx”.

The scroll flared with a yellow glow just as the other one had back in Phyndyr’s. Only this time, the stone began to glow with the same yellow hue. Chad and Bart moved closer to better observe as the crack in the stone began to fuse together. The glow continued for a few more seconds after the crack was completely mended, then it went out.

“It worked!” he hollered in jubilation.

“Of course it worked,” Bart said. “Phyndyr’s scrolls always work.”

Chad caught movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to see Eryl standing in the doorway. “The stone is mended little brother,” he said triumphantly.

Eryl stood there staring at the grinding stone without responding. The look on his face was not one of happiness or jubilation, rather it was a look of trepidation. “Chad...” he said then grew silent again.

“What?” his brother asked, his own good mood beginning to be dampened by that of his brother.

“The stones,” he said and pointed to the grinding wheel.

Chad looked at the stone but couldn’t see anything wrong. “It all looks okay to me,” he said.

Bart stepped back and that’s when his face fell too. His eyes flicked to Chad. Grabbing his tunic, Bart pulled Chad back away from the stone so he could see it in its entirety.

“Oh my lord,” he breathed when realization finally came. The scroll had worked alright, but it had worked too well. When he had activated the scroll, its magic had worked to seek out and repair any cracks in the stone. Somehow the magic must have considered the gap between the bottom stone and the top as a crack as well, for the crack had been ‘fixed’. The two stones were now fused together.

“What are we going to do?” Chad asked. Crestfallen and in fear of what his father will do to him, he stood there and began to tremble.

“He’s going to kill you,” Eryl said. Not in the literal meaning, but Chad’s life won’t be worth spit when his father learned about this. Not only had he gone against his father’s wishes, but he made the situation worse.

Chad collapsed into a nearby chair and stared at the single massive wheel. An errant breeze blew through the mill and some of the dust that once had been the scroll was picked up and

carried away. Visions of his family destitute and impoverished because of this played through his mind. He had only wanted to help.

Then from outside, footsteps could be heard approaching. Eryl stuck his head out the door to see who it was and brought it back in quickly. Turning to look at Chad with a frightened expression on his face he said, "It's father."

"Man you've got to get out of here," encouraged Bart.

"Come on Chad," Eryl said as he raced across to the door in the back.

Shaking his head, Chad said, "No. I can't run from this." He then turned to Bart and his brother. "You two shouldn't be here though." As the footsteps drew ever nearer, he pantomimed them leaving and said in a hushed whisper, "Now!"

Bart nodded and with Eryl leading the way, they left a split second before Chad's father entered the mill.

His father's face upon seeing him was one of elation as he had been worried about him all night long. Bags under his eyes showed that he hadn't had any sleep. Chad stood up and turned to face his father. Bracing himself for what was to come he said, "Father..."

Riyan had pushed the flock relentlessly all the way home. The coin he had found was a constant companion as he continued staring at it, rubbing his fingers over it, and dreamt of the untold wealth that lay buried in a passage no man had trod in for ages.

At some point he came to the realization that if there were enough down there, he might be able to change the mind of Freya's father. If he were rich enough, he was sure that the betrothal between Rupert and Freya would be annulled in favor of him.

He knew that he had some time before they would get married, as custom dictated that the betrothal must last a minimum of three months. That was to give the prospective couple a chance to get to know each other, and for their families to ensure this was in fact a good match. Though a broken betrothal was an extreme humiliation to the one being left and should only be undertaken under the direst of circumstances.

Quillim came into sight around midafternoon. The sheep had been voicing all morning their desire to stop and graze. He allowed them two brief stops to assuage their hunger, then it was back to the trail.

He angled the flock to skirt the town until he came to his home. When the sheep saw that they were to be put into the pen, they complained most heartily. Black Face was the worst. After all the others had gone into the pen, he bolted for freedom. Riyan had to chase him down and carry him back. Once Black Face was in the pen with the others, he shut and locked the gate.

"You're back early," his mother said as she came up behind him.

He turned to find her with a basket full of roots and leaves that have been a staple of their diet for as long as he could remember. Smiling, he replied, "I got over it and realized I didn't really want to be alone."

All the way back he had debated about whether to tell his mother of his discovery or not. He finally decided that she would only worry and that it would be best to come home with the treasure in hand before informing her.

When he saw her arch her eyebrows in question, he added, "Thought about going for a campout with Chad and Bart. Don't worry," he said before she could start objecting, "I can get Davin to watch the flock while I'm gone. He owes me."

Just then Chad's brother Eryl appeared running towards him. "You're back!" he exclaimed.

"Figured that out did you?" joked Riyan. Then he noticed how Eryl's eyes were red rimmed and bloodshot. His mood sobering quickly, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Father's kicked Chad out!" he said.

"What?" Riyan asked in disbelief. "Why?"

Then Eryl went into the story of how the earthquake damaged the grinding wheel and of Chad's idea in fixing it. Finally, he wound it up with the two grinding wheels becoming fused together and his father kicking Chad out. "He's staying with Bart right now," he explained.

Riyan turned to his mother and said, "I better go see him." He gave her a quick kiss and then rushed off towards where Bart stayed with old lady Rebecca.

Eryl accompanied him for a short time until he saw Rupert and his cronies standing against the side of a building talking up ahead. When he saw them, he mumbled some excuse to Riyan then bolted the other way.

Riyan saw them too and altered his course to put more distance between them.

"Hey!" he heard on the cronies yell. "Look who's back!" Then Rupert moved away from the wall and hurried to meet him.

Riyan could see the set of his face and knew the meeting was going to be bad. So he altered his course even further and ran as fast as he could in an attempt to flee.

"Stop, Riyan!" Rupert yelled at him but he ignored the command. Instead, he tried to move even faster.

Then all of a sudden, something struck the back of his legs. Losing his balance, he fell to the ground and hit hard. In a second, they were on him. Fists struck and feet kicked as he curled himself up into a ball in an attempt to keep the blows from doing any serious damage.

"You keep your nose out from between me and Freya!" Rupert yelled as he kicked him even harder.

Several more blows landed before they stopped. Riyan looked up at his tormentors and saw Rupert standing there, staring down at him. "You meddle in this again and I'll kill you," Rupert threatened. "Do I make myself clear?"

Riyan wasn't sure what he was talking about and was trying to make sense of it in his mind. Then another kick struck his back as a crony said, "He asked you a question."

"Yes!" he cried. "I understand."

"Good," Rupert said. "Let's go boys." Then he and the others left him lying there in the street as they walked off.

Riyan felt something trickling out of his nose and wiped it with his hand only to discover it was blood. Looking around, he saw several townsfolk standing there watching. When his eyes met theirs, they lowered theirs to the ground and moved off. Not one of them came and offered him any aid.

He pushed himself off the ground and back to his feet. Checking his nose again, he found the blood had stopped flowing. He did a quick self examine and found nothing broken, but he's sure that he'll feel it tomorrow. Moving off, he resumed his trek to Bart's place, albeit this time at a much more moderate pace.

When he arrived at old lady Rebecca's, he found Chad and Bart working to dig out an old stump. They stopped when they saw him coming. Throwing down their shovels, they ran over to him.

"What happened to you?" Bart asked when he saw the state he was in. Hair disheveled, a bruise beginning to form on his arm, and dried blood around his nose all said something bad had happened.

"Ran into Rupert," he explained.

"Man I'm sorry about that," he replied.

"It's not your fault," Riyan assured him.

"Well, actually it is," Bart said. Then he went into a brief explanation of the escapade he and Chad had undergone to mess with Rupert. "If I would have known this was going to happen, I never would have done it."

Riyan grinned and said, "If you caused him any anxious moments, it was worth it." Then he turned to Chad. "Ran into Eryl."

"Oh, you heard then?" he asked.

Riyan nodded. "What exactly happened?"

His tale and the one Riyan had heard from Eryl were pretty much the same until he came to the part when his father entered the mill. "When he saw the two fused slabs, I thought I was dead," he admitted. "He even went so far as to ball his fist like he was going to strike me, which is something he's never done."

He went silent a moment and Riyan could see the emotions running through him as he gathered the words to continue. When he turned sad eyes that were welling tears towards him, he said, "Then my father looked like he just deflated. I don't know how else to describe it. It almost seemed like the life went out of him."

"I was expecting an argument, even a beating, but not that." His voice grew very quiet as he said, "He didn't even look at me. Just turned his back and walked out." Tears began to well in earnest as he internally relived the experience. "I tried to follow but he just shook his head. 'Leave, Chad,' he said. 'Just go.'"

Emotions took over and he couldn't continue. Neither Riyan nor Bart knew what to do other than stand there and wait until it was over. "I was waiting outside when he came out," Bart told him. "Later, I took him back to his home so he could reconcile things, but his father wouldn't even talk to him. His mother came out and told him that his father didn't want him around anymore. Frankly I couldn't understand his father's reaction." He glanced to Riyan and added, "It seemed a bit too extreme."

"I can't go home!" Chad cried out. Grabbing onto Riyan he asked, "What am I to do?"

Bart looked at Riyan over Chad's shoulder and said, "I offered to let him stay here. Rebecca won't mind."

Riyan placed his hand on his friend's shoulder and said, "Don't worry. I'm sure that once your father has had a chance to cool down, he'll reconsider."

"So do I," agreed Bart. "Maybe you need to get out of town for awhile, give him some time to get over it. The heat of the moment is never a good time to settle anything. My father always said, 'Hot heads lead to anger, cool minds lead to reason'."

Riyan nodded. "True words." He then glanced to Chad then to Bart, "Why don't we go on a camping trip? Give your father the time he'll need to cool down."

"That might not be a bad idea," agreed Bart. Patting Chad on the back, he asked, "How about it?"

Shrugging, Chad said, "Sure. It's not like I have anything else to do anymore."

"Great!" said Riyan. "Just get your things and we'll head out right away."

Chad's face fell again when he realized he'll have to go to his home to get his camping equipment. Turning to Bart, he asked, "Can you go find Eryl and have him get my stuff? I don't think it would be wise for me to return."

"No problem," he agreed.

Riyan then said, "Chad, why don't you return with me to my home and we'll wait for Bart there?"

"Okay, sure," he replied.

"Meet you there," Bart told them. "Need to tell Rebecca she'll have to wait another couple of days before I can work on the stump again. I'll be at your place as quickly as I can."

It took Bart the better part of an hour before he arrived at Riyan's home, Eryl was with him. Eryl had managed to sneak out all the things Chad would need for a campout; bedroll, cooking pots, bowls, etc. He even managed to bring along a lantern.

"Thanks Eryl," he said. "Is father any better?"

Shaking his head, he replied, "No. I've never seen him like this before."

Sighing, Chad grabbed his brother and held him a moment. Eryl looked stunned, maybe even on the verge of panic at this display of affection. Quickly disengaging himself, he said, "I wish I could go with you, but I think it would be better for me to stay around. That way I can remind father what a loss not having you around is going to be."

"I appreciate that," his brother said. "Just don't go overboard on it."

"I won't," he assured him. "I best be getting back, it's almost lunch."

"See ya," Chad said then watched as Eryl raced down the lane.

Riyan's mother had packed plenty of food for them and they distributed it among their three packs. Between them, they were taking two lanterns and two small bladders of lantern oil. The other two looked questioningly at Riyan but he just grinned and shrugged. "Never know what may happen," he explained. "One could break."

"You boys be careful now," Riyan's mother said. "And Chad, I'm sure your father will come to see reason before your return."

"I hope so," he replied.

Riyan shouldered his pack and announced, "Let's go. Found this new area while out with the sheep that I think you both are going to like."

As they headed out, Riyan gave his mother a peck on the cheek. Riyan brought his shepherd's staff for a walking stick, the other two didn't feel the need for one. They walked in silence until they entered the hills and Riyan's home disappeared behind them.

"I think this is just what I need," Chad said. Already his mood seemed to be improving.

"To tell you both the truth, I had planned on asking you two on a campout even before discovering what happened between you and your father Chad," Riyan said. He glanced around to make sure they were alone and pulled the coin he found out of his pouch. "What do you two make of this?"

He handed it first to Bart who looked it over then gave it to Chad. "Looks old," commented Bart. "I don't think I've ever seen similar markings on any other coin before."

Chad nodded. "Me either." After carefully looking at it, he handed it back to Riyan. "So where did you find it?"

"In a hole in the ground," he explained. He then went on to relate how he came to find it, the fact that there was a passage that led somewhere, and his hopes that it might yield treasure.

"There's no guarantee that there is anything of value there," argued Bart.

"No, that's true," admitted Riyan. "But, the coin was there. Where there is one, there could be more." Then he turned to Chad, "If there's enough, maybe you could give some to your father to help with the grinding stones."

"That would be great," agreed Chad. "He would have to forgive me then."

For the rest of the day they worked their way deeper into the mountains. Riyan continuously scanned for the landmarks he noted on his way out. One by one, they came into view to tell him that they were on the right course.

That night when the sun dipped towards the horizon, they stopped and made camp. "I think we'll be there sometime tomorrow morning," he announced while they were setting up camp. "Noon by the latest."

Once the fire was going, Riyan went in search of dinner and returned shortly with a rabbit and a wild fowl. The three friends spent the rest of the evening enjoying each other's company and trying to figure out what kind of treasure they would find tomorrow.

As the shadows grew long and the people began returning to their homes, a stranger entered the quiet town of Quillim. Strangers as a rule were not too uncommon here in Quillim, it being but a short ride from the main road running north and south. Quite often travelers would cross the river running between the town and the main road to seek lodging for the night.

This stranger was no different. The first place he went was to the Sterling Sheep where he acquired a room. When asked how long he would be staying, the stranger replied that he wasn't sure and paid for three nights up front. This of course made the innkeeper quite happy.

Later that night when the common room filled with diners and others who just came to hear the bard play, the stranger was found among them. A quiet individual who sat with his back against the wall, his eyes seemed to take in and examine everyone who entered. At one point, he

waved over the serving woman. When she arrived at his table, he asked her, "I was wondering if you could help me?"

She gave him a smile and replied, "Sure, that's what I'm here for."

Returning her smile, he said, "I was wondering if you might know of a friend of mine. Last I had heard, he was moving to this area but have since forgotten the town to which he was moving."

"What was your friend's name?" she asked.

"Bartholomew Agreani," he told her. "Ever heard of him?"

"I know of a Bart," she replied. "Never heard what his last name was though. I think he came here about a year ago."

"He's a young man, brown hair and just under six feet tall," he said.

She nodded. "That sounds like him."

"Do you know where I could find him?" he asked.

"I think he works out at old Rebecca's farm," she replied.

"Could you tell me where I could find it?"

"Oh sure," she replied then gave him the directions to the farm. Just then, another customer hollered for her assistance and she said, "Hope I've been of help."

"Yes you have my dear," the stranger assured her. "Thank you very much."

As she walked over to see what the other customer needed, the stranger sat back in his chair, took his mug in hand, and smiled.

Chapter Seven

It took the entire morning and the better part of the afternoon before Riyan found the clearing he was looking for. It was surprising how many different areas in these hills looked exactly the same. And after finding the 'area' three times, the others were beginning to wonder if he would ever be able to locate it.

He knew he finally found it when he crossed a stream and saw a mass of berry vines with an area of the outer fringe cut back. "There it is," he said as he led them towards the opening. Coming to a stop before the hole in the ground, he turned back to the others and grinned.

"That's it?" Bart asked. Staring down into the black hole, he said, "Doesn't look like much."

"Maybe not from up here," Riyan replied. "But at the bottom of the hole is a passage that moves off to the right and left."

“What are we waiting for?” asked Chad. He unslung his backpack and laid it on the ground a little bit away from the opening.

“Shouldn’t leave our equipment out here,” Bart said. “We wouldn’t want a wild animal taking off with something.” When the other two turned toward him he added, “Our packs are full of food after all.”

Seeing the wisdom in what he was saying, Chad picked up his pack.

Riyan moved to the edge of the opening. He then sat on the edge with his legs extended within. While visions of chests, crypts, and hordes of gold ran wild through his mind, he scooted into the opening.

The other two watched as he disappeared into the hole. A couple seconds later they heard him holler from where he came to land down below, “Come on down!”

Chad glanced to Bart who grinned. “You first,” he offered.

“Alright,” agreed Bart who cautiously approached, then entered the hole. Once he slid to the bottom, he found Riyan there already working on getting the lantern lit. By the time the wick was burning and illuminating the passage, Chad had joined them.

With the lantern in one hand, Riyan moved down the passage to the right until he reached the spot where he had found the coin. Turning back to the others he pointed to the floor. “That’s where I found the coin,” he said. The lantern’s light revealed his footprints from his earlier time down here.

Bart nodded and then looked closely at the walls. He saw how they showed the unmistakable signs of human construction. “This place is old,” he observed.

“How old do you think?” Chad asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “But giving that none of us are familiar with the markings on the coin, I doubt if anyone’s been down here for several hundred years.” Then he glanced at Chad. “Maybe longer.”

“There could be anything down here!” exclaimed Riyan.

“True,” Bart agreed. “But I would advise caution. There’s no telling what safeguards the previous occupants could have put into place.”

“You mean traps?” Chad asked.

Bart nodded. “Exactly.”

A worried look came over Chad as he glanced towards the floor of the passage leading away.

“Don’t worry,” said Bart. “I doubt if there would be anything in the middle of the passage.”

“But let’s be careful anyway,” Riyan added. Taking the lead, he moved down the passage to the right. They didn’t get very far before coming to where another narrower passage branched off to their left. When they reached it, they found that it curved back around further to the left.

Riyan brought them to a halt and glanced back at the others. “Which way?” he asked. The excitement of the moment making him almost giddy.

“Take the smaller passage to the left,” suggested Chad. “It’s narrower so may not be a main passage.”

Nodding, Riyan entered the new passage. Barely wide enough for a grown man to pass through without scraping his shoulders, it continued to curve back around to the left until it was

running parallel to the passage they had just left. As the passage finished the curve and straightened out, they saw where it ended at an open entryway leading into what had to be a room.

In his excitement, Riyan hurried to the entryway and passed through to the other side. The room he found himself in was only about fifteen feet by ten. A stone sarcophagus sat in the center of the room indicating they were in a burial chamber. The walls were plain, unadorned stone similar to that which was used in lining the passages.

“Wow,” Riyan breathed under his breath as he came to stand next to the sarcophagus. He ran his hand across the top as he took in the ancient inscriptions engraved within the stone.

“We must be in an ancient catacomb,” Chad observed, eyes lighting up. “They often bury gold and jewels with the dead.”

Bart nodded. “Let’s get it open,” he said indicating the sarcophagus.

“Do you think that’s wise?” asked Riyan. “I mean, stealing from the dead is supposed to be bad luck.”

Shrugging, Bart replied, “It’s up to you. We could always come back if there’s nothing else down here.”

“Yeah,” agreed Riyan, “that might be a better idea. If there was a chest or something in the room with it, that’s one thing, but to take something from the dead itself?” A shiver coursed through him at the very thought.

“Then let’s go find something else,” urged Chad.

“Wait a second,” Bart said as something caught his eye from the other side of the sarcophagus. He moved around the sarcophagus and reached down to pick up another of the coins. He grinned as he held it up for the others to see.

“It’s exactly like the other one I found,” Riyan exclaimed.

“Yes it is,” nodded Bart. He put it in his pouch and then indicated for Riyan to lead the way from the room.

Once they passed through the narrow passage and were back in the main one, he turned and continued down the way they had previously been heading. It wasn’t long before the passage they were following ended at a ‘T’ junction. Riyan paused momentarily to shine the light from the lantern down the left, then to the right. Both directions extended further than the light could reach. Riyan decided to take the right.

The new passage was exactly like the one they had just left, and it too ended in a ‘T’ junction not too far down. This time however, the passages to the right and left were narrower, just as the curving passage leading to the room with the sarcophagus had been.

Again he chose the right and hurried along. The narrow passage extended straight ahead for a short span then turned abruptly to the right. As Riyan turned the corner, he saw an entryway to another burial chamber. Moving forward, he passed through into the room and gasped.

No sarcophagus within this room. Rather, within the walls on the right and left sides of the room, were stone biers. Laid out upon each of the stone biers was a corpse. Both of them had been dressed in armor, yet time had reduced the armor to nothing more than rust. Skeletal faces looked out from within the helms they wore.

But it wasn't the sight of the dead that made Riyan gasp. Rather it was the chests that sat on the floor beneath each of them. "Oh man," he said with renewed excitement. Moving forward to the chest on the right, he set the lantern down as he gripped the lid. But try as he might, he couldn't get it open. The chest was locked. Behind him, Chad was trying the other chest only to find that it too was locked.

Riyan stood up disappointed and said, "It's locked."

"So is this one," Chad said.

Bart took off his pack and set it on the floor. He opened it and pulled out a rolled piece of leather. Holding it up, he glanced to Riyan and grinned. "I may be able to do something about that." Leaving his pack on the ground, he carried the rolled piece of leather and moved to the chest where he knelt down before it. He then untied the thong securing the piece of leather and set it on the ground next to the chest.

Riyan watched as he unrolled it. Within were small tools ranging in size from two to four inches in length. "What are you going to do with those?" he asked.

"You've never seen lockpicks before?" Bart asked.

"No," replied Riyan.

"Can't you be arrested for just having them in your possession?" asked Chad.

"So I've heard," he replied. Taking out two of the tools, he inserted their tips within the lock and began working the tumblers inside. After a few moments, he felt the 'click' that always accompanied the unlocking of the lock. He then replaced his tools in the rolled leather before taking hold of the lid and opening it.

Inside was what had to have once been several weapons but were now nothing more than piles of rust. Riyan held the lantern close to better see the interior in the hopes of there being treasure. After sifting through the rusty remains, they came up with nothing.

"Try the other one," suggested Chad.

Bart nodded and picked up his lockpicks and crossed the room to work on the other chest. Then just as before with the first one, he felt the 'click' and lifted open the lid.

Inside this chest were the rusted remains of weapons, similar to the ones that had been in the first chest. But this time, there were several stacks of the coins they found earlier. "There must be twenty or so of them!" Riyan exclaimed excitedly. After pulling them out and counting them, they discovered there were twenty four. Riyan divided them among himself and the others. Each put eight coins in their packs.

"Wonder how much they're worth?" Chad asked as they were leaving the tomb.

"If you consider just the copper used in making them, not much," explained Bart. "But due to their age, certain people would be willing to pay more for them."

"Excellent." Riyan gave them all a grin as they returned to the 'T' junction. He then crossed over to the other narrow passage and began making his way through. After going straight for a short span, the passage turned back to the left and they came to another tomb with two biers, one on each side of the room.

Just as in the previous room, the dead were arrayed in rusted armor and a chest sat on the floor beneath them. Again, the chests were locked and Bart used his lockpicks to get them open.

This time they found thirty of the coins and two small gems among the rusted remains of ancient weapons. They got quite excited about the gems until Bart explained they were rather common and wouldn't bring much gold. Riyan didn't care, he was having the time of his life.

They left the room and returned to the 'T' junction where they turned and followed the wider passage back the way they came. Once they returned to the first 'T' junction of the two main passages, they continued on past the passage leading back to the hole out to the surface.

They came to another 'T' junction with two narrow passages leading right and left to two more crypts. These also each held two stone biers upon which the dead were laid out, with matching chests below.

The first room of the new pair yielded eighteen of the coins. Riyan was slightly disappointed at not finding more. "You can't expect more treasure with each room we come to," Bart said. "Frankly, I'm surprised to have found what we already have."

"I know," replied Riyan.

They left the room behind and went to check out the room on the other side of the 'T'. When Bart went to pick the lock of the first chest, he paused.

"What?" asked Chad.

Bart tapped an area near the lock. It had a marking on it that didn't blend in perfectly with the overall design of the chest. "I didn't see this on the other ones," he explained.

Riyan moved the lantern closer and saw what looked to him little more than scratches. "So?" he asked.

"This may indicate a trap of some kind," he said as he turned to glance up at them.

"Why would you think that?" asked Chad.

"Just something my father told me one time," he replied. "You see, chests such as these that are trapped, often have some marking on them telling the owner what kind of trap it holds."

"That's stupid," scorned Chad. "I mean, wouldn't that give a thief an idea that something is not right?"

"Yes," agreed Bart. "But most chest makers who specialize in traps always put an unobtrusive mark on it so they'll know what it is and how to disarm it. Just because I know it's there, doesn't mean I can disarm it."

"But why would they do that?" Riyan asked.

Sighing, Bart stood up and turned towards them. "Suppose you commissioned a chest for a specific purpose and with a specific type of trap. And suppose further that once you got it home you accidentally closed the lid and locked it before whatever you wanted to put in it was inside. How are you going to get it back open?"

"I would think the chest maker would have given the owner instructions on how to open it," said Chad.

"Oh they do," agreed Bart, "but there are stupid people out there who forget, lose the instructions, etc. So chest makers put markings on each chest that holds a trap so if they are called out to open a trapped chest, they will be able to do so."

"I guess that makes sense," said Riyan.

"How do you know so much about this?" Chad asked.

Bart gave him a look, shook his head as he rolled his eyes, and then knelt back down in front of the chest.

"He's got lockpicks," Riyan informed his friend. "Who has lockpicks?"

"Thieves?" replied Chad.

"Or sons of thieves," added Bart. "Now be quiet and let me work on this. You two may wish to wait out in the passage, just in case something goes wrong."

Riyan nodded for Chad to join him as he moved out of the room and waited at the entryway. They watched as Bart first examined the outside of the chest very closely before scrutinizing the area around the lock. After a few tense moments, Bart placed the tips of his thumbs on either side of the keyhole and pressed. Then he turned to them and grinned, "I got it."

The other two hurried back into the room and saw a needle protruding from the keyhole. "It was a 'Prick of Poison' as my father would call it," he explained. "It's designed to prick the finger of the thief and deliver a poison of some kind. Some poisons become ineffective over time, while others grow more potent."

"Is it unlocked?" Chad asked.

Bart shook his head. "Not yet." Turning back to the chest, he removed the same two tools he used on the previous chests from his lockpicks and very carefully began working around the needle. Once he had the lock picked, he opened the lid.

Riyan moved closer to see what treasure may be inside. "You've got to be kidding!" he exclaimed when he saw the usual fare of rusted weapons and a scattering of the coins. "What's the point of putting a trap on this garbage?"

"Vanity maybe" replied Bart. "Or it could have been for some other reason. Who knows?"

"Seems a waste of time to trap this sort of stuff," Chad agreed with Riyan.

Riyan knelt down in front of the chest and said, "Maybe there's a secret compartment lining the bottom or top." Bart moved aside and then collected his lockpicks as he went to work on the other chest. Running his fingers along the inside, Riyan hunted for anything that might indicate something was hidden.

Remembering a tale told by a bard about treasure hunters, he tapped the bottom of the chest and the top. After several minutes of fruitless searching, he was unable to find anything. "Ten coins!" he exclaimed as he collected them. "Ten lousy coins!"

"It's better than nothing," offered Chad.

Riyan glared at him then came to his senses. "You're right," he said. "It's just that I was expecting something a bit more..."

"Expensive?" his friend finished for him.

"Something like that, yeah" Riyan nodded.

Just then, Bart raised the lid of the other chest. "More coins," he told them. He did a quick count and said, "Twenty three."

"Every little bit helps," Chad said when he saw the disappointment in his friend's eyes.

Bart collected the coins then stood up. "You may have unrealistic expectations about this place," he said as he turned back towards Riyan. "Judging by the construction and the state of the dead, I would guess that finding something worth real gold is unlikely."

“Exactly,” agreed Chad. “Let’s hope we find at least enough so I can help my father with the new grinding wheels.”

Riyan gave him a grin and laid his hand on his shoulder. “You got it,” he said. “At the very least, we’re living the dream of being treasure hunters.”

“Just like the sagas,” agreed Chad with a grin of his own.

“Onward fearless treasure hunters!” Riyan exclaimed then the three friends broke into laughter. They left the crypt and returned back the way they came until they reached the ‘T’ with the main passage leading down to where they entered this place.

“Pack’s getting heavy,” Chad said.

“You’ve only got about thirty coins in there,” Bart told him. “If it gets too heavy, you can give me some of yours.”

“That’s okay,” Chad assured him, “I’m sure I’ll manage.” Riyan laughed.

They left the ‘T’ behind them and headed down the passage back towards the hole in the ceiling through which they entered. When they passed the curving narrow passage that led to the sarcophagus, they knew they were almost there.

Then Bart all of a sudden came to an abrupt halt. The other two who were walking behind him stopped as well. “What?” asked Chad.

He pointed down the passage ahead of them and in a quiet whisper said, “Look.” When the other two looked down the passage to where he was indicating, two red dots could be seen. They looked for all the world like a pair of eyes and they were staring right at them. Light filtering down from outside showed them the hole in the ceiling and the way out, unfortunately it was closer to the red eyes than it was to them.

“Back up slowly,” Bart said as he began walking backwards. Riyan and Chad both started moving backwards as well when a god awful roar reverberated through the passage.

“Run!” yelled Bart as he turned around to flee. Behind them, they could hear the grunting of a large animal as it thundered towards them.

When the lantern’s light revealed the curving passage coming up on their left, Chad got an idea and said, “Into the passage.” Leading the others, he raced into the passage and followed it quickly to the room with the sarcophagus. “Help me with the lid!” he replied. Moving to the sarcophagus, he gripped the side of the lid and waited for the others to come and help.

“I can’t do it by myself,” he told them. “We can block the entryway with it!”

Getting the idea, Riyan and Bart each came and took hold of an edge. Then giving out with groans of strain, they lifted the heavy stone lid up and off the sarcophagus. “Man this is heavy,” gasped Riyan.

From the narrow passage outside the room, they heard the growls of the beast as it worked its way towards them. “Hurry!” Chad exclaimed.

Once the end of the lid that was nearest the entryway was past the edge of the sarcophagus, they rested the lid on the edge and slid it the rest of the way to the floor. Out in the passage, the red eyes of the beast were now visible as it rounded the curve. The sheer size of the creature hampered it as it tried to navigate through the narrow way. It was wedged in on both sides and had to push its bulk through to get to them.

They worked the lid closer to the entryway. When it was within inches, they lifted the other end and set it against the top of the opening. "Now what?" asked Bart.

"I don't know," replied Chad. "My plan only went as far as blocking off the room."

Riyan glanced to the body that was lying within the sarcophagus. A sword lay along the top of the body, its hilt clasped in the corpse's skeletal hands. Perhaps it was the fact that it had been within a sealed sarcophagus, but the metal looked to have withstood the passage of time.

Bam!

The creature struck the other side of the lid where it blocked the entryway and almost knocked the lid back into the room. Chad and Bart put their shoulders against it to keep it upright.

Bam!

Again the creature struck the lid, this time a small piece of it broke off. "It's not going to withstand blows like that for much longer," Chad said.

"Oh yeah, this was a good idea," said Bart rather sarcastically.

"There was no other place to go," insisted Chad. Then he glanced back at where Riyan was bent over the sarcophagus. "Riyan, we could use your help right about now!"

"Just a second," replied Riyan. He gripped the hands of the corpse and was in the midst of trying to remove them from the hilt of the sword. Once he had the hilt free, he grabbed it and tried to lift it out with one hand. When he could barely move it, he used both hands and struggled to get it out.

The sword was massive, what you would call a two-handed sword. It took all of his strength simply to raise it and carry it towards the entryway. "Careful with that!" Bart exclaimed when the edge of the sword came close and almost struck him.

Riyan took the sword and moved to face the gap between the lid and the entryway. He saw the forepaw of the creature poke through for a moment before it withdrew. "I think it's a mountain bear," he told the others.

"Great," replied Bart. "Now kill it!"

Riyan lifted the sword until it was parallel with the ground. Then he aimed it at the gap between the lid and the entryway. He gave out with a cry and ran forward, at the same time he thrust the sword through the gap. His forward momentum was abruptly halted as the point of the sword struck flesh.

The beast roared in pain as the sword sank into its flesh. Whatever part of the body that was struck suddenly jerked and Riyan almost lost his grip on the hilt. But he yanked back quickly and retained the sword. The blade was stained red six inches from the tip. From the other side of the lid, the beast had grown quiet.

"I got it!" replied Riyan as he showed the others the sword.

"But whether you killed it or not remains to be seen," Bart stated.

They listened for a few seconds and could only hear muted breathing from the other side. Riyan propped the sword against the wall a foot down from the entryway as it was growing more difficult to hold.

"It isn't dead," Chad finally said as the sound the beast's breathing from the other side continued.

"Riyan," Bart whispered, "take a look." He then indicated the gap between the lid and the entryway through which he had struck the creature with the sword.

"Alright," he agreed. Leaving the sword where it was, he grabbed the lantern and moved towards the crack. The crack itself wasn't all that big as the base of the lid was only six inches from the base of the entryway. Now that he took a good look at it, he's surprised that he was even able to hit the creature through it.

He moved closer, and even got down on his knees to peer through to the other side better. Chad and Bart maintained their position against the sarcophagus' lid should the creature again try to bull its way in.

At the base of the entryway was a small pool of blood. "It's lost some blood," he told the others. Peering through with the lantern next to him, he tried to locate the creature. After a minute off looking, he backed away and said, "I can't really see anything."

"Try striking with the sword again," Bart said. "If it's close, you might hit it."

"But that might make it mad," Chad said.

Bart glanced to Chad. "Do you want to stay down here forever?" He waited for him to shake his head no then added, "It's that or we move the lid aside."

Chad turned to Riyan and said, "You better try the sword."

Riyan nodded, he didn't relish the idea of removing the protection the stone lid was affording them. So, taking up the sword again, he did just as he did the first time. He aimed the point of the sword for the crack and with a cry, thrust hard. The blade slid through the crack and failed to hit anything.

"I guess we're going to have to move the lid aside to see," he said after the failed attempt.

Bart nodded. "Stand ready," he told Riyan. Then to Chad he said, "We'll pull it back a little ways. But be ready should the beast move to attack again." When Chad acknowledged the plan, Bart glanced to Riyan. "Ready?"

Riyan raised the sword and nodded.

"Easy now," Bart told Chad. With great care, they began pulling the sarcophagus lid away from the entryway.

Sweat beaded his forehead as Riyan watched the lid begin to move away from the entryway. He expected at any minute for the beast to launch another assault, and as the lid inched its way further back, his apprehension grew.

They finally had moved the lid back far enough for Riyan to see the creature lying just on the other side of the entryway. The rise and fall of its back told him that it was still alive. "It's right on the other side," he whispered to the other two.

"Can you get at it?" asked Chad.

"I think so," Riyan replied. Raising the sword, he drove it forward and the point struck the creature in the side. The creature gave out with a grunt.

"Well?" asked Chad.

"I hit it but it didn't move," he replied.

“It’s not doing anything?” Bart asked.

Riyan left the sword in the creature’s body. He turned to his friends and shook his head.

Bart indicated to Chad that they should move the lid to the side. Once it was out of the way, they looked to the creature and found that it was indeed one of the large mountain bears common to this region. The sword stuck out of its side and blood continued to pump with every beat of its heart.

“Why doesn’t it attack?” asked Chad.

Bart moved closer and saw blood welling from just behind its head. “I think your first blow took it in the spine,” he said. Then he saw the eyes of the beast upon him and he took a quick step backwards. When the bear made no move to attack, he knew that the bear’s spinal column had been severed.

He turned to the others. “We need to put it out of its misery.”

“You two do it,” Riyan said. His arms and legs are shaking from the earlier attacks. The weight of the sword plus the adrenalin rush that was wearing off, had sapped his strength.

Bart nodded and grasped the hilt of the sword in both hands. Pulling it out of the bear’s side, he raised it high over his head. Using every ounce of strength he had, he thrust it into the bear. He was rather surprised that he managed to sink half of the blade into it before the tip hit bone and stopped.

“That had to do it,” said Chad.

They watched the sides of the bear continue to go in and out as it breathed. Then, the frequency of its breaths went down until they stopped altogether.

“Maybe we should get out of here and make camp for the night,” suggested Riyan. “I for one could use some rest.”

“Might not be a bad idea,” agreed Chad. “I’m getting hungry.”

Bart pulled out his knife and began carving off a hunk of the bear for their dinner.

Riyan stopped him before he could cut very deep. “Wait to do that until we’re on the other side,” he said. “It’s going to be bad enough as it is.”

He stopped carving when he realized what he was talking about. The bear’s body completely blocked the lower half of the entryway and most of it was already covered in blood. Then he laughed. He’s not sure why, but he started laughing and it wasn’t long before Riyan and Chad joined him.

They worked their way over the bear’s carcass and once on the other side, Bart carved out a chunk of meat. He carried it as he followed the other two down the narrow curving passage and back to the main passage. Then it was just down a little ways until they reached the opening leading to the surface.

“Look,” Riyan when came to the slope leading up. They could see the tracks the bear made as it came down the slope. “Wonder what it was doing in here?”

“Maybe looking for a den,” suggested Bart.

“Or dinner,” added Chad.

“I just hope there’s not another one out there,” Riyan said as he headed up the slope first.

The sun had already dipped past the tops of the mountains to the west. They got a fire going and once Riyan had a spit put together to roast the meat, they went down to the stream and washed the blood off.

That night as they sat around the fire, they talked about what they found down below, the bear attack, and what they may possibly find in the morning.

Chapter Eight

The clinking of coins woke Chad the following morning. He turned over and saw Riyan stacking his share of the coins on the ground before him. Chad sat up and groaned, “Not again.”

Riyan glanced over to his friend and grinned. “I can’t help it,” he replied.

“You must have counted them ten times last night before we went to sleep,” he stated.

“Sorry,” his friend said. “I just like to look at them.”

The morning dawned a beautiful day with just a hint of clouds forming a wreath that circled the mountain peaks. Chad looked around and didn’t see Bart anywhere. “Where did Bart go?” he asked.

Riyan nodded toward the stream. “He went that way,” he explained. “Said would be back shortly.” Now that Chad’s up, Riyan put his coins away and they got breakfast going. Soon the odor of bacon and eggs was wafting through the hills.

Down by the stream Bart was walking along, simply enjoying the quiet of the hills. When he first came to Quillim, it was more out of need than desire. Having lived all his life in the city, it was hard for him to adjust to the openness of the country. But it didn’t take long before he grew to cherish it.

Oh sure, he still longed for the city; the hustle, bustle, and constant noise, even late at night there was always something dispelling the quiet. It was home. When he accompanied Chad to Phyndyr’s, it had reawakened his longing for the streets. He just wished that he could go back.

Stepping along the edge of the gently flowing water, his thoughts drifted back to his days in Wardean. His life on her streets had never been dull. Then he smelled the odor of bacon wafting from camp and realized he’d better return before the other two ate it all.

Their camp wasn’t situated near the opening to the underground area. Instead, they had crossed the stream and camped a hundred yards away. Not having their camp near the entrance was Riyan’s idea. He didn’t want someone to stumble upon their camp and then discover the entrance, at least not until they were through exploring it for themselves.

When they were finished with breakfast, they carried all their equipment with them to the underground area. "Wish we could block this off somehow," Chad said as he worked his way down to the passage below.

"I know what you mean," replied Riyan. None of them wished for a repeat of the incident with the bear.

"Don't know how we could," added Bart as he entered the hole in the ground and slid down.

Riyan already had one of the lanterns lit and was looking down to the left hand passage where they had yet to explore. "Hope we find something interesting today," he said.

"Me too," agreed Chad. He then took off all his equipment and bedroll and laid them on the passage floor. "I'm not going to haul this around again today."

The others removed their equipment as well. All each of them took with them were their packs which they slung across their shoulders. Bart also brought the other lantern just in case. None of them wished to be down here without a light in the event something happened to their other one.

"All ready?" Riyan asked with renewed excitement.

"You bet," Chad replied. Bart nodded.

Setting out, Riyan took the lead and moved down the passage. He didn't go far before another curving narrow passage branched off to their right. Without hesitation, he entered the passage. It continued to curve back to the right until it was running parallel to the main passage. The narrow passage went straight for a few more feet before ending at an entryway to another crypt holding a sarcophagus.

"Just like the other one," observed Chad.

Riyan nodded and entered the crypt. A quick search turned up nothing so they left the room and returned through the curving passage back to the main passage. Then they turned to the right and continued down for a ways before coming to another 'T' junction.

He glanced down to the left and right but couldn't see any difference between them. Riyan decided to take the left passage and moved into it. It didn't go very far before they came to yet another 'T' junction. To their left and right, narrow passages branched off just like the ones they discovered the previous day.

They explored them and turned up two more of the rooms with the stone biers within the walls on either end. The chests below the biers contained a sum total of fifteen of the coins and another small gem. Once finished with searching the two rooms, they returned to the main passage, and this time took the right at the 'T'.

"This place seems to be laid out according to a pattern," observed Bart. "The bier rooms are in pairs, while the rooms with the sarcophagi are by themselves with a curved passage connecting them to the main passage."

"That's been true so far," agreed Chad.

Continuing down the passage, they came to where another main passage connected to theirs on the left. When Riyan shined the lantern's light down it, the light revealed the ceiling of the passage had caved in.

"That didn't happen too long ago," Riyan told the others. "The dirt's still fresh."

“Could’ve happened during the earthquake,” suggested Chad.

Nodding, Riyan glanced to him. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“Wonder what was down there?” Bart asked. “We should have thought to bring a shovel.”

“If we come back here another time, let’s remember to bring one,” said Chad.

Riyan nodded then turned back to the main passage and continued on. Twenty feet or so after they left the blocked passage behind, they came to a flight of steps descending into darkness on their right.

“Alright!” exclaimed Riyan when the lantern’s light revealed the steps.

He started moving into them when Bart said, “Let’s finish up here first.”

Riyan turned to him and was about ready to argue the point. For in all the sagas he’s ever heard that tell of treasure hunters, the deeper one goes, the better the treasure gets. But then he realized there’s no point in hurrying it along and nodded. “Okay.”

They spent the better part of a half hour finishing the exploration of this level. Two crypts holding sarcophagi and six bier rooms later, they returned to the stairs leading down. Two of the chests in the bier rooms had the Pricks of Poison trap which Bart readily disarmed. He told them that once you know what’s there, it’s pretty simple to take care of it. Riyan had his doubts about that, but trusted in Bart’s skill.

Their packs were now fifty three coins and three gems heavier when they finished searching this level. At least one of the gems was slightly larger than the others that they found and should bring more coins.

Riyan took the lead again as they descended to the next level. They descended twenty steps before the stairs ended at a passageway moving to their right and left. Here the stonework was of much better quality. The walls of the passage looked as if more care had been put into their construction than what they saw up above. Also, sconces that once must have held torches are spaced along the walls at ten foot intervals.

“Looks like we’ve entered a better area,” Riyan said.

“Or it was built later than the one above,” added Chad.

When Riyan glanced back at them, they could see the grin that’s spread across his face. They also noticed how his eyes were practically dancing in anticipation.

“Relax,” Bart told him. “The last thing we need to do is get in a hurry in a place like this.”

“I’ll try,” he said but the tone of his voice belied the statement.

Moving down to the right, they followed the passage until it turned abruptly to the left. Not far past the corner, another passage, slightly smaller than the main one they were in branched off to their right.

Riyan shined the light down the new passage and saw at the edge of the light how it opened up onto another room. “May have something here,” he said and moved forward.

The room at the end of the short passage was rectangular in shape, stretching to the right and left. Two large tapestries that hadn’t survive the passing of time well, hung upon the walls. The fabric had deteriorated so badly, that whatever they at one time depicted was no longer discernable.

In the center of the room, two stone biers sat six feet apart. Lying upon each were the skeletal remains of warriors. The skulls were encased in helms and armor covered the rest of the body. Their hands gripped the hilt of the swords that lay upon their breasts.

Bart entered the room and moved to the skeleton on the right and briefly examined its sword. The blade showed extensive damage by rust as did the armor.

“No chests here,” said Riyan unhappily.

“That’s true,” said Bart. Then he had Riyan follow him with the lantern as he closely examined the biers upon which the dead lay. “However, there are other means by which people store their valuables than simple wooden chests.” The biers were more than just simple blocks of stone. They were carved with figures locked in battle.

As Bart ran his fingers across one of the figures, he felt it shift under his touch. “Aha!” he exclaimed.

“What?” asked Riyan as he moved in closer to see.

“May have found something,” he told him. “Back off a little and give me some room.”

“Sorry,” he said and then backed up a foot. Chad came over and stood beside him as they watched Bart feel around the figure.

Bart was sure that if he pressed the figure it would release a catch holding open a secret compartment. But he also remembered his father telling him how in situations such as he now found himself, devices like this invariable were trapped. The problem was that he didn’t know how to disarm it.

He stood up and turned around to Riyan. “I wish you would have brought your staff down here with you.” It’s currently sitting up on the upper level with all their other equipment.

“Why?” he asked.

“I think I found how to open the compartment,” he explained, “but it may be trapped. If I had your staff, I could do it from a distance.”

“No problem there,” Riyan told him, “I’ll just run up and get it.”

“Alright,” Bart nodded.

As he turned to leave, Chad grabbed his arm and said, “Hurry.”

He grinned at his friend and said, “I will.” Then he hurried from the room and took the lantern with him. In short order, Bart and Chad were left in the dark.

They waited there for what seemed like hours, and when Chad began to express worry about what may have happened to him, the passage leading to the crypt began to lighten. Soon, Riyan rejoined them with staff in hand. “I’ll be sure to keep this with me from now on,” he told the others as he handed it to Bart.

Bart took the staff and said, “It might be safer if you two waited out in the passage. Leave the lantern on the ground first though.”

Riyan set the lantern on the ground near Bart then he and Chad left the room. They came to a stop several feet from the entryway, just far enough out of the room to still be able to see what happened.

Once Bart saw that they were safely out of the room, he too stepped back as far as he could and still be able to place the end of the staff on the figure. Then he lifted the staff and held it at

arm's reach. He positioned himself a little to one side as he moved the end of the staff to lie against the figure. Holding his breath, he depressed the figure with the end of the staff.

No sooner had the figure been depressed then a liquid squirted out from two different places on either side. The liquid shot out and landed a good two feet from the bier. When the liquid hit the stone floor, it began to eat away at it.

Bart turned back to the others and said, "Acid."

"If you had pressed that with you finger, it would have hit you," Riyan said as he moved back into the room.

Handing him back his staff, Bart replied, "That was the whole idea of the trap I'm sure." He glanced to the stone where the liquid hit and saw that the corrosiveness of the acid ate away almost a quarter inch of the stone's surface before it began to fizzle out. He thought to himself, That would have hurt.

Turning his attention back to the bier, he noticed that over a foot long section of its side had popped out a little bit. Moving closer, he took hold of the edge and pulled the piece of stone. As it turned out, it was a long drawer filled with the deceased's belongings.

"That is cool," Chad said as Bart pulled the drawer out. It finally came to a stop when it was two feet out and no amount of pulling would budge it further. Making sure not to step in the acid on the floor, Chad and Riyan moved closer to see what was inside.

Within the drawer lay a weapon wrapped in cloth. The cloth lay in tatters, and when they unwrapped the dagger that was inside, found the blade to be brittle.

Another sack lay alongside the dagger. Within they found twenty of the coins, plus five coins of another type. These were slightly larger and silver in color. "Are those silver coins?" asked Chad.

Riyan picked one up. "Looks like it," he replied. "But they're heavier than what we use now."

Bart took one of the silver coins and nodded. "I'd say it's about one and a half times the weight of the coins in use today." The design on the two sides of the silver coins matched what was on the copper coins.

They removed the coins and left the dagger. Then Bart moved on to the other bier in the room. A quick search located another movable figure. Using the same strategy he employed on the first one, he pressed the figure with the staff. Again, a spurt of acid and a similar drawer popped open.

Within they found a set of daggers and what may have been a book, but time had destroyed them beyond use. When Riyan touched the book, its pages cracked and disintegrated under his touch. The drawer wasn't without treasure as they found another ten silvers and thirty coppers. There was also a gold necklace nestled in among the coins.

Riyan held up the necklace and showed it to Bart. "Think this is worth anything?" he asked.

"If it's real gold, yes," he replied.

"Don't know why it wouldn't be," Riyan said as he put it in his pack.

Once their booty was stowed in their packs, they left the room and continued down the passage to the right. Fifty feet further down, they came to a larger entryway on their left. When they reached it, the light revealed a much larger room than any they've come across so far.

The room was quite large. Three columns were spaced evenly down the center of the room, moving from the entryway where Riyan and the others stood, to another entryway in the wall directly across the room from them on the other side. To the left and right of the columns sat three stone biers, six altogether. They were identical to those that had been in the previous room they found on this level, except that the armor the dead were wearing was slightly different. These too were ravaged by rust.

"This must be someplace special," said Chad.

"It would seem so," agreed Bart.

The walls of the room bore carvings of men in battle from one end to the other. Riyan took a closer look and saw that what the men were fighting wasn't entirely human. "Look at this," he said to the other two.

Bart and Chad came to stand by him as he pointed out the creatures the men were fighting. They were roughly the same size and shape as the fighters. Bipedal humanoids, but that's where the similarity ended. Their faces were bestial, small horns sprouted from their foreheads, and a long scaly tail touched the ground behind them.

"Ever seen anything like this before?" asked Riyan.

"No," admitted Bart. "But burial chambers such as these often have murals and such depicting the dead in a heroic and favorable light."

Chad nodded.

Bart then set about trying to find the hidden catch that would open each of the drawers in the six biers. The first one he came across, he did the staff trick again to open it. Only this time when he depressed the figure with the staff, nothing happened other than the drawer popped open a little bit. No liquid this time.

Riyan moved forward and said, "Guess it was broken." He reached the drawer and gripped the part that was protruding. Just as he began to pull it open, Bart yelled "Stop!" But his warning came too late.

No sooner had the cavity within the drawer cleared the side of the bier than a dart flew out and struck Riyan in the arm. "Damn!" he cursed as his other hand quickly moved to remove the dart. He cried out as the dart came free for its head had two nasty barbs that ripped his flesh as he pulled it out.

"Flush it with water quick!" Bart yelled.

Chad removed his water flask and upended it over the wound. He emptied its entire contents as he washed the blood away. A tearing sound drew his attention and he turned to see Bart tearing off a piece of cloth to use as a bandage.

"It's not that bad," Riyan said through gritted teeth. "I'll live."

Bart wrapped the cloth around the wound and tied it off. "It's not the wound itself that concerns me," he said. "It's what may have been on the dart that has me worried."

"You mean poison?" asked Chad.

Bart nodded. "That's usually what you'll find on a dart in circumstances like this."

Riyan turned fearful eyes to him and asked, "Am I going to die?"

"I don't know," he replied. "How do you feel?"

He took a moment to see if he felt the poison taking affect then said, "I don't feel any different."

"You could be lucky in that the potency of the poison has deteriorated over the years," he said. "If you start feeling nauseous or dizzy, let us know right away."

"You got it," he said.

Then Bart glanced at both of them and said, "From now on, no one opens anything until I say it's okay."

Both Chad and Riyan nodded affirmatively.

Then Bart set about searching the remaining five biers while the other two examined the contents of the drawer they just opened. More rusted weapons and a few coins, three of the silver and ten of the copper.

"You know," commented Chad, "it just seems odd to me that soldiers for whom someone took such care to build this place for and were laid out so respectfully, would have so little in the way of valuables." When Riyan glanced at him he gestured to the skeletal remains of the man in armor atop the bier and said, "I mean, wouldn't you think this guy here would have more than a couple weapons and a modest amount of coins?"

Riyan shrugged. "Maybe it was their custom. Or perhaps their family only gave them what they had too and saved the rest for themselves."

Chad grinned and nodded. "I'd probably do the same."

Ahhhh!

Bart's cry drew their attention and they looked over at the next bier just in time to see him jump back out of the way of an acid spray. "What happened?" Riyan said as he and Chad hurried over to him.

"I got sloppy," he said. "I forgot that when there are many of the same type of traps in the same place, they are often set to go off differently to foil thieves." He pointed to the bier he was working on. "That one had the spray come out at a little different angle and almost got me."

"You're okay though?" asked Chad.

Bart nodded. "Yes," he replied. "That one's safe, you can go through it while I finish the rest of them."

So that's what they did. While Bart would work on one, Chad and Riyan would go through the ones he already opened. When they were at last done with this room, Bart had managed to again narrowly avoid another acid spray as well as two more Pricks of Poison. The drawers of the remaining five had contributed sixty five more of the coppers, thirteen of the silvers and five small gems to their bulging packs.

Chad patted his pack and said, "We must have a fortune by now."

Bart grinned at his enthusiasm. "Actually we have a little over three golds worth, not counting the gems and the necklace," he corrected.

Holding up his bulging pack, he said, "How can this be worth so little?"

"It's the copper coins," Bart replied. "It takes a lot to make a gold. Of course, the age of the coins could bring more value if we only knew the right person to talk to."

"Do you?" asked Riyan.

Shaking his head, Bart said, "I know a fence where we could get rid of this stuff, but he wouldn't care too much about their age."

"Why would we want to get rid of this stuff?" Riyan asked.

Bart removed one of the coins and held it up. "Anyone who sees this coin is going to wonder where you got it from," he replied. "And in case you didn't already know, Duke Alric has made it law that he gets twenty percent of any treasure recovered in his dukedom. Something like this would be considered recovered treasure I'm afraid."

"You're kidding?" Chad said.

Shaking his head, Bart replied, "No I'm not. In fact, if you're found guilty of finding treasure without turning over his share, it's considered thieving."

"Great!" said Riyan. The plans that had been going through his mind as to what to do with the treasure all of a sudden went up in smoke.

"Don't worry," Bart replied. "A quick trip to Wardean and we'll get this exchanged for regular coins that won't raise as much suspicion."

"How much will the fence take for doing this?" asked Riyan.

"He takes ten percent." Bart looked at both of them and shrugged. "Ten percent, twenty, or take the chance of standing before the Duke's Court on charges of thievery. It's your choice."

Riyan's mood hardly improved, but he could see the wisdom in what Bart said. "Well, ten percent is still better than having one's hand cut off." Which was what the penalty for thieving happened to be.

Chad slaps him on the back and grins. "What price adventure?" he asked.

Then Riyan nodded as a grin spread across his face too. "No point in getting mad," he said. "There's treasure to be found!"

When they were ready to leave the room, they had a choice before them. They could either return out the way they came in and continue searching from there, or they could leave by the entryway on the opposite side. After a second of deliberation, they chose to return the way they entered. That way they wouldn't miss anything or take the chance of becoming turned around.

So back out to the passage where they continued following the passage to the left. A short ways further down they encountered another room on their right holding two biers. Bart was quick to disarm the traps, or triggered them safely as the case warranted. They acquired another twenty seven copper coins and five silver. As they left the room and continued down the passage, Riyan got to thinking that the coins he had in his pack represented more money than he and his mother could expect to make in a year or two with the sheep. He felt better about things when he came to that realization and was better able to enjoy the adventure.

Once back out in the passage, they followed it a little further until it turned to the left. From there it went down a ways past two larger rooms on the right, each of the rooms contained three biers. They were quick to loot the gold and gems within the drawers of the six biers before continuing on. Then they followed the passage until it turned back to the left once more.

After the turn, they found two more two-bier rooms on the right and the opening to the large room with the six biers and three columns they had went through earlier on their left. Once they went through the two-bier rooms, they continued down the passage until it turned once more to the left.

The main passage had formed a square, with the six-bier room that had the three columns running through it, as its center. After they rounded the fourth corner of the square, they came across another set of stairs descending down into darkness.

“What do you say we go up and have lunch before we see what’s down there?” suggested Chad. Then in the silence the others heard his stomach give out with a loud growl.

“Good idea,” agreed Riyan. “We all could use a bite to eat and some fresh air.” They headed back up to the uppermost level and gathered what they would need for lunch. Then they went topside and cleared the mustiness from their lungs with the fresh summer air while they ate.

Chapter Nine

Upon their return back into what they’ve begun to call The Crypt, they once again deposited all of their equipment, except their packs and treasure, on the floor of the passage beneath the entrance. Riyan came up with the bright idea of depositing all the copper coins, save a couple for each, within one of the chests that they had searched earlier here on the top level. His pack had grown quite heavy with the weight of the coins and he didn’t really feel like lugging it around. The silver coins, gems and the single gold necklace they distributed evenly among their packs.

Once the copper had been dropped off, they moved to the steps leading down to the second level. Then from the bottom of the steps they turned left and walked over to where the next set of steps descended further down.

Riyan took the lead as he stepped into the opening of the stairs. Just like the previous stair, this one held twenty steps leading from this level down to the next. He quickly descended the twenty steps and at the bottom came out into another passage running left and right. The lantern’s light revealed the passage extending into darkness to the left, but to the right it continued a short ways before abruptly turning to the left. “Might be square just like the one above,” he commented.

Turning to the right, he led the others as he headed for the corner and followed it around to the left. Not too much further from the turn they came across another entryway to a two-bier

room. It was practically identical to the one above only this time, the two chests were sitting on the biers themselves at the foot of the deceased.

Riyan and Chad stayed out in the passage while Bart took the lantern inside and began to examine the chests. The first one had a mark by the keyhole indicating the possibility of a trap.

Over lunch they had been discussing traps and the way chest makers would put a mark to indicate the presence of one. Riyan had thought it rather dumb, seeing as how it only seemed to work to the thief's best interest. But Chad had come up with another probable reason.

"Maybe it could be put there to discourage thieves?" he had guessed. "I mean, if a thief knew it was trapped, wouldn't he be more likely to move on to a less life threatening target?"

"Perhaps," Riyan had said. "But I still think it's a pretty stupid idea." He had looked to Bart and added, "It hasn't dissuaded us in any way."

"You got a point there," replied Bart.

But now they stood there and watched as Bart worked on the chests. He managed to get them open in short order and within each they found a total of twelve silver coins. For the first time, the copper coins were not present.

Riyan nodded as they divvied up the coins. "That's more like it," he stated. Since twenty copper coins were the equivalent of a silver, having only silver kept the weight down.

They left the room and Riyan again took the lead as they continued down the passage. The light from the lantern soon revealed two openings coming up ahead. One on the right that was similar in width to the one they just left, and a much wider one to the left. As they drew closer, the lantern's light revealed the opening to the left to be almost three times as wide as any they've come across thus far.

Riyan slowed his steps as he came nearer the two openings. A quick look through the one on the right showed that it was another of the two-bier rooms with chests resting atop the biers. Leaving the two-bier room alone for the time being, he turned his attention to the larger opening on the left.

This room was almost three times as large as the three columned room with six biers they had found above. It was shaped as a diamond, with the entryway where they were standing being one of the diamond's points. As it turned out, there were entryways at each of the four points of the diamond.

A single bier rested against the wall of each of the four sides of the diamond. Just beyond the head and foot of each of the biers, tall columns stretched upward from the floor all the way to the ceiling.

As Riyan entered the room with the others right behind, the light from the lantern revealed a sword and shield hanging on the wall above each of the biers. Also, in the center of the floor between the four biers, was an opening with stairs leading down.

They gave the stairs a quick look and when nothing other than darkness could be seen, turned their attention to the swords and shields upon the walls. Closer examination revealed that they had survived the passage of time well. Not a speck of rust marred their surfaces and each looked as if there was strength remaining in them.

Each of the shields bore a different coat of arms that was an exact match to the coat of arms depicted on the armor of the deceased soldier lying beneath. One was of a sword pointed downward with a dragon grasping the hilt as its body twined around the blade. The next was a simple red background with but a stripe of green running from the upper left corner to the bottom right. The third coat of arms was that of a two headed grey falcon, one head looking to the right and the other to the left. In the falcon's left claw was grasped a stick with but a single leaf upon the upper end, and in the other claw was a dagger with the blade pointing down.

The fourth coat of arms drew the attention of them all. It was a black field upon which lay a five pointed golden crown surrounded in a nimbus of light. And beneath the crown was the symbol that has been depicted on all the coins.

They took a closer look at the body laid out upon the bier beneath the shield bearing the crown. They saw the helm that the skeletal remains was wearing had a crown of sorts worked into the design. The five points of the crown depicted on the shield were matched by five protruding points spaced evenly around the helm. Gems sparkled as they reflected the lantern's light from where they were embedded in the tips of the spikes.

"He must have been a king," breathed Chad.

"I would have to agree," said Bart.

Riyan nodded too. "But I've never seen his coat of arms anywhere before, nor any of the others."

"Neither have I," Bart admitted. Then he moved closer to the bier until he was almost touching it so he could examine the sword and shield on the wall better. "I don't see how they managed to survive so well all this time."

"Unless they're magical," suggested Riyan.

Bart turned to him and nodded. "That would explain it."

"Uh," began Chad, "I think it might be wise to leave this room alone. It's bad enough we're grave robbers, but to take anything from this room just seems wrong."

"I get that feeling too," agreed Riyan. Riyan gazed at the shield bearing the crown and the sword beside it. How he longed for such things, magical weapons and armor just like in the sagas. For the sword and shield had to be magical to have survived so well for so long. Sighing, he said, "Come on, we still have more of this level to check before we head down the stairs to the next."

The others agreed with him and they returned back to the passage from whence they entered the diamond shaped chamber. Once there, they crossed the passage and entered the two-bier room and began the looting of the rest of this level.

Just as Riyan had predicted, the passage did form a square as it moved around the diamond shaped room. As they went along, they came across seven more of the two-bier rooms and collected another seventy two silver pieces and six small gems. Again, there were no coppers.

As they rounded the final corner of the square, they came across an entryway into a large room with fourteen biers. The dead lying upon them were different than the ones they had come across thus far. Instead of being arrayed in armor with a sword lying upon their chest, these were archers. Each held a quiver of arrows rather than a sword upon their chest. The arrows

themselves didn't look all that great, most of them were seriously warped. At the foot of each bier sat a chest.

While Bart worked to get the chests open, Chad commented to Riyan, "You know, this whole place may be some king's final resting place. I heard that in some places, when a king dies he's buried with soldiers, so that in the afterlife he'll be protected."

Riyan nodded agreement. "I've heard that too."

"Got it!" hollered Bart as he moved on to the second chest.

Chad glanced to Riyan and shrugged. Then they walked over to the chest Bart had just disarmed and resumed the looting process. Once all the chests were disarmed and searched, they garnered another twenty silver coins and three gems.

"Today's been rather successful so far," Riyan announced as they were leaving the room.

"Including what we left up on the top level, I'd say we're pushing close to the equivalent of twenty six golds," Bart told them. "And that's not counting what the gems may bring."

As they made their way down the passage to the diamond room and the stairs leading down, Riyan asked his friend Chad, "Do you think this will be enough to help your father?"

"I can't take all of this for myself," he said.

"Don't worry about it," replied Bart. "You need it more than us right now. Use what you have to and get the grinding wheels fixed, then we'll split the rest."

"I appreciate this," Chad told them. "I really do."

"Hey," said Riyan as he placed a hand on his shoulder, "what are friends for?"

Then they turned into the diamond room and made their way over to the head of the stairs. Riyan didn't even hesitate as he stepped upon the top step and began his descent to the next level.

Unlike the two previous flights of steps they took as they descended from one level to the next, this one had forty steps before reaching the bottom. Where the steps ended a passage extended forward for twenty feet before reaching an entryway into another room. For the first time since they've been down here, they came across a door.

The door sat opened and was swung within the hallway towards them. It was a rather sturdy wooden door with reinforced iron bindings. If the door had been shut, it would have taken quite a bit of force to get it open.

"Odd to find a door here," Chad stated.

"Isn't it though?" asked Bart.

Then they passed by the open door and into the room on the other side. Here they were taken aback as they entered a massive room. Thirty biers were spaced in six rows of five with three rows of three columns each dividing the room equally into thirds. One row of five biers, then a row of columns. Two rows of five biers, then another row of columns. Then two more rows of biers, a row of columns, and then one last row of five biers. Upon each of the biers were more of the armored individuals laid out just as all the others they came across had been since they entered The Crypt.

"This could take some time," Bart said as he gauged the length of time it's going to take him to search each of the thirty biers and disarm whatever traps they may have.

“We got time,” Chad replied. “It’s not like we have anywhere to go.”

“Yeah, but you guys aren’t the ones having to do all the work,” he admonished.

“We’ll lug the treasure for you if that will make you feel better,” offered Riyan.

Bart nodded and grinned. “It would, now that you mentioned it.” He then set his pack down and began removing the coins he’s been carrying. Once he transferred them to Riyan and Chad, he stood back up. “Better.”

“I bet,” said Riyan as he hefted his now much heavier pack.

Bart moved to the first bier and began to inspect it. Chad lit the wick of the second lantern they carried and said to Riyan, “Why don’t we explore a little while we’re waiting?”

“Sure,” agreed Riyan.

On the far side of the room across from the end of the center set of columns, was a pair of double doors. Both stood wide open into the room. When they reached them they found another passage moved directly away from the doors then turned to the right.

“You two be careful,” Bart hollered in warning.

“We promise not to touch anything,” Chad hollered back. Then he and Riyan passed through the doors and into the passage. They walked down to where it turned to the right and followed it around the corner. Stretching before them was a long passage, longer than what the lantern’s light could reveal.

As they began walking down it, Chad said to Riyan, “Just like one of those stories we would tell each other.”

Riyan grinned. “Better.” Then he held up his arm that was bandaged due to his impatience in opening the drawer. “Even this doesn’t dampen my enthusiasm for what we’re doing.”

Chad glanced at the bandage and asked, “Is it bothering you at all?”

Shaking his head, Riyan replied, “Only a twinge now and then when I flex my arm.”

“I was worried about it,” he said.

“So was I at first,” admitted Riyan. “But since nothing has developed, I don’t give it much thought.”

Up ahead, they see another door standing open at the end of the hallway. Moving forward, they pass through the entryway and enter another room just like the one they had left Bart in. Thirty biers separated in six rows of five, which in turn are divided by three rows of three columns.

“Bart’s going to be busy,” grinned Chad.

“Maybe we should give him a larger share of the treasure,” suggested Riyan. “After all, he’s taking the most risk in disarming the traps.”

“That would be alright with me,” replied Chad. “So long as I am still able to give my father ample gold to cover the cost of the two new grinding stones.”

“Of course,” Riyan agreed.

Far to their right, another set of double doors stood open. After a brief inspection of the room, they made their way towards the double doors. Again on the other side of the doors was a passage moving directly away from them before turning sharply to the left.

They passed through the double doors and followed the passage until it turned left. After that they continued to follow it quite a ways to where another door stood open at the end. On the other side was yet another bier filled room.

This room turned out to be larger by far than the two other previous rooms they had discovered on this level. A quick count revealed sixty biers with armored dead lying in neat rows from one wall to the other with only a two foot gap between them. Six massive columns stood in two rows of three down the center of the room.

“Man,” breathed Riyan. “I guess this king really felt the need for protection in the afterlife.”

“It looks like it,” Chad agreed. “It’s going to take Bart days to work his way through all these.”

“I know,” said Riyan. “Feel sorry for him. He’ll definitely deserve the dragon’s share after this.”

They walked between the biers and briefly gave the dead lying upon them a once over. The walls of this room bore the scenes of fighting as they had discovered in that one room up above. Soldiers fighting the bestial, demonic looking creatures. A shiver runs through Riyan as he paused to look at one particular nasty scene where it looked as if a group of creatures were eating the flesh from a fallen soldier.

“Let’s get out of here,” Chad said as he indicated another set of double doors at the far end of the room. “This place kind of gives me the creeps.”

“You know it,” agreed Riyan.

Moving out, they made their way through the biers until they reached the double doors. There they discovered a passage moving directly away before turning left.

“How many more of these are there?” Chad asked as they passed into the passage.

“I hope not too many more for Bart’s sake,” replied Riyan. “They seem to be getting bigger as we go along.” Chad chuckled at that.

After turning left, the passage continued to run twice as far as the others on this level before opening up onto a room.

When the light from the lantern hit the room, they could tell that here at last they had found something different. There were no biers within this room. What they saw caused them to come to an abrupt halt.

From the end of the passage, the walls of the room angled outward forty five degrees until ending at the far wall of the room. Just within the room, on either side of the entryway, were large, empty urns. From the soot coating the upper rim of each, Riyan deduced that they must have at one time been filled with oil and had burned.

But this was not what had made them stop, rather the wall across the room from them. It was covered in sigils and writing unfamiliar to them. Two steps led up to a dais that stood beneath the sigils and writing. Lying on the steps was a skeleton dressed in ragged clothes. His upper body was upon the dais with one of his arms outstretched towards the pattern of sigils on the wall.

Riyan moved to approach the figure on the steps but Chad placed a restraining hand before him. “I think we should get Bart in here before we do anything,” he advised.

All set to argue, Riyan saw the look in his friend's eye and gave in. "Very well," he said. He glanced once more back to the skeletal figure and just as he turned back to return down the passage, a glint of something caught his eye. Turning back, he looked more closely and saw something golden in the figure's hand.

"Look!" he said as he pointed to it. Again he tried to move forward, and again Chad stopped him.

"Let's go get Bart first," he insisted.

Sighing, Riyan nodded. Hurrying back down the passage, they returned to the room where Bart was working on the biers.

By this time Bart was feeling quite frustrated. He was in the middle of inspecting his fourth bier and so far hadn't found any catches or releases to open secret drawers in any of them. He was beginning to wonder if these even had any.

He meticulously worked over this fourth bier with a growing feeling of annoyance. Finally, he gave up and set the lantern on top of the bier by the deceased warrior's feet. With hands on his hips, he surveyed the twenty six other biers still within the room and shook his head. "I'm not going to waste my time on any more of these," he told himself. Just as he grabbed the lantern and was about to leave the room through the doors Riyan and Chad had, they burst into the room at a run.

"We found something!"

"You've got to come and see!" Chad and Riyan blurted out simultaneously.

Bart could see something had them all excited. Holding up his hand, he said, "Calm down." They came to a stop before him. When they looked like they were both about to speak again, he cut them off by holding his hand up. Then he turned to Riyan. "Riyan, what is it?"

"We found a room unlike any other down here," he replied.

"What do you mean?" Bart asked.

"Come on," urged Chad. "We've got to show you."

Bart nodded. "Okay. I don't think these biers in here are going to yield anything anyway." He followed them out of the room and down the passage. When he got to the next room with thirty biers, he was stunned by so many.

"That's nothing," Chad said. "Wait until you see the big one."

"Big one?" he asked.

Riyan grinned. "Yeah, big one."

Chad and Riyan led him between the biers and left the room through the far door. Chad and Riyan were hurrying Bart along down the passage to the larger room with sixty biers. They wanted to reach the final room at the end and see what Bart had to say about it.

When he followed the other two into the massive room containing rows and rows of biers, with an armored figure laid out upon each, he stopped in awe. He had never seen such a thing. "This is incredible," he said.

"Pretty impressive isn't it?" asked Chad.

All he could do was nod in reply.

Riyan took the lead and moved between the biers to the door at the other side. Once there, he paused a moment then turned to Bart. "The next room is the one we were talking about," he explained. "I think you should lead from here."

Bart nodded and passed Riyan as he moved into the passage. He turned the corner to the left and followed it down until the end of the passage began to open up onto the room with the sigils and writing.

When he reached where the walls began to widen to form the sides of the room, he stopped. The light from the two lanterns illuminated the entire room well enough for him to make out the room's features. He saw the long dead figure lying on the steps leading up to the dais, then his eyes moved to the sigils and writing upon the wall across from him.

Chad pointed to the figure on the steps and said, "There's something in his hand."

Bart turned his attention to the figure's outstretched hand and saw the glint of something golden. "Stay here," he told the other two as he worked his way towards the steps. This room gave off a feeling of unease that made him be extra careful. There was something about the figure sprawled on the steps that screamed for him to proceed with caution.

He figured what was lying before him had been a man at one time, though it's hard to tell as all that's left were bones and the remnants of his clothes he was wearing when he died. On the steps next to the man sat a pack that was all but worn away by time. As he came to a stop by the man's feet, a foot from the edge of the first step, he looked closely at what was glittering in the man's hand.

It looked like a piece of what had once been a circular torc of some kind. The bones of the man's hand shielded most of it from view, but he figured the width of the piece had to be at least three to four inches.

Why was the man in the position that he was? That was the question that has been nagging at him ever since he saw him. The man had to have arrived here after the place was constructed, otherwise the builders would have removed his body. In Bart's mind that made the figure before him a thief, or some sort of robber.

He also had to have worked alone, for if he had partners, Bart doubted that they would have left the golden item in his hand when they left. So the question remained, what was he doing here?

Then Bart turned his attention to the wall above the dais and the sigils inscribed upon it. The way the man's hand was outstretched led him to believe the wall was in some way the man's destination. Also, the fact that steps led up to it had to mean something as well.

"What do you think?" asked Riyan.

Bart turned back to them and said, "I think he was a thief here to loot the place."

"But if he was," supposed Chad, "why weren't the biers in the above levels touched?"

"Good question," Bart replied. Then more to himself than to the others he said quietly, "Yes, why wouldn't he have searched the biers as we did?" He must have been after something, something specific and didn't want to be bothered with what little the biers would have given him.

“Could that wall there hold some sort of secret door,” suggested Riyan. “Maybe on the other side is the king’s treasure room.”

“Possibly,” agreed Bart. That would make sense. He turned his gaze back to the wall and examined the sigils and writing. One pattern seemed to stand out more than the others. At the pattern’s center was a circle, one of many such designs inscribed in the stone. But something about this one caught his eye.

It was sunken into the wall more than the others!

He looked to the golden item in the man’s hand and then back to the circle. Yes! It would fit perfectly within the circular depression of that sigil. Turning his head towards where the other two stood at the entrance, he said, “I believe you’re right.”

Pointing to the golden item in the man’s hand, he said, “I think that fits nicely within that sigil there.” He then moved his hand and pointed toward the sigil whose circle was indented.

“Do you think it would open up if we placed it in there?” asked Riyan. The tone of his voice held excitement that he almost was unable to restrain.

“Maybe,” he said. “But it looks like it’s only about a quarter of the circle that would fit in there.”

“Check his pack,” suggested Chad. “The other pieces could be in there.”

Bart nodded and then turned back to the steps. The pack in question was resting on the second step. Bart could reach it if he stood close to the bottom step and stretched his arm forward. He came forward until the toe of his foot was less than an inch from the bottom step and then reached for the pack. He took hold of the pack by one of the straps and very carefully picked it up. He halfway expected something to happen, and when it didn’t he was most relieved.

Turning around, he brought the pack over to the others. He then set it on the ground and very carefully started to open it. The cloth of the pack disintegrated under his fingers and revealed what once had been papers within. But time had destroyed the papers beyond all recognition, the barest touch causing them to crumble into dust.

“There aren’t any other pieces of the circle here,” he said after a moment’s search.

“But there has to be!” exclaimed Riyan. “Why would he be here if he didn’t have the entire key to the secret door?”

“Could be he didn’t know that he only had a part of it,” suggested Bart. “Greed can blind you that way. Or he could have thought that just a single piece would have opened it.”

“Do you think it could?” Chad asked. “I mean, if he thought this would have opened it, he may have known more about it than we do.”

“Worth a shot.” Taking the staff that he’s been using to trigger traps with, he returned to the steps and stopped several feet away. He placed the end of the staff on the first step and pressed down on it. When nothing happened, he moved the end of the staff to the second step and repeated the process. Again, nothing happened. Then he did it to the dais with the same results.

Turning around, he handed the staff back to Riyan and then began moving to the steps. Taking them one at a time carefully, he climbed to the dais and removed the golden piece of the circle from the dead man’s hand.

It was heavy. He paused a moment as he closely inspected the item. On one side were sigils similar in nature to those on the wall. And on the other was what looked for all the world as part of a map. There were mountains and what looked like two lakes. A river flowed from one lake to the other, and a set of miniscule notations were inscribed at a point alongside the smaller lake further from the mountains. Once he was done examining it, he stepped towards the wall.

He brought the piece of the circle near the sigil and quickly realized that the markings on the one side matched perfectly with those surrounding the circular indentation in the wall. He maneuvered the piece of the sigil so that the markings on it lined up perfectly with those on the wall, then set it into the depression. He held his breath, not sure exactly what to expect. But nothing happened.

For a full minute he held it there and nothing changed. The wall remained the same. He had halfway expected the sigils to flare to life and was somewhat relieved when they failed to. Finally, he pulled the quarter circle away from the wall and turned towards the others. "I don't think it's going to work," he said.

"Then what are we to do?" asked Chad.

Beginning to leave the dais, he moved to the steps and replied, "I don't know." He no sooner stepped onto the top step than was struck in the back by something. He cried out from the unexpected attack and the other two rushed forward as he stumbled down the steps.

"My back!" he cried out as the others reached him.

Riyan looked at his back and saw that a two inch dart had pierced his skin several inches to the right of his spine. He grabbed it and pulled it out which elicited another cry from Bart. Then he and Chad helped him to the floor.

When he showed Bart the dart, he said, "Check my back. See if there are any red lines radiating from the wound, or if there is any swelling."

Chad helped Riyan to pull up his tunic to bare his back. When they had it bared, they saw the wound, then glanced at each other worriedly.

"Anything?" he asked.

They saw the hole where the dart had punctured Bart's skin. It was still welling drops of blood but that wasn't the cause of their concern. What was, were the dark red, spidery tendrils that were beginning to spread outward from the wound.

Chapter Ten

“I’ve been poisoned!” he exclaimed when they described what was happening to the skin around the wound.

“What do we do?” Chad cried out anxiously.

“Get me out of here,” he said. Then he pointed to the skeleton on the steps. “I think that was what killed him. He and I both triggered the same trap.” Then as he tried to get to his feet, his knees buckled under him. “I don’t know how much longer I have.”

Perspiration had already begun to form on his forehead and when Riyan checked to see if he had a fever, he felt warm. “Take his other arm,” he said to Chad. “We’re going home.”

“But it took us over a day to get here!” exclaimed Chad as he placed one of Bart’s arms around his neck.

“Don’t you think I know that?” hollered Riyan back at him. He and Chad grabbed their packs as they made ready to return to the surface, Riyan also took his staff.

A sudden clinking sound drew his attention to the floor where the golden item had all of a sudden fallen from Bart’s hand. Riyan looked to his friend and saw that he had passed out. Picking up the piece of the golden key, he stuffed it into his pack. With Chad holding one of the lanterns and Riyan his staff, they began heading out. As they hurried down the passage and reached the turn to the right, Riyan cast one last glance back to the room. The glow from the second lantern which they left burning just within the room almost seemed to be beckoning to him. Turning back to the matter at hand, he passed around the corner and the light disappeared from sight.

It took them some doing to get Bart up to the surface. When they reached the uppermost level of The Crypt and were moving past the room where they had stashed the copper coins, Riyan said, “We’ll come back for them.”

“Hope so,” replied Chad.

At the hole leading to the surface, they worked to get Bart up the slope. They found it exceedingly difficult to haul a limp body up a steep incline, but they finally managed it.

Once he was lying on the grass just outside the hole, Chad sat down.

“There’s no time to rest!” admonished Riyan.

“My arms are like rubber,” he said. In fact, both of them were fatigued by the effort of practically carrying Bart up through the four levels.

Riyan felt the same way. His arms ached and his legs could use a rest, but Bart might die if they dilly dallied. He pulled up Bart’s tunic to inspect his back and gasped. The dark red, spidery tendrils had spread. Now they covered a good portion of his back. The area around the puncture wound had turned red and angry looking as well.

He turned to Chad who had also seen the progression of the poison. “We don’t have much time,” he said with emotion choking him.

Chad nodded. Then he suggested, “Let’s make a stretcher. It would make carrying him easier.”

“Alright,” agreed Riyan. “I’ll find another long stick and we’ll use it and my staff for the poles. You get our blankets out and discard everything we don’t need back down the hole.”

“You got it,” replied Chad.

Riyan got up from the ground and rushed over to the stream where a copse of trees stood. There he hunted for a long branch that would work. He finally took out his sword and used it to cut one off of a tree. On the way back to where he left Chad and Bart, he trimmed the branches until all he was left with was a long pole.

Chad had their three blankets laid out and ready, Riyan's staff was already in position. Next to the blankets their packs sat ready for them. "I just left the food, coins and gems," he said. "Everything else is down the hole.

"Good." Riyan came and laid the branch on the blankets. Then he and Chad began folding the blankets over the staff and branch to create a stretcher. Once they had it finished, they picked up Bart and placed him upon the stretcher. Each took their pack and slung it across their back, Bart's they placed between his feet on the stretcher.

Then Riyan moved to the end of the poles at Bart's feet while Chad took the ones by his head. They lifted him up and with Riyan leading the way, began the trek back.

All afternoon long they carried Bart as quickly as they could toward Quillim. Despite the threat spreading through Bart's system, they were forced to stop twice to rest. If they hadn't, they risked weakening themselves to the point where they might have dropped the stretcher.

When it finally began to grow dark, they continued on. Once night settled in, they used the moon and stars above to light their way. And still they continued.

"How's he doing?" asked Riyan for the dozenth time.

"Bad," replied Chad. In the gloom of night, the only indication that he was even alive was the groans he gave out with every now and then. "I'm not sure but I think the fever's worsened."

"It shouldn't be too long before we reach my home," he replied.

"Then what are we to do?" asked Chad.

"I'll leave you there with him and I'll head over to Glia's," he explained. Old Glia was an odd sort of woman. She lived alone out in the hills, most people thought she was a witch or something and had very little to do with her. The people of Quillim tolerated her presence for the simple fact that she's the only one in the area who makes potions. Many people owed their lives to the potions she brewed. The one she's most famous for was the one that will purge poison out of your system, which was useful seeing as how the mountain spiders made an appearance every once in awhile. They were very aggressive and poisonous.

Riyan had always liked her, and whenever he moved his flock to graze in the area near her hut, would visit with her. She's the oldest living person in the Quillim area, none knew just how old she was. She has been a fixture in these parts for as long as anyone could remember.

They continued carrying Bart for another hour before Riyan began to recognize the hills they were passing through. "We're almost there," he announced to Chad.

"Thank goodness," gasped Chad. It's all he's been able to do to simply continue to hold the ends of the stretcher. He was sure that if he were to but let go, he'd never be able to pick it back up again. His arms have all but grown numb and his back ached horribly.

Riyan altered their course slightly to maneuver through the hills in a more direct approach to his home. When at last they topped a hill and saw his home in the distance, they breathed a sigh

of relief. The light coming through the window seemed to renew their strength as they headed down the hill.

Once they came close he shouted, "Mother!" Practically running forward, he was about to call again when the front door opened.

The smile on her face died quickly when she saw Bart lying on the stretcher. A worried look came over her as she opened the door to let them in. "What happened?" she asked.

"Bart was..." began Chad.

"...bit by something." Riyan cut Chad off and finished the sentence. Then he flashed a meaningful look to his friend.

Once they had him through the door, she shut it and said, "Let's put him on your bed Riyan."

They carried him through the front room to his and when they were outside the door to his room, they set the stretcher down on the floor. Riyan grabbed Bart's ankles and Chad gripped him under the arms as they lifted him off the stretcher. They carried him through the bedroom door and laid him on the bed.

Riyan's mother appeared a split second later with a bowl of cool water and a towel. She sat on the bed near Bart's head and dipped the towel in the water, then began to dab his forehead. "How long has he been like this?" she asked.

"Since about noon," replied Chad.

Riyan was out in the hallway collecting Bart's pack. He took off his and as he entered the room, had Chad give him his. When Chad removed his pack and handed it to him, the coins within clinked together. Riyan flashed a look to his mother and was relieved to see that she made no indication that she had heard. He took the three packs to his closet and set them down inside, careful to not repeat the clinking sound.

He opened his pack and removed several of the small gems for Glia's potion. Once he had them in his pocket, he closed his pack again and shut the closet door. "I'm going to Glia's to get a potion for him," he told her.

"You better hurry," she said. "I'm not sure how long he's going to last."

Riyan paused a moment to look at his friend. His mother had pulled his tunic up and he could see the spidery tendrils had spread even further. They've already made their way completely around his side and were beginning to creep across his chest. Even his throat showed signs of the tendrils.

Without another word, he raced from the room and was soon outside heading through the hills towards the hut she called home. Old Glia lived a mile or so from where his home sat and it took him some minutes to cross over the hills before her hut came into view.

It was a small dwelling, barely more than one room. He was relieved to see light coming through her window and smoke rising from her chimney. Running towards her door, he hollered, "Glia!" When he reached her door, he knocked loudly while hollering, "Glia, I need your help."

The door opened and he saw her standing there. Dressed in a tattered dress, the same dress he's seen her wear for as long as he's known her. He has at times wondered how it could possible have survived year after year without becoming threadbare and ruined. "Why Riyan," she said with a smile, "what brings you to my door at so late an hour?"

“Bart’s been poisoned,” he blurted out. “I need one of your potions.”

Her smile faded away as she opened the door wider and said, “Come inside.”

He moved through the door and entered her hut. It always seemed bigger on the inside than it appeared on the outside.

When she shut the door, she turned to him. “What bit him?” she asked.

Riyan hesitated a moment, not sure how to answer as he didn’t want anyone to know what they’ve been up to.

“Been up to something have you?” she asked.

“What?” he replied. “No, of course not.”

She gave him a look as if she didn’t believe him. People have said that she had the knack of knowing truth from lies.

“Okay,” he said, giving in. “But you can’t tell anyone!”

“Who am I to tell?” she asked. “Other than you, no one else ever comes here except when they are in need. Whatever you tell me will stay between us.”

“We found an old burial complex out in the hills,” he told her. “We were rooting around in it when Bart set off some kind of trap and was struck with a dart.”

“Poisoned I take it?” she asked. When he nodded, she moved over to where she concocted her potions. “What happened next?”

He then went into the details of how the dark red spidery tendrils formed and began to spread, Bart’s subsequent passing out, and the fever. “My mother doesn’t think he has long to live,” he finally concluded.

“She’s right,” Glia replied. “If those tendrils you described are what I think they are, his life will end should their tips meet on his chest or reach his eyes.”

“Can you help?” he asked. Pulling forth the gems he said, “I can pay you.”

She glanced at the gems in his hand and plucked two from his palm. “These will do nicely, thank you,” she said. Then she cleared an area on her table and began gathering the needed ingredients.

Riyan watched as she worked. After producing a large bowl, she began filling it with various powders and liquids. Once she had all the necessary ingredients, she took what looked like a femur of some small animal and mixed the powders and liquids together with it. He moved closer to see what the concoction in the bowl looked like and quickly pulled back when the odor emanating from it hit his nose.

“Ugh!” he exclaimed. “What’s in there?”

She grinned at him and said, “A little of this and a touch of that.” As soon as the mixture met her approval, she removed the bone and passed her hand over the mixture as she said a word so quietly that Riyan couldn’t make it out. The mixture sparkled for a second then turned a slight greenish brown color.

Then she pulled a long necked bottle from off one of her shelves and poured the mixture into it. After sealing the bottle with a cork, she handed it to Riyan. “Just a second,” she said as he turned to leave. She moved to the back of her hut for a moment then returned holding a small vial.

“The potion you hold will purge the poison from his system if he is not yet dead,” she explained. Then she handed him the small vial. “This will heal most of the damage done to him by the poison. Be sure to return the bottles when you’re done.”

Taking the vial, Riyan said, “I will and thank you.”

“You’re welcome Riyan.” As he turned to leave, she added, “I hope you get back in time.”

“So do I,” he replied.

“Come visit when you can.” Her words followed him out into the night as he broke into a run back to his home. He prayed that Bart would still be alive when he returned. When his home came into sight he saw Chad standing outside looking in his general direction. The sight of his friend sent a chill down his spine that he might be too late.

“Is he still alive?” he hollered as he ran to the house.

Chad saw him coming and replied, “Yes. But not by much.” When Riyan reached him he added, “Your mother doesn’t think he’ll last long.”

He showed his friend the potion and said, “Old Glia said this would save him.”

Chad opened the door for him and he raced through to his room. There he saw his mother still on the bed beside Bart. Bart’s tunic was off and he could see the spidery tendrils all over his chest now. And the ones that had been on his throat have spread to his upper lip.

Moving quickly to the side of the bed, he uncorked the bottle containing the potion to purge the poison. Putting it to his lips, he glanced to his mother and said, “I hope this works.”

“So do we all,” she replied. Which kind of surprised him that she would say that. She had never cared much for Bart.

Riyan began to pour the liquid into Bart’s mouth slowly. As the potion hit his tongue and began trickling to the back of his throat, he saw Bart’s throat contract as he swallowed. Encouraged by the reaction, he poured the liquid a little bit faster.

“Not too much at once,” cautioned his mother. “You don’t want to make him choke.”

Nodding at her wisdom, he backed off and continued to trickle the potion into him little by little. Once the bottle was drained, he set it on the nightstand next to the bed and produced the other vial. When his mother looked questioningly at it, he said, “She said that this would heal whatever damage the poison did to him.”

“Better wait and let the other potion work first,” she advised.

“Very well,” he said.

All three of them watched Bart carefully, none daring to speak as if breaking the silence would work against him somehow. Riyan’s mother put her hand to Bart’s forehead and whispered, “I think his fever is going down. That’s a good sign.”

As they watched, the spidery tendrils started to recede. Though they began to disappear, they left a pale pattern of tendril-like markings behind in their wake.

“It’s working!” exclaimed Chad. He gave the others a grin at the speed with which the spidery tendrils were disappearing. When all traces save a pale patchwork were gone from his chest, face, and throat, Riyan opened the small vial. He glanced to his mother who nodded for him to go ahead.

Placing the vial to Bart's mouth, he slowly poured its contents between his lips just as he had the other. Once all of it was administered, he stoppered the vial back up and set it on the stand next to the first bottle.

Bart suddenly gave out with a sigh and then settled into a quiet sleep. Riyan looked to his mother who said, "I think he's just asleep now. We'll know better how he's faring in the morning."

Chad clapped Riyan on the back. "We did it," he said. "For awhile there I didn't think he was going to make it."

"Neither did I," admitted Riyan.

"You two look dead to the world," his mother said. "Why don't you get some sleep? Riyan, you take my bed. Chad, you can sleep out in the front room. I'll sit up with him."

"Thank you mother," Riyan said. He gave her a peck on the cheek and nodded for Chad to leave the room with him. They closed his bedroom door and headed out to the front room.

"I don't think we should tell her about what we found," Riyan told Chad. They went to sit down at the table while they talked. "I would hate to think what would happen to that place if Rupert were to find out about it."

Chad nodded. "He would go through there and take everything but the bones of the dead."

"Exactly," agreed Riyan. "And remember what Bart said about how Duke Yoric was supposed to get twenty percent. If no one knows, then perhaps we won't lose that much."

"Okay," he said. "I'll keep quiet."

"In the morning we'll see how Bart is doing," Riyan said, "then we'll figure out what to do with the treasure."

"Alright," Chad agreed. All of a sudden a mighty yawn escaped him.

Riyan grinned at his friend. The trip from The Crypt had exhausted both of them. Getting up, he told Chad he would see him in the morning. Making his way into his mother's room, he took off his shoes and dirty outer garments before collapsing on her bed. Before he even realized it, he was out.

The following morning found Bart awake but weak as a kitten. Riyan had awakened at dawn and tiptoed through the front room so as not to awaken Chad. His snores came from where he slept on the couch.

He opened the door to his room slowly and saw his mother asleep in a chair next to the bed. Pushing the door open, it let out with a creak and Bart's eyes popped open. Riyan grinned at his friend and closed the door before going over to his side.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Tired," he replied. "I can barely move, but I'm alive."

Riyan gestured to the two bottles he got the night before from Old Glia and said, "Your condition turned around once some of Glia's brew got into you."

"Thanks," he said. "Don't know how you two managed to carry me back here. Last thing I remembered was you checking my back. Then I woke up and saw your mother sitting there. I figured you two had somehow managed to get me back here."

Riyan moved closer to Bart's ear and whispered, "My mother doesn't know anything about where we went. It might be best to keep it that way."

Bart nodded and replied, "I agree."

Just then his mother began to stir. She opened her eyes and saw them talking. "How are you this morning Bart?" she asked.

"Feeling alright," he replied. "But I don't have any strength."

"That's to be expected," she said. Getting up, she placed her hand on his forehead. "You feel normal." Then she turned to her son and said, "I'll fix some breakfast."

"Chad's still out there sleeping," Riyan told her.

"I'll be quiet," she assured him as she headed to the door.

Once she left and had closed the door, Riyan got up and sat in the chair she just vacated. "What are we to do now?" he asked.

"About what?" Bart glanced to him but it seemed difficult for him to keep his eyes open. "Don't worry, I'm not asleep. It's just more comfortable for me."

"It's alright," Riyan told him. "What I meant was, what are we to do about the coins and gems?"

His eyes parted slightly and he turned his head towards his friend. "You and Chad are going to need to make a trip to Wardean," he explained. "There you can find Thyrr and exchange the stuff we collected for regular coins."

"Is he the fence you mentioned?" asked Riyan.

"That's right. You can find his shop on Dulcet Street." He again closed his eyes and for a moment Riyan thought he had fallen asleep. Then his eyes opened again and he grinned.

"What's so funny?" Riyan asked.

"Nothing. Just glad to be alive." He laid there silently for a minute before he asked, "Could you bring me my pack?"

"Why?" inquired Riyan.

"You'll need to have something before Thyrr will talk to you," he explained.

Getting up off the bed, Riyan went over to his closet and retrieved Bart's pack. He brought it over to the bed and set it down next to him.

Bart sat up a little bit more and grabbed his pack. It was evident that he had trouble even with the little effort he was forced to expend in moving the pack closer. The poison had really drained his strength. After digging through the pack, he pulled out one of his darts. Handing it to Riyan he said, "Tell him a friend sent you then show him this."

Riyan took the dart and nodded. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"We've done business with one another before," he replied. Just what that business had been he didn't go into.

Riyan stood up and returned Bart's pack to the closet. He transferred the coins and gems that were in Bart's pack to his. Then he saw the golden piece of the circular key that they found back in The Crypt. He had begun thinking of it as a key, or rather part of a key. For he believed that if they could find all the other pieces and put it back together, they would be able to open the

king's treasure room. And his imagination had been working over time ever since on what may be in there. He put the key in Bart's pack and then stuffed it way in the back of his closet.

Just then the door to his room opened and Chad stuck his head in. "How are you doing?" he asked Bart.

"Weak, but alive," Bart replied.

"Shut the door," Riyan told him as he returned to the bed.

After shutting the door, Chad came and sat on the bed with them. "Your mother woke me up," he said.

"About time you were awake anyway," grinned Bart.

Riyan then filled him in on what they were talking about, and the impending trip he and Chad will be taking to Wardean.

"We should leave soon," Chad said. "Maybe right after breakfast."

"We've only got the one horse," explained Riyan.

"I don't think I should try to get one of my father's right now," said Chad. "We'll just have to ride double."

Until his mother called them to breakfast, they talked about what they found at the bottom of The Crypt. Bart had Riyan fetch the piece of the broken key and showed them the map on the other side. "Does this look familiar to either of you?" he asked.

They both shook their heads. "Could be anywhere," offered Chad. "Would need the rest to fully figure out what area it represents."

"Oh well," sighed Bart. Then he had Riyan put it back. "I want to find the other parts."

On his way back from returning the piece of the key to Bart's pack, Riyan nodded and said, "So do I."

"How are we going to find them?" asked Chad.

"I don't know," said Bart. "I'll think about it while you guys go to Wardean."

Then from the other side of the door they heard his mother announce that breakfast was ready. Riyan looked questioningly to Bart to see if he thought he could make it. "Lend me a hand," Bart said as he worked his way to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. With Bart and Riyan on either side, they managed to help him out to the table so he could eat with the rest of them.

Chapter Eleven

After giving his mother some excuse about needing to run an errand for Bart, Riyan and Chad saddled the horse and were soon underway. Each wore their pack which contained the treasure they took from The Crypt. Bart had suggested they wrap the coins in cloth so they wouldn't jingle and give away their presence.

Before they left Quillim and headed to Wardean, they made a stop at Old Glia's to return the bottles as she had requested. When she learned of their impending journey to Wardean, she asked them if they could pick up a few things for her at the apothecary where she buys some of her ingredients.

Riyan said they would and they waited while she prepared a list. "Just give this to Gyman," she told them as she handed Riyan the list. Then she explained where to find his shop. She also handed him the two small gems that she had taken for the potions which saved Bart's life. "This should cover the cost. You two can split whatever is left over for your trouble."

"Thank you Glia," Riyan said.

She eyed the packs they were wearing and how their bottoms bulged out some. But what thoughts she may have been thinking she kept to herself.

They left her hut and headed cross country toward the road leading south to Wardean. The route they took bypassed Quillim in order to avoid encountering anyone.

On the way to Wardean, Riyan came to the conclusion that what they had taken from The Crypt wouldn't be enough for him to change the mind of Freya's father. He had forgotten to ask his mother how things were going as far as her engagement with Rupert. He hoped that the date for their marriage would be sometime next year. Thoughts such as these haunted him along every mile of the road to Wardean.

Riyan's mother helped Bart from the bed and to the table when it came time for the noon meal. He had slept throughout the morning, having fallen asleep not long after Chad and Riyan left for Wardean.

Now he sat at the table while Riyan's mother filled a bowl with a light stew that was more broth than anything substantial. He looked at it for a second after she placed it before him and then glanced to her.

"Eat it," she said. "It will help you get your strength back."

Knowing better than to argue with a woman when she thinks she's doing something for your own good, he took up his spoon and began slurping broth. He continued to eat the stew for several minutes in silence, neither one doing much in the way of engaging the other in conversation.

Finally, Riyan's mother said, "A stranger arrived in town about the time you, Riyan, and Chad went camping." She paused a moment as she glanced to him. When no response was forthcoming, she continued. "He was asking around about you." She glanced to him again and saw that the spoon was poised just before his mouth, motionless. The look that came over him could only be considered one of dread.

He held that position for a couple seconds before resuming to eat the soup. "Oh?" he asked.

“He claimed that he was your friend,” she told him. “He’s been wandering around town ever since.”

Trying not to appear unnerved by what she was telling him, he asked, “What does this man look like?”

“Oh, he’s of average height,” she replied. “Dark hair with brown eyes. Seemed to have an air of confidence about him according to what Laerin said.”

He continued eating while he assimilated the information. The fact that the man had appeared in town the day after he and Chad went to Wardean couldn’t be dismissed as a coincidence. Someone must have seen him while he was there and tracked him back to Quillim.

A worried look came over him as he glanced to Riyan’s mother. Anyone near him now was in great danger. “Have you mentioned to anyone that we returned last night?” he asked.

She shook her head negatively. “I haven’t been further than the pen outside to feed the sheep,” she replied.

“It might be better to not let anyone know that we have returned,” he said. “Especially that I am staying here.”

She turned a grim look to him. “I knew you were trouble,” she said. “Usually Riyan has good judgment when it comes to people, but why he chose to be friends with you I have never figured out.”

“If you feel that way about me,” he said, a touch of hurt entering his voice, “why are you taking care of me?”

“Because Riyan cares about you,” she replied. “I’m doing it for him.”

He finished his stew and she began ladling him another bowlful. “I’ll leave as soon as I am able,” he assured her.

“Oh stop,” she stated. “I’ve never turned away a person in need before and I’m not about to now.” When his bowl was again full, she sat back down and continued eating her portion of the stew.

Bart ate quickly and finished the stew. When she offered him a third bowl he turned her down, saying that he was tired and needed rest. He allowed her to assist him back to the room and into bed. He laid there calmly until she left the room and closed the door.

No sooner was the door shut than he swung his legs back over the side of the bed facing the closet. He had to get to his pack. If the man searching for him was a member of a certain group as he feared, then it would only be a matter of time before they tracked him here to Riyan’s place.

Riyan’s staff was leaning against the wall close to the bed and he was able to get a hold of it. Using it as a crutch, he crossed the short space to the closet. Leaning heavily on the staff, he opened the door and then worked to reach his pack that was hidden in the back.

He stretched in order to reach it and overextended himself. Losing his balance, he fell to the floor of the closet and the staff hit the floor with a clatter. He froze there on the floor, listening for the approaching footsteps of Riyan’s mother as she came to see what the noise was. To his relief, no such footsteps developed.

Crawling now, he reached his pack and opened it. He pulled out one of the rolled pieces of leather nestled inside and tried to toss it over onto the bed. It didn't quite make it all the way and landed on the floor next to it. He closed the pack again and worked his way out of the closet, cursing his weakened condition the entire time.

Once the closet door was closed, he managed to return the staff back to its original position propped against the wall. Then he crawled over to where the rolled leather had landed, picked it up and set it on the bed. After that, he gripped the side of the bed and pulled himself back up onto it.

After he made it up, he had to lay there for several minutes before his limbs would stop trembling. The exertion of going to the closet and back had used up what strength he had left. It took awhile, but when his muscles finally calmed down he untied the thong securing the rolled leather pack. Then he unrolled it and revealed a dozen, four inch darts. Three small vials filled with a dark liquid were secured in line with the darts.

Over the next hour, he worked most carefully to remove each dart, dip it in the liquid, then return it to its place in the leather pack. Once he was finished with applying the liquid to all the darts, he replaced the small vials back in their places. Leaving two of the darts out, he rolled the pack back up and laid it on the bed next to him. He then placed the two darts he left out on top of it.

By the time he was finished, his muscles were again complaining. He laid his head back on the pillow and prayed that they would not find him here. Glancing at the darts lying atop the rolled leather pack, he at least was ready should they come for him.

"I think we're too late to do anything tonight," Riyan announced. They were still on the road and the sun had gone down an hour ago.

"Best if we find an inn and conduct our business in the morning," offered Chad.

"I don't know if we have enough coins for a room." Riyan knew that all he had brought was the treasure on his back. He should have anticipated that they might not reach Wardean before nightfall.

"I have three coppers," Chad told him after checking his pouch.

"Great," moaned Riyan. "Food or a room, and a cheap room at that."

"We always have the gems," suggested Chad. "Perhaps we could trade one for a room?"

"Worth a try."

Two hours later the lights of Wardean appeared out of the dark ahead of them. Riyan sighed with relief, he had been worried about bandits the whole way here. True, Wardean was the seat of the Border Lord. But at night? Well, you just never know.

The walls approached quickly and they were soon passing through the gate. As they passed through, Riyan asked one of the guards about an inn that was nice but not too dear. The guard told them the Silent Shepherd would be suitable and gave them directions.

"Silent Shepherd," mused Riyan with a grin. "I like the name."

Chad gave out with a chuckle and said, "I thought you might."

Following the directions the guard had given them, they soon rode up to a modest two story building. Out front was a sign depicting a shepherd sleeping on a hill while his flock was down below grazing.

Inside they found a middle aged woman coming down the stair from the second floor. When she saw them entering, she came forward and greeted them.

“Welcome to the Silent Shepherd gentlemen,” she said with a smile. “How can we be of service to you?”

“My friend and I would like a room for the night,” Riyan explained.

“One with two beds if that’s possible,” interjected Chad.

“Absolutely,” she assured him with a smile. She indicated for them to follow her as she led them over to a counter where they were to check in. Once there, she immediately went behind the counter and then turned to face them.

“It will be seven coppers for the night,” she said.

Riyan nodded then set his pack on the floor. After a few moments rummaging through its contents, he removed one of the smaller gems. “I’m afraid we’re a bit short on coins,” he explained. Then he showed her the gem. “Would this be sufficient for a room, dinner, and breakfast in the morning?”

She took the gem and examined it. When she was finished, she turned back to them with a smile and nodded. “It will be acceptable.”

Riyan and Chad both sighed with relief. “Thank you,” he said.

Removing a key from under the counter, she handed it to Riyan telling them that their room was upstairs, third door on the left.

“Thank you,” Chad said.

“I hope you enjoy your stay here,” she wished.

“I’m sure we will,” Riyan assured her.

Turning from the counter, they headed for the stairs and once on the second floor, found their room. It had two beds as Chad had requested. He immediately went and laid on the one furthest from the door. “This is the life,” he said with a satisfied smile.

Riyan set his pack on the floor by the head of his bed and then sat down. “Comfy.”

“Let’s go downstairs and get something to eat,” Chad said as he sat back up. “I’m starved.”

“Alright,” agreed Riyan. When Chad was heading for the door without his pack, Riyan said, “I don’t think we should leave our packs up here unguarded.”

“May be right there,” nodded Chad. He returned for his then they went down to the common room to see about getting a meal. Both were feeling quite good about everything. Off on their own and independent, what a heady feeling.

Over the course of the day, his strength had gradually returned. For dinner Riyan’s mother had cooked a much more substantial meal than the thin stew she fed him for lunch. He had worried that whoever the man was that was in town would make an appearance, but so far nothing.

Riyan's mother had stayed near the house all day, only venturing out to take care of the sheep from time to time. The boy that Riyan had paid to take the sheep out while he had been 'camping' wasn't able to do it today. His father needed him for some chore or another.

Every time she left the house, she looked for any sign that someone was nearby. Even now, sitting at the table, she continued to glance out the windows. Bart felt bad that his presence was causing problems, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He did come to the decision that when Riyan and Chad returned with his share of the coins, that he was going to leave Quillim. It was no longer safe for him here.

Once he finished eating, he thanked her for the meal and returned to bed. He still needed to lean on Riyan's staff to get there, but at least he no longer had to bother her with helping him.

Sometime after the sun went down the sheep outside began stirring. Not like they were alarmed by the presence of a predator or anything, just making noises. Bart didn't think too much about it, for to him the sheep always seemed to be making noise of one kind or another.

He was almost asleep when the bedroom door opened and Riyan's mother poked her head in. The worried look on her face gave him cause for concern. "There's someone out there," she whispered.

His concern flared into full blown alarm at her words. Glancing to the bedroom window, all he could see was blackness. Turning back to her he asked, "Are you sure?" She nodded silently.

"Blow out that candle," he said to her quietly. When she blew it out, the room was plunged into darkness and at the window next to the bed was the moon shrouded silhouette of a man looking in.

"Get to your room and bar the door!" Bart yelled as the man broke the window.

Riyan's mother screamed and fled down the hall.

As Bart rolled off the bed away from the window, he grabbed the leather pack and the two darts lying on top. He hit the floor just as the man was passing through the broken frame.

"Bartholomew Agreani," the man said as he came fully into the room. A glint of light flashed off the weapon the man held in his hand. "The time has come." In the darkness, Bart could see the man move around the bed on his way to where he was laying.

Bart took one of his darts and threw it. The dart flew true and struck the man in the shoulder. Pain caused the man to cry out as he pulled it from his flesh. "Don't make this any harder than it has to be," the man told him.

Then the man cried out again as another dart struck him in the chest. "I'm going to enjoy this," he cried as he came forward and raised his sword.

Bart kicked out and took the man in the leg. It didn't break anything but it did cause him to stumble backwards a step.

"Now..." the man said then paused a moment. He shook his head as if to clear it before he raised his sword again. "Now...it's..." Unable to continue, the man dropped to one knee and the sword fell from his grip.

Bart sat up and scooted back against the wall, all the while keeping an eye on the man before him. Placing his back firmly against the wall, he braced himself and began working his way up

to a standing position. By the time he was erect, the man had completely collapsed to the floor. Removing another of the darts from the leather pack, he made his way to the hall.

The silence in the house was absolute. He listened for any indication that another intruder was present, but aside from the normal noise of the sheep, there was only silence.

He worked his way down to the front room and then over to the door leading into Riyan's mother's room. The house was dark. When he reached the door, he tapped upon it. "Kaitlyn," he said softly, "it's Bart."

There wasn't an immediate answer so he knocked one more time. "It's me, Bart. Everything's alright."

Then from the other side he heard the bar being lifted and the door started to open. "He's gone?" she asked once the door was opened a crack.

"No," replied Bart, "but he won't be bothering us again."

"Did you kill him?" she asked.

"Yes."

She opened the door fully. "Are there any others?"

"I haven't seen anyone," he said. "He may have been working alone."

He stepped aside as she passed into the front room. She was but a shadow as she made her way through the house to the room where the man lay.

She picked up the candle again and was about to light it when Bart told her it might not be a good idea. "He could have had someone working with him," he explained. "They do that sometimes."

Placing the unlit candle back on the table, she turned her head back toward him and asked, "Who are 'they'?"

"I'm pretty sure he came from Wardean," he said.

Moving into the hall, she asked, "What do they want with you?"

"I was on the wrong side in a power struggle you might say," he explained. "I and others have been marked for death. I understand there's a reward offered for my demise."

"I see," she said. Entering the room, she glanced over to the shattered window through which the man made his entrance. Bart followed her and had one of his darts clutched in his hand in the event of another attack.

She moved around the bed to where the man lay sprawled out across the floor. In the dark he was nothing but a vague shadow. With her foot she nudged him to see if he would respond. When he didn't, she bent down and turned him over onto his back. After a brief examination she turned towards Bart and said, "He's dead."

Bart didn't answer, just stood there while she gazed up at him. She finally stood up when he failed to answer. "How are we to find out if there's another person out there?"

"I'll go check," he replied. "Stay in your room."

"You can barely walk," she stated.

"I can walk well enough for this," he said. Then with the staff in hand, he left the room and headed for the front door. Once there, he cracked it open slightly and gazed out. No shadows moved in the moonlight. The sheep were behaving normally which was a good sign.

He opened the door and slipped out. For several minutes he did a circuit around the home until he was sure there was no one else out there. Then returning back into the house, he informed Riyan's mother that the man had come alone.

"Is it safe for us to have light now?" she asked.

"Yes, I think so."

She lit the candle on the table, then picked up a second and lit it from the flame of the first. "Here," she said as she offered him the second candle.

"Thanks," he told her as he took the candle. "We better get the man outside and hidden before someone comes looking for him. If they find out that he was killed in this house, you and Riyan will be marked for death as well."

A grim expression came over her as she turned her face towards him. He could tell that her opinion of him was getting worse by the minute. But she nodded and between them, they managed to drag the dead man out of the house and into the hills. She returned to the house for a shovel and then began digging a grave in a copse of trees. Before they put his body into the grave, Bart removed everything from the man's pockets and anything else of value he had including the scabbard for the sword still laying on the bedroom floor.

It was some time before the work was completed and they returned to the house. "I'm sorry I brought this trouble to your door," he said once they were back inside and sitting at the table. Laid out upon the table before him were the items he liberated from the man's pockets.

She didn't respond, just gave him a meaningful look.

"I don't think he would have told anyone what he was doing before he came here," he said. "He wouldn't have wanted to take the chance on anyone else beating him to the reward."

"How much is the reward?" she asked.

"I'm not exactly sure," he admitted. "But I would hazard a guess it's more than a thousand golds."

Her eyes widened at the figure. "That is quite a sum," she said. He only nodded in reply. They sat there while he went through the items laid out before him, but there was nothing that indicated who the man was.

Finally she asked him, "How did you manage to kill him?"

"Poisoned dart," he replied. "When you told me someone was in town looking for me, I prepared some just in case. Turned out to be most fortuitous."

"Yes, it did," she agreed. Then she stood up abruptly. "I'm going to bed."

"Hope you sleep well," he told her.

She paused there a moment before saying, "You too."

He sat there at the table thinking over the ramifications of the man showing up here. Could he have told someone where he was going? And if so, would there be other attacks? Bart wasn't sure. The only thing he did know for certain was that he needed to leave before trouble came calling again.

Chapter Twelve

In the morning, Chad and Riyan slept late as the rigors of the past few days had definitely taken their toll. When they finally arose, the sun had already been up for a couple hours. Taking their packs with them, they headed downstairs and were soon enjoying a breakfast of chicken and eggs.

Halfway through their meal Riyan flagged down the serving lady. "Yes?" she asked as she approached their table.

"I was wondering if you could direct us to Dulcet Street?" he said.

She pointed out the window. "There it is."

"You mean it runs right in front of here?" he asked.

Nodding her head, the lady replied, "That's right."

"Thank you," Riyan said with a smile. She flashed him a smile too before returning to her work.

Once they finished eating, they located the lady who gave them their room key the night before and made their way over to her. "Excuse me ma'am," Riyan said.

She looked up from making a notation in a book and gave them a friendly smile. "Are you leaving this morning?" she asked.

"Afraid so," he replied. After returning the key to her, he said, "We have business in town before we head out. I was wondering if it would be alright for us to leave our horse in your stable for a couple hours?"

"Sure," she said. "We're not full and I don't think it will be a problem."

"Thank you," Chad said to her.

"You're most welcome," came the reply. "If you ever find yourselves in Wardean again, I hope you choose to stay here."

Riyan grinned and nodded. "We will."

Turning away from her, they made their way out into the street. They looked up one way then down another, both directions were busy and crowded. "Which way?" Chad asked.

Shrugging, Riyan said, "One way's as good as another." So stepping out, they headed down to their left and entered the throng on the streets.

"Pretty crowded here," commented Chad.

"I know," Riyan said just as he was bumped into by a lady going the other way. After traveling down four blocks with no luck, they finally asked directions of a local and were soon to realize they had been going in the wrong direction.

Turning around, they worked their way back through the mass of people on the street. They passed by the Silent Shepherd and after another three blocks, the building they were told by the man contained Thyrr's shop came into view. More than thankful to leave the river of people on the street behind, they stepped up to the door and entered.

Inside they found a typical chandler's shop selling a variety of goods people would find useful. A man was situated behind a counter going over a ledger while a woman was looking through bolts of fabric. The man looked up as they entered and gave them a once over before returning to his ledger.

"That must be Thyrr," stated Chad.

"You think?" asked Riyan. He then moved towards the man who again looked up and noticed them crossing the shop. Closing the ledger, he grinned them a welcome.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" he asked.

Riyan nodded and set his pack on the counter. "Are you Thyrr?" he asked.

"That's right," the man affirmed.

He then opened his pack and said, "A friend sent me." Pulling forth the dart, he laid it on the counter between them.

Thyrr glanced to the lady and said in a hushed tone, "Put that away!"

Riyan quickly returned the dart to his pack.

Nodding over to a table set against the wall at the back of the store, he said, "Have a seat. I'll be with you when I can." He then nodded his head meaningfully towards the lady.

Understanding what he meant, Riyan and Chad moved over to the table and took their seats. The table was out of the direct view of the door, but they could see the area of the store where the lady was looking through the fabric. They waited for what must have been over ten minutes before she finally settled on the cloth she wanted. Once she paid for it and had left the store, Thyrr came over to the table.

"Sorry about that," he said, "can't be too careful you know."

"We understand," replied Riyan.

"What do you have?" he asked.

Opening his pack, Riyan pulled out several of the silver coins and showed them to him. "Our friend said you might be able to take these off our hands for a fair price," he said.

"How is he?" Thyrr asked. "Haven't seen him for some time."

"He's well," Chad said.

"Good, good." Thyrr took one of the coins and closely examined it. "I haven't run across these for some time."

Surprised, Riyan asked, "You've seen them before?"

Thyrr turned his attention back to the friends and nodded. "They turn up from time to time," he replied. "It's been almost thirty years now since the last person found a cache of these. His were mostly copper though."

"Are they worth much?" Chad asked expectantly.

"Oh yes," he replied. "How many do you have?"

“Three hundred and seventy of the silver,” Riyan told him. He nodded to Chad who produced the gold chain. “We also have this gold chain and several gems too.”

“Must have found the King’s Horde,” Thyrr joked.

“King’s Horde?” asked Chad.

“You two have never heard the story of the King’s Horde?” he asked.

They both shook their heads.

“Supposedly there’s this horde of treasure buried in the mountains hereabouts that’s guarded by an army of the dead,” he explained. Both Chad and Riyan glanced at one another at mention of the army of the dead. The corpses lying on the biers in The Crypt could be construed as just that.

“You see, long ago before the people who now live here arrived from the east, there existed a kingdom of men,” he explained. “No one knows what happened to them or who they were.” He held up the coin. “But these have been found all over the place among ruins of that lost kingdom.”

“Really?” asked Riyan. It was all he could do to keep his growing excitement out of his voice.

“Really,” Thyrr acknowledged. “Treasure hunters have been trying to locate this horde for hundreds of years but its hiding place has remained secret. No one hardly looks for it anymore.” He then glanced at them. “The last major search was sparked thirty years ago when that last cache of these coins I mentioned were found.”

Riyan and Chad glanced to each other again. The last thing they wanted was for others to learn of what they found. Two young men from a sleepy town such as Quillim would easily be swept aside by those with more experience, and lethal determination.

“Now, seeing as how you and I have a mutual friend, I’ll try to keep the knowledge of where I got them quiet,” he explained. “But keep in mind, there will come a time when the fact that you found three hundred and seventy of the King’s silver coins will come to light.”

He turned his full attention to the two young men and asked, “Did you find the King’s Horde?”

Riyan gulped under the intensity of that glare. He shook his head and lied, “No. We found these in an old chest dug out of a hill.” Beside him, Chad nodded agreement.

“Hmmm,” he stated. Then his gaze turned back to the packs. “Let me see the gems.”

He and Chad then removed the gems and laid them out on the table before him. He picked them up one by one and closely examined each in turn. Then he took the gold chain and gave it a once over as well.

“I’ll give you fifty golds for the lot,” he said. “And that’s only because we have a mutual friend.”

“Fifty?” asked Riyan, shocked that he would be offered so much.

“Alright then,” Thyrr said, “fifty five. But you’ll not get one more copper from me.”

“Deal!” blurted out Chad before Thyrr came to his senses.

He began going through the packs and stacking the silver coins on the table. “Just have to make sure there are in fact the number of coins here you claimed,” he explained.

So they waited while he counted. When he was satisfied that the count matched what they had claimed, he grabbed a box off a nearby shelf and scraped the coins, gems and the golden necklace into it.

Once the box was closed, he took a key out from his pocket and locked it. "I'll be but a second," he told them. He left the locked box containing the coins on the table as he turned around and went through the door into the back of the store. He returned a moment later with a small, bulging sack. After a quick glance around his store to make sure no one had entered while he had been in the back, he emptied the contents of the sack onto the table.

Riyan and Chad's eyes grew wide as they watched the golden sovereigns spilling from the mouth of the sack. Riyan's heart actually skipped a beat and his breath caught in his throat, so intense was the emotion he felt.

"Go ahead and count them," Thyrr said. "And hurry before someone comes in."

With trembling hands Riyan and Chad began stacking the coins into piles of five for easy counting. Twice the trembling of Chad's hands caused a stack of coins to topple before they finally had eleven stacks of five lined up neatly before them.

Never before had either one of them seen such a fortune. They could work all their lives as a shepherd or miller and not see that much wealth at one time. "The..." began Riyan but then had to clear his throat as he could barely speak. "The count is good."

"Excellent," Thyrr said with a grin. When the two lads made no move to put the gold away and just kept staring at it, he added, "You better put that away before someone sees it."

"Yeah," said Riyan as the gold's spell was broken. He and Chad picked up the coins and refilled the sack before Riyan set it inside his pack.

"Nice to have done business with you," Thyrr said. "If you see your friend again, tell him not to be such a stranger."

"We will," Chad assured him.

As he and Riyan got to their feet, Riyan said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he replied. He stood there with his hand resting on the chest as the two friends left the table.

Chad led the way as they made their way to the front door and passed through into the street. "Can you believe..." he started to say before Riyan cut him off.

"Let's not talk about it out here," he said. "Too many ears may be listening." Chad glanced around and nodded.

"On to the apothecary and then we can head home," Riyan said.

The directions Glia had given them were pretty straight forward and it took them little time in finding the place. When they opened the door to enter, a strong odor wafted out. Riyan's nose wrinkled as it enveloped them, but he couldn't decide if it was unpleasant or not. Just the strangeness of it put him off.

Dark and gloomy was the best way to describe Gyman's establishment. The few windows the place had were occluded by grime or blocked by objects hanging from the ceiling. Shelves lined the walls holding the most unusual items either of them had ever seen. Roots, leaves, branches; all things botanical were grouped together in an area that took up almost a third of the store. One

area had bones of varying sizes from what had to have been all sorts of creatures. The rest of the place contained items ranging from rocks to dust and one wall contained large bottles containing liquids of varying color.

“How may I help you?”

Chad jumped when the voice came from just behind him.

They turned to find a little old man who couldn't have been more than four feet tall. His features were gnarled and his back was bent. Eyes peered keenly at them from beneath bushy eyebrows. His head was devoid of all hair but for a single tuft of white sticking up several inches from the top of his head.

“Are you Gyman?” Ryan asked.

“That I am,” he replied. The way he stood there motionless as he stared at them gave them both the creeps.

“A friend of ours asked us to stop by while we were in Wardean,” he explained. Reaching into his pack, he pulled out Glia's list. “This is what she wanted.”

The old man stared at the list in his hand but made no move to take it. Riyan glanced to Chad just as Gyman asked, “What was the name of your friend?”

“Glia,” replied Chad. “She's an old lady that lives near us.”

“Ah yes,” he stated with an ever so slight nod of his head. He then reached up and took the list from Riyan. “Wait here and don't touch anything,” he said. Taking one step away, he paused and then glanced back at them, “Some of the things here don't like to be bothered.”

The two young men watched him as he moved away deeper into the store. “What do you suppose he meant by that?” Chad asked quietly.

“I don't know,” replied Riyan in a similar hushed voice. Glancing around he wondered what could possibly be in here that wouldn't like to be bothered.

They stood there for almost ten minutes, all the while fearing to move, before Gyman made his appearance. The little, gnarled old man clutched a small package in one of his hands. Riyan removed the two gems that Glia had given them for the items and held them out.

The old man came to a stop and moved his face close to his hand. He took several moments to examine the gems as they lay in his hand before reaching out and taking them. “Here,” he said as he handed the package to Riyan. “Tell her I was able to accommodate her wishes.”

“We will,” Riyan assured him. Putting the package in his pack, he said, “Thank you,” then he and Chad turned for the door. As he opened the door and was about to leave, he glanced back inside only to find Gyman was no longer anywhere to be seen. Turning back, he passed through the door and entered the street.

“That was creepy,” he commented to Chad as they headed back to the inn to retrieve their horse.

“You could say that again,” he replied. “I never saw anyone act like that before.”

“Me either. Let's get out of here and go home.”

“You got it,” agreed Chad.

They had moved down the street when Chad suddenly remembered that Glia had said they could keep the change. But Gyman didn't give them any and neither one desired to enter

Gyman's Apothecary again, even if they could have gained a few coins for the effort. So they resumed their trek back to the inn.

Back at the Silent Shepherd, they saddled their horse and were soon on their way home. By the position of the sun, it was likely they weren't going to make it back before dark.

When Bart had awoken earlier this morning, more of his strength had returned. Not nearly to the degree that he had before being struck down in The Crypt, but at least he no longer needed the aid of Riyan's staff to walk around.

He spent the early morning hours lying in bed. At one point he went over to the closet and took the piece of the golden key from out of his pack and carried it back to the bed. There he examined it closely.

The sigils on the one side that had lined up with the sigils inscribed on the wall in the room at the deepest point of The Crypt, made no sense to him. Despite studying them at length, he learned nothing from them.

On the other side, however, the map was very clear. Not a complete map to be sure, he figured it would take combining this section of the circular key with the others to achieve that. What this one did show was a mountain range running along the bottom. Just to the north of the mountain range was a lake that had a river connecting it to another, smaller lake further to the north with markings next to it. After careful examination, he came to the conclusion that the markings next to the smaller lake represented a city or town of some kind.

Knock! Knock!

The sound of someone knocking on the front door echoed through the house. Suddenly alarmed, he leaped from the bed and quickly secreted the piece of the key back within his pack. Removing two of his darts, he moved to the bedroom door and cracked it open.

Peering out, he saw Riyan's mother at the door talking to someone. From his position in the bedroom, he wasn't able to overhear very well what was being said. He was about to leave the room and go out to the front room when Riyan's mother stepped back and allowed Freya to enter.

He was stunned to see Freya. She was literally the last person he expected. Realizing there was no immediate threat, he placed the darts back into the rolled leather pack that held all of his darts. Then he returned to the door and peered out through the crack between the door and the door jamb. Listening carefully, he tried to hear what was being said.

"...didn't know who else to come to," Freya said. By the tone of her voice, she was obviously distraught. "I don't want to marry Rupert, he doesn't even like me."

"Are you so sure?" Kaitlyn asked.

"Yes," replied Freya. "You sort of know about things like that."

Kaitlyn nodded. "I don't know what I can do to help. This is between your family and Rupert's."

"I know," Freya told her. "Every one of my friends thinks he's a great catch. Wealth and a good standing in the community, but I don't care for that. I would rather be some shepherd's

wife living in squalor than as Rupert's and live in wealth." Then her eyes widened and she stammered, "I...I didn't mean to imply..."

Kaitlyn smiled. "I understand," she assured her.

"I heard Riyan was out of town and thought this would be a good time to talk with someone who understands." Freya cast her eyes down before saying, "My father has forbidden me to see or talk with Riyan until after the wedding."

"I know, Riyan told me," she replied. "This marriage is going to be hard on you, Riyan too." Placing her hand under Freya's chin, she raised her face until it looked into hers. She could see the tracks the tears were making as they coursed down her cheeks. "Riyan holds no animosity towards you. In fact I do believe that he will still be a stalwart friend of yours until the end of his days."

"I'm glad," Freya said through the emotion constricting her throat. "I wouldn't want to lose him."

"You won't," Kaitlyn assured her. "I'll be here for you too." Putting her arms around the girl, she held Freya as the sobs began wracking her body. With tears in her own eyes, she patted the girl's back and comforted her until the sobbing quieted.

"When will the wedding be?" Riyan's mother asked.

A few more sniffles then Freya raised her head from off Kaitlyn's shoulder. "Fortunately custom is on my side there," she replied. "As the bride, I get to set the date."

"And?" Kaitlyn prompted.

From his position where he's eavesdropping behind the bedroom door, Bart held his breath.

"As you know, custom allows me to set the date anywhere from three months to a year from the day the betrothal is finalized," she explained. "So I set it one year away."

Kaitlyn nodded, "I can understand your willingness to put this off for as long as possible."

"I know," she replied. "But my father is pressuring me to change it for an earlier time. He wants it done and settled." Not to mention the fact that the longer the engagement lasts, the more the bride tells the community how she feels about the marriage. To set it a year away is practically a slap in Rupert's face.

"As do all fathers." A sad smile came to her as her memory went back to the time when her own father urged her to marry Riyan's father. She was dead set against it, as she was sure all brides were who were not allowed to pick their own groom, and so had set the date as far out as possible. As it turned out, her father made a much better match for her than she had ever dreamed could be possible. She had later regretted the shame she had put her husband through during that time.

As Bart closed the door, Freya and Riyan's mother began talking about things that held very little interest for him. He had heard what he wanted. A year! Riyan had a year unless her father's urging changed her mind, but with the way she felt about Rupert, that was as unlikely to happen as Bart to grow a second head.

He'll see what Riyan plans to do before he makes any decisions about leaving Quillim and starting a new life elsewhere. For if one of those seeking him has already discovered him here,

then more are likely to follow, it's only a matter of time. The last thing he wants to do is bring his troubles into the lives of the friends he made here.

Lying back on the bed, his mind wandered to what Chad and Riyan were doing now.

Chapter Thirteen

"Why didn't you stay on the road?" exclaimed Chad quietly from where he sat on the horse behind Riyan.

"We can lose them in the hills," replied Riyan.

They leaned low in the saddle as they fled through the hills. A short time ago, three bandits accosted them and it was only through great luck that they managed to get away. Now the bandits were hot on their trail. Riyan had turned off the road and begun heading through the hills.

"Are they still back there?" asked Riyan.

Chad glanced back and saw that they had only a couple hundred foot lead on them. "Oh yeah," he replied. "I think they're gaining." Which wasn't too surprising seeing as how Chad and Riyan were riding double and the bandits were not. "We're not going to be able to stay ahead of them."

"I know," Riyan acknowledged. Not too far ahead of them stood the treeline where the forest began. He hoped that if they could make it to the trees before the bandits closed the gap, they might have a better chance of escaping. Chad saw where Riyan was taking them and silently agreed that it was their best shot.

They didn't even consider putting up a fight since all they had for weapons was the sling that Riyan always carried with him and a couple belt knives. At the moment the sling was buried at the bottom of his pack.

The bandits on the other hand were equipped with swords, knives, and one even had a shield secured behind his saddle. Any stand they were to make against such armed men would prove futile.

Keeping low in the saddle, they urged their horse in maintaining as fast a pace as it could. The bandits behind them continued to slowly gain ground until they reached the forest. By that time the gap between them had been reduced to a mere hundred feet.

Riyan maneuvered between the boles of the trees but initially was unsuccessful in putting any more distance between themselves and the bandits. From behind they heard one of the bandits yell, "Give it up! You'll never get away!"

Ignoring him, Riyan continued to push deeper into the forest.

Overhanging limbs started striking them as they raced between the trees, and bushes were beginning to impede their progress. When their forward momentum began to diminish, Riyan started to think this hadn't been such a smart idea. Fortunately though, the bandits behind them were just as hampered in their movement through the forest as they were.

Riyan finally came to the conclusion that escape was going to be impossible. So it was time to get creative. "Get my sling out of my pack," he hollered to Chad. Then he ducked just as a thick branch loomed up in front of him. Behind him, he heard Chad grunt when he wasn't quick enough to avoid the branch.

"I'll try," he said as he rubbed the red spot on his forehead.

As they maneuvered between the trees, Chad untied the top of Riyan's pack and began digging through it until he felt one of the straps of the sling. "Got it," he said just as the horse jumped over a fallen log. Chad hadn't been prepared and was almost thrown from its back. When he felt himself sliding off, he grabbed onto Riyan with a death grip and managed to right himself.

Handing the sling to his friend, he said, "Here."

Riyan reached back and took the sling. "Now, get five of the gold coins out."

"Why?" he asked.

"Just do it!" Riyan insisted. He felt Chad begin to rummage through his pack again. While he dug out the coins, Riyan began scanning the forest ahead of them for what he wanted.

"We better do something quick," said Chad, "they're almost upon us."

Riyan turned his attention from the forest ahead to the bandits behind. What had been over a hundred feet lead, has shrunk further to three quarters of that. "I know," he replied. "Working on it."

He turned back to the forest ahead and finally saw what he was looking for. "There's a clearing up ahead," he told his friend. "Once we're halfway through it, toss the gold coins to the ground. Make sure they land somewhere visible."

"You think they're going to stop for the coins?" he asked.

"With any luck, yes," he replied. "We're almost there, get ready."

Chad looked over his friend's shoulder and saw the clearing approaching. Through the trees it appeared as a beacon of light in the dark forest seeing as how the sunlight was able to breach the canopy of leaves.

Riyan braced himself as the horse leaped across another fallen log and entered the clearing. It wasn't big, just a small area where it looked like wild animals came to graze. The clearing was primarily covered with grass though a few wild bushes sprouted here and there. "Now Chad!" hollered Riyan as they came to a spot slightly more barren than the rest.

Chad tossed the coins so they landed upon and around the barren area a split second before the bandits entered the clearing behind them. Then Riyan and Chad reached the far side. They glanced back and saw that two of the bandits had indeed stopped to pick up the coins while the third continued the chase.

"It didn't work!" hollered Chad.

“It worked well enough,” countered Riyan then they were back in among the trees. “Here,” said Riyan as he handed the reins to Chad.

“What are you planning on doing?” Chad asked.

“Something stupid I’m sure,” was the reply. Riyan saw a thick branch hanging across their path two feet above their heads, it was perfect. Just before they drew close to it, Riyan took his right foot out of the stirrup and placed it on the saddle beneath him.

“You’re crazy!” Chad yelled at him when he realized what he was about to do.

Ignoring his friend, Riyan braced himself and then leaped from the back of the horse when they reached the branch. He sailed through the air and grabbed the overhanging branch. The force of his impact scrapped several inches of skin off his forearms before he was able to stop himself.

A quick glance back showed the pursuing bandit drawing his sword as he looked at Riyan hanging from the branch. Swinging up, he got on top of the branch just as the sword struck the wood right where he had been hanging a moment before. As the bandit pulled the blade from the branch, he reached for another one higher up in the tree and pulled himself even further out of the bandit’s reach.

He glanced down at the bandit who was still at the bottom of the tree, then off to where Chad was disappearing in the forest. At least he got Chad out of this, now to save himself. Taking his sling out from where he had stuffed it in his shirt, he contemplated what he was going to do. From the direction of the clearing he could hear the other two bandits making their way towards their partner.

The only ammunition he had for the sling were the coins in his pack. Reaching into it, he pulled out one of the copper coins they had found in The Crypt. Placing it in the cup of his sling, he steadied himself against the tree’s trunk as best he could. In all the times he spent practicing this sort of thing while watching the sheep, he never once tried it from the top of a tree. If he ever gets out of this and has the time, he may put in some practice.

“Come on down,” the bandit said from atop his horse. “You got nowhere to go.” Either the bandit didn’t realize that Riyan had a sling, or he didn’t care, for he made no effort to avoid the attack.

So Riyan got the sling up to speed quickly then released the coin. It flew down and struck the bandit in the face. With a cry, the bandit fell off his horse backwards. Blood flew everywhere and when he stood back up, Riyan could see the coin embedded where his nose once had been.

The man was shrieking in pain as blood poured from the wound. Riyan didn’t want to give him a chance to recover so he got another of the coins into the sling’s cup and launched it. This one struck the bandit in the side of the head and when he fell to the ground, he didn’t get back up.

By this time the other two bandits had arrived. They saw their partner lying on the ground dead. Then they turned their attention up to where Riyan stood in the tree. “We’re going to gut you kid!” one of them threatened. Dismounting, they went to the base of the tree and began climbing up.

First one began to climb, then the other. From his position, Riyan was unable to get a good shot at them. They were much too close to the trunk for his shot to be effective. There were too many branches in the way too.

Then from out of the forest behind the men climbing the tree, Riyan saw Chad approaching. In his hand he held a four foot branch, one end was sharp and jagged from where Chad must have broken it off. Unnoticed, he came up behind the bandit closest to the ground and with all his might, stabbed him in the back with the branch.

The years of hauling grain sacks and barrels of flour at the mill paid off. For when the stick struck, it pierced the man's back and went all the way through, exiting from the other side. Blood spurted out of the man's chest as the jagged end of the stick emerged. The man didn't even cry out, the blow must have killed him instantly.

As the man fell from the tree, Chad jumped backwards to avoid the dead man collapsing on him. Then from above he heard the last bandit yell as he leaped from the tree towards him. Backpedaling quickly, Chad got out of the way.

The man landed with sword in hand. Chad could see the hate for him burning in his eyes. Giving out with an inarticulate cry, the man charged with his right hand holding the sword high. He could see the man intended to cleave him in two. Chad kept moving backwards until his heel hit a root and fell to the ground. There was no time to do anything but brace for the sword stroke that would end his life.

But just before the sword fell, the bandit cried out and sank to his knees. His left hand reached behind him as if he was trying to get something. Chad watched quite perplexed until he saw something shiny fly from the tree wherein Riyan stood and strike the bandit.

This time the blow knocked the bandit to the ground and he laid there crying out in pain. Chad could see the man's back was covered in blood and obviously was in a lot of pain. He glanced up to see Riyan hop down out of the tree. Riyan stopped next to the man with the stick through his back and pulled the stick free.

Then he carried it over to where Chad stood over the man writhing on the ground. "Can't let him suffer," Riyan said. Even though the bandit would have most likely killed them, he couldn't leave the man to suffer. So taking the stick in both hands, he held it aloft over his head for the briefest moment before plunging it into the man and silencing his cries.

"You okay?" Riyan asked as he turned to his friend.

"Yeah," nodded Chad. "You?"

"Just a few scrapes," he said.

"What should we do with them?" Chad asked as he gazed at the dead bandits. Then it suddenly hit him. He and Riyan had fought off three vicious bandits and prevailed. "Our first real battle," he announced.

"I guess you could call it that," agreed Riyan. Grinning, he patted Chad on the back. "We make a great team. And as for what to do with them? I say leave 'em for the animals."

"No point in letting their horses and equipment go to waste though," suggested Chad.

"Absolutely not," agreed Riyan. "To the victor go the spoils." So while Chad went to retrieve Riyan's horse from where he left him, Riyan went about gathering the three bandits' horses

together. Then he went to one of the bandits by the tree and removed the man's sword belt from around his waist. Strapping it on around his own, he pulled forth the sword and felt every inch the hero.

The sword itself was a rather plain sword, more for utility than anything else. It had a straight blade that would be considered a longsword, with a plain unadorned crossguard and hilt. Still, it was the first sword Riyan ever held and he felt great holding it.

When Chad returned with the horse, he found Riyan swinging the sword back and forth with a grin on his face. Chad of course had to have one for himself, so he went and removed one from another and strapped it around his waist. It definitely took some getting use to, the scabbard kept trying to trip him up and the whole thing weighed quite a bit more than he expected.

"These might come in useful," Riyan finally said after sliding his sword back in the scabbard. He pulled the hand away that he was using to guide the blade as it slid into the scabbard. Blood was welling from a cut he gave himself as the sword was sliding in.

"If we don't kill ourselves with them first," agreed Chad. "We don't know the first thing about using a sword."

"What's there to know?" asked Riyan. "You get close to an enemy and stick 'em."

Chad looked at his friend doubtfully, "I think there's a bit more than that to it."

Riyan grinned and shrugged. "Let's see what they have on them and then head home."

Other than a few copper coins and a single silver, the bandits didn't have much of what you would call treasure on them. Riyan was disappointed. For in the sagas bards always told, whenever the hero killed a bandit or some other foe, the dead usually held a magical item or maybe a map, something. Needless to say, he was a bit put off. He did use one of the bandit's knives to remove the coins from their bodies that he slung at them. That part was a bit ghastly but he didn't want to leave anything behind. They also retrieved the gold coins they had dropped in an attempt to slow the bandits down.

"At least we aren't going to have to ride double anymore," Chad stated.

"Thank goodness," replied Riyan. "No offense but I was getting tired of you hanging onto me."

"Oh and like I enjoyed smelling your wonderful odor for so long?" The two friends stared at each other until they both erupted in laughter. "Let's get out of here," he said.

They mounted, then each took the reins of one of the two remaining horses and tied them to the rear of their saddles. Once the two spare horses were secured, Riyan began leading them out of the forest. Chad suggested they take the back way to Riyan's house so no one in town would see them arriving with the horses. Just their luck they would run into Rupert who would probably take them.

It was a little before dinner when they finally arrived at Riyan's home. Needless to say, when Bart and Riyan's mother saw them arriving with three extra horses and swords at their hip, they knew something must have happened. So while they were putting the horses into the barn, Chad and Riyan explained what happened. They didn't go into detail as to why they had been in Wardean, and they definitely made no mention of the coins or the King's Horde while Riyan's mother was with them.

Then it was Bart and Riyan's mother's turn to tell them of the man who showed up to kill Bart. It was well past dinner before both parties had finished relating their different adventures.

Riyan's mother mentioned that Freya had stopped by but didn't say much more than that. Later that night after Riyan's mother had gone to bed, the three friends stayed up late in the front room. It was at that time when Bart told them of the conversation he overheard Freya and Riyan's mother have.

"So they won't be getting married for a year," he summed up once he was finished.

"That might be enough time," Riyan said as he glanced to Chad.

"Time for what?" asked Bart.

"To find the rest of the key, and open the King's Horde," he stated quietly.

"King's Horde?"

"Yes," replied Chad. "It's..." He and Riyan then filled Bart in on what they had learned from Thyrr.

Once they were done, Riyan said, "I intend to find the rest of the key and open it. With the treasure inside, Freya's father would have to agree to let his daughter break off the engagement with Rupert in my favor."

"There's but one minor problem," said Bart.

"What?" Riyan asked.

"You don't know where the rest of it is," he explained. "What we have could be the missing fragment from the whole, or it could be one of many scattered in a dozen different places." He paused a moment as he glanced from one to the other. "From what you said Thyrr told you, people have been searching for this place for centuries."

"I know, but we have something they don't," he stated. "We have a part of the key. Plus we've been in The Crypt and seen the seal protecting the King's Horde."

"That's true Bart," added Chad.

He glanced at them both again and could see they were dead set to do this. Sighing, he indicated for them to follow and said, "Come with me a second." Leading them to Riyan's room, he went to the closet and removed the piece of the golden key from his pack. He showed them the map on the one side and the spot he believed indicated a town of some sort. "This is the only place on here that shows something other than geographic representations. It has to mean something."

"Are you saying the rest of the key is there?" asked Riyan.

Bart shrugged. "I don't know," he admitted. "But if we are going to go in search of the rest of the key, it's as good a place as any to start."

"But we still don't know where the place is," said Chad.

"True," nodded Bart.

"There is a large map of the surrounding area in the Magistrate's office," Chad suddenly said. "Maybe we could see if this place is on that map."

"Good idea," agreed Riyan. "We could go down in the morning and take a look."

Chad nodded and then grew silent. After a moment he said, "Somehow I need to figure a way to talk to my mother about the grinding stones and give her the coins they need."

“I could find Eryl in the morning and discover whether your father will be at the mill or not,” offered Bart.

“That would be great. Then if he is, I could go pay a visit to my mother.” Chad felt better now that he was one step closer to helping his family and hopefully mending the rift that was between himself and his father.

Chad and Bart spent the night at Riyan’s place. They crashed in the front room while Riyan took back his bed from Bart. In the morning when they told Riyan’s mother that they were heading into town, she asked about the sheep.

“Your friend Davin hasn’t been taking them out much,” she said. “They really need to graze.”

“I know mother,” replied Riyan. “But this is more important right now.”

She gave him a look saying that she didn’t agree but wasn’t about to argue the point. He felt guilty. He knew that she counted on him to help with the sheep and he couldn’t help but feel that he was letting her down somehow. “I’ll take them out later this afternoon, okay?” he said.

“See that you do,” she said.

Feeling somewhat better now that she’s been mollified, he and the other two left and headed into town. Riyan thought about wearing his sword but decided against it. If he were to be seen wearing a sword around Quillim, it would have raised too many questions he wouldn’t want to answer.

The first thing they did was to hunt down Eryl. Finding Chad’s brother wasn’t too difficult and when asked, he told them that their father would be at the mill until lunchtime. He was working to prepare the wooden framework for the two wheels that were coming in later in the week.

“How’s mother doing?” asked Chad.

“Fine,” replied his brother. “She’s sad about all that’s going on. I hope things can work out again.”

“Me too,” Chad assured him. “I’m going home now to talk to her.”

“Good luck,” Eryl wished him.

“Thanks,” Chad replied.

They left Eryl where he was playing with several other youths of similar age and headed directly to Chad’s home. Despite what his father said, he still felt that it was his home too.

Making their way through the streets, they kept a lookout for Rupert but he and his three buddies were nowhere to be seen. Before they reached Chad’s home, another young man that lived in town saw them passing through and moved to intercept them.

“Bart,” the young man said. “There’s been a stranger in town asking about you.”

“Yeah, I heard,” replied Bart. “We just got back.”

“He was kind of strange,” Egrin replied. Egrin was the son of the local baker. He wasn’t as close to Chad and Riyan as he was to Bart, though he’s had more dealings with Chad due to the fact his father bought flour from Chad’s father.

Bart came to a stop as he talked with Egrin. “You two go on ahead,” he said. “I’ll catch up.”

“Alright,” Riyan said as he and Chad continued on towards Chad’s home.

It didn't take them long before they arrived. Chad's mother was outside drawing water from their well when she saw them approaching. Leaving the bucket sitting on the ground, she turned towards them and waited for her son to approach.

Chad was filled with uncertainty when he saw her. He wasn't sure just how she was going to react to him after everything that's happened. Coming close, he said the only thing he could, "I'm sorry mother," and then gave her an embrace.

She returned it with feeling and when they broke it off, had tears in her eyes. "Oh Chad," she said, "why did you go against your father's wishes?"

He felt bad. "I was just trying to help," he replied. "I didn't mean to make the situation worse."

"I know," she said.

"How's father?" he asked.

"Not good," she told him. Emotions got the better of her and it took a minute to get them under control. "He hasn't changed his mind about you."

"I realize that," stated Bart. "How much are the two new grinding stones going to set him back?"

"Fifty golds," she replied. "We had twenty saved against adversity and those are already gone. The magistrate was good enough to loan us the rest. He said that it wouldn't do for Quillim not to have an operable mill."

"Fifty?" he asked incredulous. That amounted to a veritable fortune by the standards of those in Quillim. He was surprised that his family had actually managed to squirrel away twenty golds.

She nodded. "I know. I don't know how we'll ever pay him back."

Chad glanced to Riyan who nodded.

Before they left, they had placed all the gold coins they had received from Thyrr into his pack. "I have something for you and father," he said. "To make up for what I did." She looked at him questioningly. Then he opened his pack and showed her the gold inside.

When she looked inside and saw the shining golden coins, she had a sharp intake of breath. "Oh my," she said. "How many are in there?"

"Fifty five," he replied. "We found some gems up in the mountains while we were camping and sold them in Wardean. Me, Riyan and Bart have decided to give you and father what is needed to replace the grinding wheels."

"You can't be serious!" she exclaimed. "Oh Chadric." Tears began to flow unbidden as she sobbed in happiness.

"Will father accept this?" Chad asked. "I know how proud he is about some things."

"I think he will," she said. "But it might be best if I tell him. If you were to be here he might get his back up and no amount of logic would sway him."

"He can stay at my place," offered Riyan.

"That would be best," she said, "at least for now."

So they went inside the house to take the fifty coins out of the pack. When Chad's mother was about to pick up the water bucket to take it back to the house, Riyan beat her to it and carried the bucket inside for her.

Once inside, Chad removed the coins and stacked them on the table. "I hope this makes things better between father and me," he said.

"I'm sure it will," she replied. "But even with this it may take time for things to be as they were."

"I know." Chad gave her a hug before he and Riyan took off for the magistrate's office. "Send Eryl to Riyan's if things change and I can come back."

"I will," she said as fresh tears began to course down her face.

"I love you mother," Chad said after another hug.

"I love you too," she replied.

When at last she was able to release her son, he and Riyan left and headed over to the magistrate's office. Chad was awfully quiet as they made their way back through town. "You okay?" Riyan asked.

"Better," he replied. "If my father forgives me then I will be." He really didn't realize how much he cared about the way his father felt about him until he lost his goodwill. Now he almost felt empty inside and knew that only regaining his father's favor would fill it.

They encountered Bart who was on his way to meet them at Chad's family's home. "Everything go alright?" he asked.

"Won't know that until Eryl comes with word," Riyan replied.

"I'm sure it's going to work out for the best," Bart said reassuringly as they approached the Town Hall where the magistrate's office lies.

When they entered the building, they stopped to see Ceci and asked her if they could see the magistrate.

"I'm sorry Riyan," she replied. "He and Rupert went up to Yarix and won't be back for three days." Yarix was a small town less than a day's ride to the north. It too was a small town of herders and farmers like Quillim.

"Thank you," he said.

Once they were outside, Riyan said under his breath, "Three days!"

"Don't worry Riyan," Bart said. "We're going to get in and see that map before then."

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Ceci isn't about to allow us to go poking around his office while he's out."

"I know," he replied with a grin. "But if you don't want to wait three days, I do have another idea."

Riyan glanced at his friend and asked, "What?"

Chapter Fourteen

Later that night when the town grew quiet, three shadows moved in the dark. They wended their way through the buildings until the Town Hall rose out of the darkness before them. Stopping for only a brief moment in the shadows of a bordering building, Bart made sure no one was around. Then he led Riyan and Chad towards the main door.

“Are you sure this is such a good idea?” asked Riyan.

“No one’s around this late at night,” replied Bart. “Besides, we’ll only be a moment.”

“Exactly,” Chad interjected. “It’s not like we’re planning on taking anything.”

“Just keep an eye out until I get the door opened,” Bart told the other two. Taking out his lockpicks, he pulled out two of the instruments and began working on the lock. This lock was a rather simple one, nothing better had ever been needed in the quiet town of Quillim. It took him but a moment before he felt the lock turn.

“Okay,” he whispered and opened the door. Bart moved inside and was quickly followed by Chad and Riyan. He relocked the door once it was shut.

They followed him to the stairs where they made their way up to the third floor in the dark. Moving in the all but absolute darkness of the Town Hall’s interior forced them to step carefully. Riyan had thought they should bring a lantern, but Bart had argued against it.

“You aren’t really going to need it if you just move slowly enough,” he explained. “Also, it might be seen by someone passing by outside.” He did however bring along an item for light, something he called a ‘tube lantern’. It was little more than a hollowed out piece of wood, six inches long with a diameter of three inches, with the stub of a candle set inside. When the candle was lit, it aimed a beam of light at a specified location rather than illuminating the entire room. He told them this was a little item his father claimed to have thought up.

Riyan recognized it from earlier this afternoon. He had taken the flock out to graze as he promised his mother, Chad and Bart had accompanied him. They also dropped off Old Glia’s package for which she was very thankful. While they were out, Bart had found the piece of wood and begun carving out its insides. When they asked what he was doing, he just grinned but wouldn’t answer. As it turned out, he had been making the tube lantern.

They followed the stairs up until they reached the third floor landing. Then they headed down the hallway to the end and the Magistrate’s Office. None were surprised to find that the door was locked. But it was just as simple as the one below and Bart had it opened in no time. “They don’t worry too much about break-ins around here do they?” he asked once the lock was opened.

Chad chuckled, “What would anyone steal?”

“True,” Bart replied then opened the door. Several windows spaced along two of the walls allowed light from the moon and stars to filter in. It cast the room in a multitude of shadows.

“Over here,” Riyan said as he moved to their right. In the faint light coming in through the windows they saw the outline of a map framed upon the wall.

“Just give me a second,” Bart said as he settled to the floor. He set the tube lantern on the floor before him and worked to get the stub of a candle lit. Once the wick caught fire, light came out of the end and created a line of light across the floor.

“That’s pretty cool,” Chad said.

“I know,” Bart replied with a grin. Standing up, he took the tube lantern in hand and showed them how it only illuminated a circular area directly in front of where he pointing it. “My father has all sorts of things like this.”

“Never heard of anything like this before,” Riyan said as he watched the circle of light move across the wall.

“No, I wouldn’t think so,” said Bart. “He’s pretty protective of his things. Not too many people even know about most of them.” As he moved the light to reveal the map, Riyan took the piece of the golden key from out of his pocket.

“Now,” murmured Bart, “let’s see if we can find out where this place is.” He shined the light on the map and saw where Quillim was prominently displayed in the center. The rest of the map radiated out every direction.

The map extended as far north to just above Yarix, and southward a little past Wardean. The mountains to the west filled in the left side of the map while the lands of Duke Yoric filled the right.

“I don’t see it,” Riyan said.

“No,” agreed Bart. “This map doesn’t show enough of the land.”

“Then how are we to know where this place is?” questioned Chad.

“That’s the question,” replied Riyan. “How are we going to figure it out without anyone else discovering what we’re looking for?” In the back of his mind he remembered Thyrr saying that there would come a time when the coins he bought from them would become known. The last thing Riyan wanted was for them to leave a trail for others to follow.

“Is there another place that would have a map?” asked Chad. “One that might show a wider area?”

“In Wardean there’s a cartographer by the name of Bennin that has a variety of maps depicting the known world,” explained Bart. “Or so he claims.”

“But if we seek his help, then others could find out where we went,” Riyan objected. “Once the news of our finding the silver coins gets out, and it will according to Thyrr, then the hunt will be on. We can’t afford to leave any trail.”

“Maybe Crag Keep?” suggested Bart.

“Crag Keep?” asked Riyan. Crag Keep was one of the keeps under the Border Lord Duke Yoric. It was west of Wardean and sat on the southern end of one of the passes between the lands of Duke Yoric and those of the goblins on the far side.

“Exactly,” he replied. “I’ve heard that in the great hall there is a massive map showing the lands on both sides of the mountain range.”

“That might be what we need to look at,” agreed Riyan.

“How are we going to gain access to the great hall?” asked Chad. “Do you think they are going to just allow anyone to stroll through there?”

“We’ll worry about that when we get there,” shrugged Bart. “But I don’t think we have many other options open to us if we wish to keep this to ourselves.”

“I agree,” Riyan said. “We can leave in the morning.”

Bart put the end of the tube lantern to his lips and blew the candle out. “Then let’s get out of here.” He led them out of the Magistrate’s Office and made sure the door was once again locked. After that they went down the stairs and to the front door. There, Bart peered out to be sure the area was clear, then they quickly exited the building. Bart took a moment to relock the door before the three friends headed back to Riyan’s place.

They spent an hour sitting up in the front room planning what they were going to do the following morning. Most of it was fairly simple, getting supplies together, clothes, that sort of thing. But what gave Riyan concern was what he was going to tell his mother. After all, it was just him and her. There was no one else in whom she could rely upon other than her son. He wasn’t sure how she would take the news.

In the morning when he told her they were planning on leaving for an indeterminate amount of time, she just stared at him. “We won’t be gone forever,” he explained. “Maybe a couple weeks.”

Chad jumped in to help by saying, “A month, tops.”

“Where are you going?” she asked. She had a tight rein on her emotions and Riyan couldn’t tell what her reaction was.

“Bart has some business down south and we are going along,” he told her.

Apparently that was the wrong thing to say for her expression darkened and her brows knitted together. She turned her eyes on Bart and asked, “Haven’t you brought enough trouble into this house?”

“I assure you,” Bart replied, “it is nothing like that.”

Turning back to her son, she looked at him. Really looked at him for the first time and a tear came to her eye.

“I’ll be okay mother, I promise,” he said.

She smiled. It was such a sad smile that it almost broke his heart. “I guess this time comes in every mother’s life,” she said.

“What?” he asked.

“When her son grows up and becomes a man.”

Riyan didn’t know how to reply to that other than going over and giving her a hug. “I’ll be back before Freya’s and Rupert’s marriage,” he said. “Who knows what may happen between now and then?”

She suddenly gripped his shoulders and pushed him back to arm’s length. “You’re not going to kill him are you?” she asked as she stared into his eyes. Then she glanced to Bart and Chad.

“No!” all three exclaimed at the same time.

Riyan reached into his pocket and pulled out three of the remaining five gold coins they received from Thyrr. Last night the other two agreed for his mother to have them to tide her over until his return. He held them out to her.

She gasped when she saw them. "Where did you get these?"

"Is that important?" he asked.

Her expression hardened one more time. "Yes, it is. Now, where did you get them?"

Riyan glanced at the other two for help but they weren't able to give him any. "We found some treasure up in the mountains," he explained. "When Bart was poisoned. Chad and I went to Wardean and sold what we found to someone that Bart knew. He gave us enough gold to help Chad's parents with replacing the grinding wheels, and now to help you while I'm gone."

"It might be a good idea to keep all this between us," suggested Chad.

"And if anyone comes around looking for me," Bart added, "you haven't seen me and you don't know where I went."

"I don't like this one bit," she said. Then she gazed into the eyes of her son and took the three golds. "But it would seem your mind is already made up."

"It'll work out for the best," he assured her. He indicated the gold in her hand and said, "With that you can pay someone to come and help with the flock."

She nodded. "Be careful," she said.

And with those words Riyan knew that she had resigned herself to his going. He's not sure why, but it didn't make him feel a whole lot better.

"We should get going before someone comes around," Bart said.

"Give me a minute okay?" he asked his two friends.

"Sure," replied Chad then he and Bart went out to the barn to ready the three horses they'll be taking.

Once they were out, Riyan hugged his mother tightly as a tear welled from his eye. "I love you mother," he said. "I'll be back."

"I love you too," she replied with a catch in her voice.

They held each other for quite awhile, neither one wanting to break away. Finally, he disengaged from her embrace. Giving her a peck on the cheek, he left her sitting in the chair in the front room as he exited through the back door.

"You okay?" Chad asked as he appeared in the barn.

Nodding, Riyan said, "Yeah."

Bart was already in the saddle and came forward with the horse Riyan was to ride. He handed him the reins and waited until he was in the saddle. Once Riyan was mounted, they headed out.

Riyan glanced to the doorway at the back of the house and saw his mother standing there. She waved goodbye silently as he rode away. Before he rode out of sight, he turned and waved a final time, then she was gone.

None of them were very good on horseback, though they all had some experience. They made fairly decent time as they worked their way through the hills around town to the road leading south.

Riyan had the sword belt around his waist that he took from the thieves, Chad wore the other. Bart thought they were both dumb to wear them. "You guys don't even know how to use them."

"So?" Riyan asked. "It feels good to have it on."

Chad grinned to him and said, "It does, doesn't it."

Bart just rolled his eyes heavenward. He refused to take the sword of the man who came to kill him. They left it wrapped up in some old clothes in the back of Riyan's closet.

Once they came to the road running north and south, they were quite a ways south of Quillim. "We should be there in just under two days," he told them.

"Ever been to Crag Keep?" asked Chad.

Shaking his head, Bart replied, "No, though I have talked with people who have."

They rode throughout the day and in the latter part of the afternoon the town of Wardean appeared before them. "On the south side is a road heading almost due west," he explained. "If we take that road, we should reach Crag Keep by noon tomorrow."

After what happened the last time Bart set foot within Wardean, they thought it best to skirt around the walls and head cross country to the westward road. In fact, they found a trail of sorts that branched off a mile north of Wardean that ended up bringing them to the road to Crag Keep.

They didn't travel much further than past where the walls of Wardean disappeared behind them before stopping for the night. The day of riding was beginning to take its toll on their posteriors. They found a decent spot in the hills a short way from the road that was an ideal spot to make camp.

The sadness of leaving home had gradually diminished until it was now nothing more than a thought that flittered across his mind from time to time. The adventure of the road had taken over and all regrets at leaving were gone. Here he was with good friends, a clear sky above, and the prospect of adventure. How in the world could he remain sad?

Later that evening after they finished their dinner and were sitting around the fire talking, Chad asked Bart, "What are you going to do with your share?"

"Of the King's Horde?" he asked.

"That's right," replied Chad.

"Probably pay to have the death mark removed," he said.

"You can do that?" Riyan asked.

"Oh sure," he replied. "Though you need to have enough gold to overcome their sense of vengeance."

"How much do you think you're going to need?" Riyan asked.

"I wouldn't dare to make the attempt with less than ten thousand golds," he explained.

"Ten thousand?" exclaimed Chad. "What did you do?"

Bart smiled a sad smile. "I was on the wrong side of a power struggle." He grew silent and didn't say anything further about it.

"As for me," Chad said, "maybe I'll learn to use this sword and go on adventures."

"Now you're talking!" Riyan agreed with great enthusiasm. "We could fight the forces of evil and maybe save a damsel in distress or two."

"You guys are crazy," Bart said with a grin. "I've talked with people who have had adventures such as you two are in love with, and they say they are nothing like the sagas. They're long rides, stretches of boredom that are interrupted with moments of life threatening ordeals, and half the time the rewards are not worth it."

"I don't care what you say," Riyan asserted, "I'm having the time of my life."

“We’ll see,” he replied. No one’s trying to kill you yet, he thought to himself.

It wasn’t long after that before they turned in for the night. All through the night, Riyan dreamt of treasures untold.

The following morning they had a quick bite to eat then were back in the saddle. The road they were taking will lead them directly to Crag Keep. It has been devoid of traffic ever since they stopped to camp the night before. Even during the night, not one traveler was heard passing by.

“This place seems pretty deserted,” commented Chad.

“You need to realize that Crag Keep is little more than a fortress sitting on this side of the Reilkyn Pass,” he explained. “Other than merchants heading to the Marketplace, or soldiers going to the Keep, there’s not much else out here.”

“What’s the Marketplace?” Riyan asked.

“You two don’t know anything about nothing do you?” Bart exclaimed. “The Marketplace is where goblins and humans meet in the spring and summer months to trade goods.”

“Oh,” replied Riyan.

“What do the goblins have to trade?” Chad asked.

Bart turned back and glanced at where Chad was riding behind him. “Why do you want to know?”

“Just curious is all,” he explained.

“I’m not really sure,” he admitted. “Probably hides. I would think they would be more along the lines of being the buyers than sellers.”

“You may be right,” agreed Riyan.

They rode another two hours, all the while the mountains grew ever closer. The hills they have been traveling through continuously became steeper until finally merging into the sides of the mountains. A river now flowed beside them on their left as it made its way down from the mountains. It also brought colder air along with it.

The road followed the banks of the river until it came to a wooden bridge that spanned the river. Here the river turned, passed under the bridge, and commenced flowing on their right.

Once past the bridge they rode for another hour before the walls of Crag Keep appeared before them. It was built right into the face of one of the mountains with a high wall enclosing it. A single gate loomed in the middle of the wall with a drawbridge that was currently extended. As they rode closer, they could see where a small tributary broke off from the river and made its way beneath the drawbridge forming a moat of sorts.

A soldier stood just outside the portcullis area and watched them as they approached. When their horses began crossing the drawbridge, the soldier raised his arm. “I’m sorry boys,” he said. “No one’s allowed inside unless they have business.”

When the other two came to a halt, Bart rode forward another foot before he too halted. “That’s what we’re here on,” Bart said without skipping a beat. “Our father will be on his way in the morning with a load of goods to trade at the Marketplace from Wardean. He sent us ahead to see about getting everything arranged for making the trip over the pass.”

The guard stared at Bart for a second as if he was trying to determine the validity of what he was saying. Then he turned his gaze to Chad and Riyan who worked hard at maintaining a relaxed demeanor. After coming to a decision, the guard nodded and said, "Very well. You can enter."

"Thank you," said Bart as he got his horse moving again. Then with Riyan and Chad behind him, he entered Crag Keep.

Now that they were inside the walls, they could better see the layout of the keep. Between the walls and the cliffside was a large courtyard. A group of five wagons were huddled together off to one side with a party of merchants moving in and around them.

The keep itself was almost entirely within the mountain. At the other end of the courtyard stood the main entrance, a double door of sturdy construction. Other than the door, there was no other opening in the lower portion of the cliffside. Not until twenty feet above the ground did the first opening appear which had to be a window though it was rather narrow. Other windows gaped from the cliff face for another hundred feet above the first one.

"Pretty impressive," stated Chad.

"Now what are we to do?" asked Riyan. Lowering his voice, he turned to Bart and asked, "Tomorrow morning that guard is going to expect to see a caravan show up with our 'father'."

"Keep your voice down," he said. Then he nodded to a small building on the opposite side of the courtyard from the five wagons. "If what I heard is accurate, that's an inn. We can stay there tonight."

"But how are we to get into the great hall and view the map?" Chad asked in a very quiet voice.

Bart shrugged, "I don't know. Let's get settled in. I'll figure something out after that."

"I hope so," said Riyan as Bart led the way over to the building.

It turned out that his source had been correct for it was indeed an inn, a rather pricey inn in fact. They used most of one of the gold coins they had left for a room for themselves and stall space for their horses.

After settling in their horses, and on the way back to the inn, Riyan stopped to stare at the opening to the keep. Two guards stood watch and he knew they wouldn't allow them to simply walk in and look around. He hoped Bart knew what he was doing, the place looked pretty daunting. Then he followed the other two into the inn for dinner.

Chapter Fifteen

The inn had very little in the way of amenities for its guests. The rooms were quite small, in fact they were forced to share a single room with one small bed. Still, it was better than sleeping outside on the ground.

They had but two choices for dinner. One was the stew that the cook at the inn provided or they could choose the food they brought with them. Forget about entertainment. There was a very small spot where a bard of some kind could have entertained those eating there, but none made an appearance. Riyan commented to the others that he thought it unlikely a bard ever came this way.

Once they finished eating, they stepped outside and tried to figure a way into the keep. The same two guards were still standing there to either side of the entrance. Any attempt at scaling the walls would be immediately seen. The prospect of gaining admittance seemed remote in the extreme.

“We could still ask,” Riyan said.

“I don’t think that would be such a good idea,” countered Bart. “Though if no other opportunity presents itself, we may be left with little choice.”

For over an hour they wandered around the courtyard, all the while maintaining an eye on the keep while trying to appear like they weren’t. Finally, Bart noticed two men emerge between the two guards as they left the keep. They were dressed like merchants and were making their way over to where the five wagons sat.

Bart watched them cross the courtyard and grew thoughtful. Riyan noticed him following the two men with his eyes and asked, “What?”

“Those two men just came out of the keep,” he said. “I wonder what they were doing in there?”

“Good question,” Chad said. “Maybe you should go over and ask them.”

Bart turned to him and nodded. “I think I will,” he said. Before Bart or Chad could say anything he stepped out and hurried over to the caravan’s camp.

“What does he think he’s doing?” asked Chad. He had been kidding when he suggested that he go talk with them.

“I don’t know,” replied Riyan. Then he watched as Bart arrived at the wagons and begun talking with the two men. “I hope he doesn’t get us into trouble.”

They remained where they were in the courtyard until whatever conversation Bart had been having came to an end. Then he turned around and began heading back to the inn. He indicated with a nod of his head that they should meet him there. They met up with him at the inn’s entrance where he came to a stop. “So?” asked Riyan.

“Inside the keep is where you acquire your permit to travel across the pass to the Marketplace,” he explained.

“You need a permit?” asked Chad.

“So it would seem,” replied Bart. He grinned and said, “This is just what we needed.”

“They’re not going to give us a permit,” Riyan stated. “We have no logical reason for going over there.”

“We can use the same story you used to get us in here,” suggested Chad. “That we are waiting for our father’s caravan.”

“But we can’t prove that,” objected Riyan.

“Look,” said Bart. “If we can just get past the guards at the entrance, then it doesn’t matter if we get a pass or not. All we really need is to look at the map in the great hall.”

Chad looked to Riyan and shrugged, “It’s worth a try.”

“Alright,” he agreed. “The worst they could do is not let us in.”

Bart gave him a grin and said, “That’s the spirit. Let’s go.”

They left the front of the inn and made their way toward the entrance to the keep. Riyan felt his insides tighten up in nervousness that he prayed wasn’t mirrored on his face. As they approached the guards at the entrance, Bart took the lead.

One of the guards stepped forward and held up a hand indicating they were to stop. “Sorry boys, but the keep is off limits,” he told them.

“We were going to see about getting passes for our father’s wagons before they arrived in the morning,” Bart said in complete sincerity.

“Passes?” the guard asked.

“That’s right,” he replied. “Our father wants to see if the goblins would be willing to purchase some jewelry and trinkets that he recently acquired.”

“Usually the passes aren’t given until the wagons are actually here,” explained the guard.

“I know,” continued Bart. “Last year we were here with the wagons and it wasn’t a problem. Is Sergeant Akers still issuing the passes?”

“Yes he is,” the guard replied. His manner seemed to relax just a little.

“How is his little girl doing?” Bart asked. “Still giving him problems?”

“Oh you know it,” the guard said with a grin. “She’s not so little anymore. She drives him crazy whenever he’s home on leave.”

“Is he still in the same room as last year?” Bart asked.

“Yes,” the guard said. “Down the hall, fourth door on the right.”

“Thanks,” Bart said then moved forward to enter the keep. Behind him Chad and Riyan follow and to their astonishment, the guard stepped aside and allowed them to enter.

Once they left the guards behind, they entered a large hall. At present no one was in sight. Riyan tried to ask him about how he knew so much about this Sergeant Akers but Bart waved him silent. “Later,” he said.

At the far end of the hall was the corridor the guard had referred to. Another corridor left the hall to their right and two closed doors sat in the wall to their left. “Which way?” asked Chad.

“You got me,” replied Bart. “Let’s hope we find it before they find us.” Moving quickly to the corridor on their right, he soon left the hall behind as he made his way deeper into the keep. Scones bearing burning torches lined the walls, both in the hall and in the corridors extending from it.

The great hall had to be in a prominent location, it would stand to reason that they would want it to be very accessible to visitors. So Bart moved down the corridor with the other two right behind, all three trying to be as quiet as possible.

The corridor extended for over a hundred feet before ending at a closed door. Other doors had sat along either side of the corridor as they moved along it, some open and some closed. The closed ones they left closed, and paused only a moment to peer through the open ones. They were making sure that there was no one on the other side who might see them pass. Not to mention making sure the door didn't open onto the main hall, though Bart doubted if any of these doors would do that. They simply were not in what he felt was the right place.

When they reached the door at the end, Bart listened at it for a moment until he was sure it was quiet on the other side. Then he opened the door slowly and peered around. There he found another corridor running perpendicular to the one they were in.

Suddenly, footsteps were heard approaching down the corridor on the other side of the door. Bart closed it quickly and turned to the others. "Someone's coming!" he said. They moved back quickly to the closest door to them and opened it. Fortunately it opened up onto a storage room and they hurried inside. No sooner did they get the door closed than they heard the door at the end of the corridor open. The footsteps began walking towards them down the corridor and they listened as they drew abreast of the door then continued on past. A second or two later they heard another door open and close.

Bart cracked open the door to the storage room and looked out. The corridor was once again empty. "Come on," he said to the other two. Opening the door wider, he left the storage room and made his way back to the door at the end of the corridor.

This time when he peered out into the other corridor, there were no footsteps to be heard and both ways were deserted. Waving for the others to follow, he passed through the doorway and started following the corridor to the left.

The corridor they found themselves in now was fairly similar to the one they just left. Voices could be heard coming from up ahead and Bart had them pause in a small alcove as they listened. A few seconds later they determined that the voices were neither approaching nor moving away. So they returned to the corridor and resumed their progress.

Thirty feet further down stood an open doorway and it was from there that the voices were originating. He motioned for Riyan and Chad to remain where they were as he continued forward to peer into the room. Creeping forward silently, he reached the edge of the open door and very slowly looked around to the other side.

It turned out to be a room where several soldiers were taking their ease before a fireplace. The table they were sitting around had a pitcher of ale and several cups resting on top. One of the men was facing in such a way that the doorway was in his direct line of sight. However, in Bart's opinion, the man appeared rather drunk and may not notice when they moved across the doorway quickly.

Turning back to the others, he waved them forward. When they reached his side he said, "Need to be quick." Once he received nods of understanding, he stepped out and very quickly, passed in front of the doorway. Riyan and Chad followed right behind him.

Bart didn't stop when they reached the other side. Instead, he kept leading them forward as he listened for anything that might indicate they were seen by the men in the room behind them. When nothing materialized, he breathed a sigh of relief and continued down the corridor.

Several other corridors at times branched off, but Bart continued following the corridor they were in. Each time they came to a branching, they would slow down, check for anyone in the other corridor, then proceed when clear. It was the third such branching to the left when they saw what had to be the great hall opening up at the end of the new corridor.

"I think that's it," he said as he turned them down it. When Riyan and Chad entered the corridor, they agreed with him. The corridor extended for about twenty feet before opening up on a large hall with many tables set in three neat rows running from one side to the other. A servant was seen passing through towards one of the exits on the far side.

They waited until the servant had left the great hall before they entered. As they stepped from the corridor, Riyan glanced up at the vaulting ceiling that arched overhead "Wow," he breathed in awe as the sheer size of the room overpowered him. He had never been in such a massive room before, other than what they found in The Crypt that is.

"We don't have time for gawking," Bart admonished them. "Let's find the map and get out of here."

They looked for the map and didn't see it. From what Bart had said it should have been quite large and out in the open. Then Chad turned around and looked at the wall through which they just emerged. "I think I found it," he said.

The other two turned about and saw that most of the wall was painted with a map depicting a large portion of the Kingdom of Byrdlon, of which the lands of Duke Yoric were but a part. It also showed the mountains to the west that separated the goblin lands from theirs and beyond.

"There's Quillim!" exclaimed Chad.

Riyan looked to where he pointed and saw a tiny dot with the name of their town upon it. "It isn't that big," he said.

"No it isn't," said Bart as he backed away from the wall to get a better view. As much as he stared at the map on the piece of the key when he was lying in bed, he had the area depicted upon it memorized. His eyes scanned the map and came to an area that matched what was on the key.

Just on the other side of the mountains from Crag Keep was the larger of the two lakes. It sat a little bit west and north of the Marketplace. From its northern shore a river extended northward to the smaller lake where they figured the rest of the key to be. Or at least some indication of where to look for it.

He frowned slightly when he saw that the area on the shore of the smaller lake showed nothing at all. The map on the key had indicated there was something there, yet here, nothing. "Maybe they don't know about it," he mumbled to himself.

"What?" asked Riyan.

He pointed to the two lakes and said, "That's the area inscribed on the back of the key."

Riyan and Chad both turned their gaze to see it. Riyan was about to pull forth the piece of the key to compare it when Bart stopped him. "Not here," he advised. "I know that is it." He committed the general area of the two lakes to memory, then indicated they should start to leave.

"What are you doing in here?" a voice asked.

Turning around in surprise, they saw a middle aged man in uniform. He was staring at them with a rather unpleasant expression.

“We, uh...” began Riyan then grew silent under the man’s stern gaze.

“We were trying to find the room where we were told we could acquire passes for our caravan to travel to the Marketplace in the morning,” Bart explained.

“Yeah,” added Chad. “We sort of lost our way.”

The soldier studied them for a moment then said, “Come this way.” He turned around and headed to a corridor that left the room behind him. After two steps he paused and glanced back to make sure they were following. When he saw that they were, he continued.

Riyan glanced to Bart and could see the worry he was feeling mirrored in his friend’s face. They followed the soldier as he worked his way through the keep. Along the way they passed several other soldiers moving about on various errands. The soldier finally came to a stop before a door.

“You can get your passes in here,” he told them. “Don’t let me catch you three wandering around again.”

“You won’t,” Bart assured him. “We promise.”

Giving them a nod, the soldier left them standing before the door as he returned back the way they came.

“Let’s get out of here,” urged Chad.

“Not yet,” replied Bart. Taking the handle of the door, he opened it and walked in. They found it to be a rather small room with but a single desk covered in neat stacks of paper sitting before the door. Behind the desk was a soldier who had to be Sergeant Akers.

He looked up when the door opened and asked, “Can I help you?”

Bart nodded and stepped up to the desk. Riyan and Chad followed him in. “We need to procure passes for the wagons our father will be bringing up tomorrow,” Bart explained.

“Sorry son,” Sergeant Akers said as he leaned back in his chair. “We don’t give out passes until we’ve had a chance to look the goods over. The guards out front should have explained that to you.”

“I just thought we could expedite things so father could head on up as soon as he arrived,” Bart stated.

“I hate to disappoint you, but the procedure is for your father, who is the master of the caravan, to apply for the passes,” the sergeant explained. “When he arrives you tell him to come see me.”

Bart put a despondent look on his face and said, “Very well. Sorry to have bothered you.”

“That’s okay,” Sergeant Akers assured him.

Bart turned around and ushered Riyan and Chad out ahead of him. Once out in the corridor, they turned and headed for the exit. They remained silent until they passed the two guards that were standing watch, returned to the inn, and were back in their room.

“Now, why did we have to go talk to that sergeant?” asked Chad. “And how did you know his name in the first place?”

Bart grinned. “When I went over to talk to those merchants before we went in, that’s when I found out his name. Once I found out why they were inside the keep, I wormed out the name of the man we were to see. It’s always easier to enter a place you aren’t supposed to be if it appears

you know what's going on and have been there before. Since I was convincing enough to make the guard out front believe that we were here last year, he was more inclined to allow us entry."

"Weren't you taking a risk?" Riyan asked.

Bart shrugged. "I suppose so, but the worst he would have done was denied us entry. We would have been no worse off than we were before."

"Okay, but what about going in and talking to Sergeant Akers?" Chad asked. "That seemed a total waste of time."

Bart grinned and shook his head. "No it wasn't." He put his left hand in the right sleeve of his tunic and pulled out several pieces of paper. He held them up and grinned all the wider.

"You stole those?" asked Riyan.

"Of course," he replied. "How else were we to get passes?" He spread them out on the bed and they went through them. They were all passes allowing the bearer to proceed through the pass to the Marketplace. "Tomorrow morning we tag along with that caravan out there and we're on our way."

Riyan took out the key and laid it on the bed next to the passes. Pointing to a spot just south of the mountains, he said, "We're here." Then he moved his finger to the other side of the mountains. "We cross here and then we're at the Marketplace. From there we skirt around this lake," his finger moved around the southern edge of the lower lake to the other side. "Then we follow the river up to this other lake where hopefully we'll find something that will lead us to the rest of the key."

"I hope you both realize that once we leave the protection of the Marketplace that we'll be in goblin territory," Bart explained to them. "From what I've heard, they don't take kindly to trespassers."

Riyan nodded, "I know. We'll simply have to make sure we avoid them."

Bart laughed. "Easier said than done," he stated.

"I say the risks are worth the rewards," Riyan insisted.

"The risks being our continued existence," Chad clarified.

Riyan glanced from one to the other, "But what existence would we be losing? I already lost the one I love. Bart, you have a death mark on you. And Chad? Do you really want to spend the rest of your life as a miller?"

Chad shook his head, "Hardly."

"Alright," said Riyan with finality. "Either we succeed or we die trying."

"You say that so easily now," Bart said. "How are you going to feel when you are being skinned alive for some goblin's roasting spit?"

Riyan didn't reply. This was the only way he could see for him to get Freya back. He had to take the risk!

Later that evening when Riyan and Chad were getting ready to fall asleep, Bart offered for them to share the bed. He said he didn't mind the floor. They happily agreed and were soon lying side by side on the cramped little bed. Riyan could understand why Bart preferred the floor every time Chad's elbow nailed him in the side. Despite the tight sleeping arrangements, Riyan was soon asleep.

At some point in the night he awoke and saw Bart sitting at the table. A candle burned next to him as he worked on something. Sleepily, Riyan started to ask, "What..."

Bart turned his head toward him and said, "Go back to sleep Riyan."

Laying his head back on the pillow, Riyan quickly fell back to sleep and slept through the rest of the night.

In the morning when Riyan awoke, he saw Bart lying on the floor in front of the door with his head propped on top of his pack. In the bed next to him, Chad was stirring and he elbowed him to get him up. "It's morning Bart," Riyan hollered over to him.

Bart came awake quickly and asked, "It is?" Looking to the window he saw the light coming through. "Damn!" he exclaimed. Coming to his feet, he grabbed his boots and started to pull them on. "We've got to hurry."

"Why?" Riyan asked as he got out of bed.

"After you two fell asleep, I went and talked with a couple of the guards who are escorting that caravan," he explained. "They said they were pulling out early this morning. If we want to go with them we need to hurry." He again looked to the light coming through the window as he pulled his last boot on. Getting to his feet, he said, "I'll get the horses ready. You two get a move on." With that he opened the door and left.

Riyan elbowed a still sleeping Chad a little harder this time and said, "Wake up!"

Chad mumbled something and promptly fell back to sleep.

Exasperated with his friend, Riyan placed both hands on Chad's back and shoved him off the bed.

Arms and legs went in all directions as he tumbled over the edge and hit the floor. "We don't have much time," Riyan said as Chad sat up on the floor. He tried to hide the smile that was threatening to break out. "The caravan is pulling out early."

"Oh," he said and quickly pulled his boots on and grabbed his pack.

By the time they were ready and left the room, Bart had two of the horses saddled and was almost done with the third. Riyan saw the wagons that had been over to the side of the courtyard were already trundling their way towards the gate leading through the outer wall.

"About time you two showed up," Bart said. When Riyan and Chad reached the horses, he cinched the last buckle then turned to them. "Here," he said and handed each of them one of the passes he appropriated the night before.

"What are we to do with these?" Riyan asked. "They're not even signed."

"They are now," replied Bart. "Quit talking and let's get moving."

Riyan took a moment to open the paper. Sure enough, there at the bottom was a signature. He was about ready to ask Bart how this came to be when the memory of Bart working at the table last night returned to him. It was one thing to try to sneak through the pass, quite another to bear forged documents. He's not entirely sure but the penalty for that would have to be severe.

Getting into the saddle, he and Chad followed Bart as he rode towards the wagons. He made sure that the wagons were on the other side before catching up with them. One of the guards

riding at the rear saw them coming and grinned. "Wasn't sure if you were going to make it Bart," the guard said.

Nodding to Riyan and Chad, Bart replied, "They overslept."

The guard laughed.

Another member of the caravan on a horse saw the guard talking with them and slowed down until they had caught up with him. "What's this?" the man asked.

"Just a fellow I shared a fire with last night," the guard replied. "He and his friends are trying to catch up with a caravan that has already reached the Marketplace."

"Hmmm," the man said. "Do you boys have passes?"

Bart held his up as did Riyan and Chad.

The man didn't look entirely pleased with the situation but didn't say anything. Nudging his horse in the sides, he quickened his pace until he returned to where he was before moving back.

"Grumpy," Bart commented to the guard.

"You could say that," he replied with a grin. "I think he's more upset that another caravan beat him there than that you are riding with us. Might be best if you and your friends were to drop back a bit."

"Sure," Bart said. He and the others slowed down until about thirty feet separated them and the rear guard of the caravan.

Up ahead, the canyon that Crag Keep sat in grew narrower. The river coursed its way through the opening over thunderous cataracts as it left the mountains. At the narrowest point, the road went through an area barely wide enough for two wagons side by side.

It was at that point a score of soldiers were stationed to be sure travelers heading across the pass had all the necessary documents. When the caravan drew near, one of the soldiers moved forward and began checking the passes of the guards and the drivers of the wagons. The master of the caravan remained with the soldier until he was satisfied that all was in order and waved the caravan on through.

Riyan's heart beat rapidly when it was their turn to approach the soldier. "Good morning young sirs," the soldier greeted them. "Need to see your passes before you can proceed."

"No problem," Bart said then handed his over to the guard. Riyan and Chad did the same.

Riyan was poised to flee as soon as the soldier discovered the passes were forgeries. But to his amazement, the soldier handed the passes back and waved them on through. He almost couldn't believe they had pulled it off.

Once they were past and had put some distance between them and the soldiers, Riyan asked Bart how he had managed it.

Bart grinned. "Quite easy actually. Last night while you and Chad were sleeping, I left the room and went over to where a couple of the caravan guards were relaxing around a fire. One thing led to another and I was invited to share it with them. It was quite easy to lift their passes off of them and take them back to our room. Then I studied the signature and copied it onto ours. After that it was a simple matter to return the passes to their owners."

"Something your father taught you?" Chad asked.

"Actually no," he replied and offered no further explanation.

Chapter Sixteen

The trip through the pass took the better part of the day. They reached the western side an hour or so before sundown. From the pass to the Marketplace, humans were supposedly safe from any goblin attacks. The Marketplace was considered neutral ground as both sides desired the continued trade and prosperity the place brought.

As they descended out of the narrowness of the pass, they saw how the hills at the mountain's base were thickly forested. The sparkle of water could be seen far off beyond the hills a little to the left of the pass. It had to be the larger of the two lakes depicted on the back of the key.

After leaving the pass, the road meandered its way through the lower hills until it finally reached a point where the Marketplace became visible. It was a large area with several permanent structures wherein the trading between the two races could take place. Over a dozen wagons sat in a caravansary on the side closest to the pass, testament that other traders were already there. That wasn't too surprising seeing as how trading goes on here shortly after the snows melt in the spring until the first snows come again in the fall.

The Marketplace wasn't enclosed by any sort of wall or fence. Rather, there were totems spaced every twenty feet or so on the goblin side. They seemed to be warning the humans that their presence was not welcomed, nor tolerated.

Riyan wondered how they were going to pass through the line of totems and enter the forest without anyone the wiser. All their lives they have heard of the ferocity of the goblins.

A contingent of Byrdlon soldiers were present down below. Also moving around the Marketplace area were shorter individuals who walked with a loping gait. "Goblins," Bart told the other two.

Riyan's eyes widened when he realized he was seeing goblins for the first time. They seemed to be quite a bit shorter than the average human, being around three to four feet in height. The goblins were wearing clothing similar to what you might find the average person on the streets of Wardean wearing. It surprised Riyan at first, but then he realized that he really didn't know what to expect in regards to them.

The trail continued its winding way through the hills, all the way to the main square of the Market place. The main square was a large area which the buildings bordered on. It has been kept relatively clear as the bulk of the trading goes on in the buildings.

Bart said his goodbyes to the guard with whom he befriended when the wagons headed over to the caravansary. "Maybe we should go there as well and mingle," suggested Chad.

"Probably wouldn't be a bad idea," said Bart. Several of the soldiers were giving them a curious look.

Making their way over, they were soon among the wagons of various merchants who have come to trade. It appeared that whatever trading had been going on has come to a halt now that it was getting close to sunset. The merchants and their guards were returning from the buildings with a line of porters following behind carrying goods.

Riyan found them a location at the edge of the caravansary where they could set up camp. It was near enough to a caravan so they hopefully would be considered a part of it, while at the same time not so close as to cause the people of the caravan concern.

While they set up camp and got a fire going, they looked toward the buildings in an attempt to see a goblin. One of their neighbors noticed what they were doing and told them that at night, the goblins returned to the forest. In the morning they would return at sunrise.

"Would be interesting to get a closer look at one," commented Riyan.

Keeping his voice low so as not to be overheard, Bart replied, "In a little bit you may get your wish."

"How are we to get out of here?" Chad asked in a hushed whisper.

"Later tonight when everyone else is asleep," Bart explained, "we'll slip out."

"Won't the soldiers stop us?" Riyan asked.

"Maybe," he admitted. "But I doubt it. I think they're more here to keep order within the Marketplace than to keep fools from passing through the totems."

At that Riyan glanced over towards where one of the totems stood not ten feet away. The menacing visages carved into the wood seemed to warn of dire consequences should their warning not be heeded.

As night settled in, they prepared for a quick nap before they took off. They left their horses saddled with most of their equipment still secured behind the saddle. They got questioning glances from those around them about that but no one said anything.

They took turns at watch while the others slept. Riyan took the first one, then Chad. It was during Bart's turn that the camp grew quiet as even the latest night owl finally went to sleep. There was at least one guard in every caravan that remained awake to keep watch. Even the caravan beside them had a guard.

When Bart felt that the time was right to make their break, he woke the others. The guard on watch in the caravan next to theirs took note of their preparations to leave. But apparently three fools who planned to pass through the ring of totems weren't enough for him to bother with. When they headed out, he grinned as he nodded and gave them a wave. Riyan waved back.

Bart took the lead as they rode from the Marketplace and passed through the ring of totems. Riyan felt a tremor of foreboding as he passed between them, almost as if the totem's faces were actually staring at him. The feeling of foreboding stayed with him until the Marketplace had disappeared in the trees behind them.

To the west was the closest lake, the larger of the two. From there they would have to follow the river northward until they reached the smaller lake. If the markings on the key were any indication, what they were looking for lies on the western shore of the smaller lake. All they had to do now was to pass through goblin territory without being discovered.

The night was eerily quiet. Nocturnal creatures could be heard throughout the forest as the three companions slowly made their way through the dark forest. Shadows surrounded them as the light from the moon above barely managed to filter its way through the forest's canopy. They dared not travel very fast else they would risk giving away their presence to any goblins that may be in the area.

Bart tried to keep them on a fairly westerly heading, but the forest wasn't like the city. His bump of direction that was infallible within the city, didn't feel quite as reliable out here in the forest now that the sun had gone down.

They rode in single file along what Riyan soon realized was a game trail. Bart was in the lead while Chad brought up the rear. Every once in a while one of their horses would snort or make some other noise and Riyan's heart would almost freeze in panic as his mind imagined goblins rushing out of the forest to attack. But no such attack developed.

It was about a half hour since they left the Marketplace when the smell of wood smoke began to be noticed. Shortly after that, the sound of guttural speech came from down the game trail ahead of them.

Bart signaled for them to stop and had the others come in close. "You two stay here," he said. "I'm going to go ahead on foot and see what's going on."

"Be careful," warned Chad.

"Don't worry," he assured them. "Just stay here and be quiet." Dismounting, he handed his horse's reins to Riyan then disappeared down the trail towards the voices.

Riyan glanced nervously to Chad. "Goblins," he whispered. Chad nodded in reply.

As he left the other two behind, Bart was feeling a bit nervous. The tales of goblins he had heard all his life painted them as a blood thirsty savage race that would sooner eat you than look at you. Any number of the sagas dealing with these creatures always had despicable acts of mayhem and carnage attributed to them. So now that he was approaching what could very well be a war party, he felt decidedly nervous.

Moving forward, he stepped as carefully as he could so as not to make any sound that would give away his presence. The sound of the goblin's voices grew louder as he edged closer. Finally, a light appeared through the trees ahead, just a little to the right of the game trail.

He continued working his way closer until he could see a small encampment of goblins set off the game trail a ways. When he was close enough to make them out, he was shocked to discover that they weren't wearing any clothes. A few of them sported jewelry of one kind or another, but as far as clothes went, nothing. Bart just shook his head.

The goblins were sitting around a roaring fire near the center of the encampment. There were a couple buildings nearby, the architecture was slightly different than what he was used to. They were long and squat with a chimney rising high at either end. Having grown up on the streets of Wardean, he could tell that they were very well crafted.

Turning his attention back to the goblins themselves, he didn't think they were too concerned about the possibility of humans being in the area. They looked rather relaxed as they spoke to one another in their guttural language.

He crouched there among the trees and watched them for several minutes before coming to the conclusion that they were no immediate threat to him and the others. He started to back away. Once he felt he was far enough away not to be heard, he turned and quickened his pace back to Riyan and Chad.

"There's a group of them ahead," he told them upon his return. "Maybe fifteen or twenty." He then briefly described the buildings he saw and the fact that they were naked.

"Naked?" asked Riyan in disbelief.

Bart nodded. "As the day they were born," he affirmed.

Chad shook his head. "You would think they would get cold at night," he said.

"Perhaps," shrugged Bart. "But I think we need to give them a wide berth. Once on the far side of their encampment we should start looking for some place to hole up before dawn."

"Yeah," agreed Riyan. "We don't want to be moving around during the day."

Bart nodded then took the lead as he led them from the game trail and entered the forest. He took it slow and steady, always working to maintain their distance from the goblin encampment.

Some time after they circumvented the encampment and left the voices behind, they came across a small stream flowing in the general direction Bart figured the lake to be. Realizing this would lead them to where they wanted to go, he altered their course to follow the stream.

Despite keeping a constant lookout for a place to hole up, all they encountered as they made their way through the forest were trees. No suitable place of concealment presented itself. Bart finally came to the conclusion that when the sky began to lighten, they would most likely be forced to find a dense copse of trees where they could hide throughout the day.

They followed the stream for another hour before it emptied into the lake. The twinkling of the stars above reflected off the surface of the water, giving it a dazzling appearance. Across the lake on the opposite shore, they saw the unmistakable sight of a goblin settlement. Not a large one to be sure, but a settlement nonetheless.

Before they arrived and saw the goblin settlement, they had thought to go around the southern shore and then follow it north. For the area indicated on the back of the key was on the western side. But if they did they would risk encountering that settlement and the goblins inhabiting it. At least a dozen lights could be seen coming from the buildings over there.

"Perhaps we should head north from here," suggested Chad.

While standing at the water's edge, they gave the route around the eastern shore of the lake a careful look. Unlike the western shore, it was dark and looked deserted. "Around to the east it is," announced Bart.

As they progressed around the lake, Riyan kept glancing to the lights on the distant shore. Almost as if he expected pursuit at any minute. But nothing developed and the longer they followed the shore, the fainter the lights became until they could no longer be seen. The sight of the settlement had seemed strange to him. After all, weren't goblins little better than beasts? Wild and dangerous who's only thought was that of killing any human they came in contact

with? A shudder ran through him at the thought that so many could even now be in close proximity to them.

A thought flashed through his mind and made him shudder. If they were caught, it would be the end of them. The goblins would use their claws and teeth to rip their flesh, and they would use their skulls to drink their blood in dark rituals.

He tried to banish such unpleasant thoughts by concentrating on Freya. And how her father was going to welcome him home with open arms once they found the parts of the key and opened the King's Horde. Oh what a glorious day that would be.

"We better find somewhere to hole up soon," Bart suddenly announced.

Snapped out of his reverie, Riyan realized the sky to the east was beginning to lighten behind the peaks of the mountains. He definitely didn't want to risk being out here in the open once it became light. The bloodthirsty goblins would definitely find them and attack and... Enough! You've got to stop thinking about such things! he admonished himself. Turning his attention to the forest, he tried to locate someplace where they could hole up until night returned.

The stars began to fade with the coming of dawn, and still they hadn't located a very good spot to hide in. When it grew too light and they no longer dared to ride so exposed along the shoreline, Bart led them into the forest.

Still no spot presented itself that was very suitable for hiding throughout the day. Finally they decided on an area fifty feet or so from the shore where the trees were slightly thicker than the rest of the forest. It wasn't great, if a goblin should pass by even as close as the shoreline, they would be seen.

"Keep the saddles on," advised Riyan. "We may need a quick getaway."

"If we're discovered," said Bart, "it's unlikely we could ride fast enough to get away."

"Let me have my illusions," Riyan said as he turned to him. "Please."

Bart could see the worry in his eyes and nodded. "As you will. I'll take the first watch while you two get some sleep."

They both agreed to that and after a quick meal of cold rations that were beginning to grow stale, they laid down and tried to go to sleep. Despite the fatigue that he was feeling, it took Riyan some time before sleep came. When it did, it brought nightmares of being chased through the forest by demonic, fire breathing goblins with red eyes the color of hellish flames. He was glad when Chad finally awakened him for his turn at watch.

Throughout the day's watch, the only anxious moment any of them had was during the middle watch. Chad was pacing around the forest doing his best to keep awake when the sound of many goblins moving through the trees came to him. Fearful that they might be heading in their direction, he snuck closer only to find that the group of goblins was gathering branches and dead wood. For what purpose Chad was unable to find out. He was simply happy the goblins weren't approaching any further to their camp. After ten minutes of foraging for wood, they departed back to the east.

Before the sun hit the horizon at the end of the day, they were awake. They talked in hushed voices about what they should do once night set in. They decided to continue following the shoreline northward until they came across the river that flowed from the second lake further to

the north. Once they found the mouth of the river, they would have to discover a way of fording to the other side. For the area they wished to find lay on the western side.

"I'm surprised we've made it this far," commented Chad. "This area doesn't seem too densely settled by them."

"Thank goodness," Riyan said nervously. Aside from that one settlement on the southwestern shore of the lake, the forest has been fairly empty of them.

"You're not worried are you?" asked Bart with a grin. When Riyan only glared at him he added. "This is the meat and bones of adventuring."

"I'm having the time of my life," replied Riyan rather unconvincingly. To be honest with himself, he had to admit that this wasn't exactly the glorious expedition that he had anticipated. He also hadn't planned on being scared most of the time either. But the last thing he was going to do was admit that to Bart and Chad.

"Me too," agreed Chad. Only from the way he said it, it sounded like he genuinely meant it.

Once night had settled in enough for the stars to begin filling the sky, they mounted their horses and returned to the shore of the lake. The trees weren't nearly as dense there so it made for an easier ride.

They followed the edge of the lake for several hours almost due north before they reached the point where the shoreline turned back to the west. Another hour of riding brought them to a large river flowing into the lake.

"Think this is the one?" Chad asked.

Bart considered the size of the river and nodded. "It has to be," he stated. "Couldn't imagine another river of comparable size in the area."

"Can we ford here?" Riyan asked. Then he took a better look at the river and saw that it was over a hundred feet wide and moving quickly.

"Can't tell just how deep it is here in the dark," Bart said. "It might be a good idea to follow it north a ways before we attempt to cross."

"Would be shallower," agreed Chad.

So with Bart once more in the lead, they turned northwards and followed the river as it wound its way through the forest. Along the way they came across several smaller tributaries that flowed into it. By the time Riyan figured midnight had come and gone, the river had narrowed to only about fifty feet. It was still a bit too wide to attempt to cross.

When the sky began to lighten several hours later, the river was still around fifty feet across though it didn't look nearly so deep as it had earlier. "Let's find a place to hole up until nightfall again," suggested Bart. They kept a lookout for a thickening of the trees and a short time later came across one that was slightly better than the previous night's.

After they entered the thicket and were settled in, they left their horses in the thicket and worked their way back to the river. They wanted to see if this might be a good place to ford come nightfall.

They stayed within the treeline until the sun's rays were seen hitting the tops of the trees. "Alright," Riyan said. "Let's find a place to cross." Once they made sure that the area was clear of goblins, they moved to the bank of the river.

First thing they did was to fill their water bottles. After that they started moving upriver and searched for a place to ford. They needed to find an area where the river widened. That would indicate the water's level would be lower and thus make the crossing easier.

A half hour after they began hunting for a place to ford they came to a bend in the river. At that point, the river widened to a width of about a hundred feet again. They knew this was the place to ford, not only because the water would be shallower, but because of a road that emerged from the trees on their side of the river and went to the bank of the river. On the other side they saw where it resumed before reentering the forest.

"A road?" asked Riyan.

"Looks like it," said Bart.

"Why would goblins have a road?" he asked.

Bart turned and looked at him like he was an idiot. "Probably for the same reason we have them," he explained. "To get from one place to another."

"But, they're goblins," stated Riyan.

"So?" asked Chad. "They need them too."

Riyan couldn't argue with that logic. It was just so unexpected to discover them to have roads, and well maintained ones if the one they saw in front of them was any indication.

"If there's a road then that means they could be around," Bart said. "We better get back to the horses."

Turning around, they returned to where they left their horses. There they had a meal of rations and settled in until dark. Watches were in the same order as the previous night with Bart taking the first one.

Throughout the day nothing much happened. They slept, took turns at watch, and when the sun began its descent to the horizon, made ready to leave.

When the stars were out and the forest was once again dark, they left the copse of trees and followed the river back to where the road forded the water. As they drew near the road, they slowed to a crawl. Due to their uneasiness about being in this area, every sound of the forest seemed to herald the approach of goblins upon the road. When at last they came to the bend in the river and saw the road in the moonlight, Bart brought them to a sudden halt.

"Wait here," he said as he dismounted.

Chad was about to ask him why they stopped when he waved for him to be quiet.

Moving forward, Bart edged closer to the road. He had heard something and wanted to make sure it was safe before they rode to the ford. Before he made it to the road, he heard the sound of rapidly approaching horses coming down the road on his side of the river. He froze for just a moment before dodging behind the trunk of a nearby tree.

He peered around the trunk and saw half a dozen goblin riders appear riding small ponies. They slowed their ponies to a walk as they came to the bank of the river. While they crossed, Bart got a good look at them. Each had on what looked like leather armor with a shortsword at their hips. Across the back of each rider were small curved bows and a quiver of arrows.

Bart stood there in the shadows as the riders forded the river. It wasn't until they had crossed and disappeared into the forest on the other side did he turn around and head back. When he reached where the other two were waiting for him, he told them of the riders.

"Ponies?" asked Chad. When Bart nodded, he added, "At least our horses would be able to outrun them in an emergency."

"That's true," agreed Riyan.

"Come on," Bart said as he swung up into the saddle. "We better get across before more show up." Leading them forward, he brought them to the edge of the road. There they paused for just a second to listen for any other approaching riders. When they failed to hear any, Bart turned toward the river and headed for the ford.

They took the crossing slowly. The water didn't reach much more than a foot up their horses' legs and wasn't flowing all that rapidly. It was an easy crossing and once on the other side they kept to the road. It was risky to keep to the road, but they felt that if they stayed alert for approaching riders, they would be able to leave the road in time. Besides, they could make much better time on the road than if they slugged their way through the forest.

The road entered the forest a short ways before turning to the right and began following the river northward. They continued to follow the road, all the while very aware that a band of six armed goblins had passed this way just before them. An hour later the road began to turn more westward, leaving the river behind.

They followed the road to the west for a short distance until they were certain it wasn't going to return to its northerly trek. "We're going to have to leave the road if we wish to continue following the river," Bart announced.

"Nothing for it I guess," Chad said.

As they began to turn and head into the forest, the night erupted in a bright flash of light to the west, followed a split second later by the sound of an explosion.

"What was that?" exclaimed Chad as they looked to the west where a glow blossomed into the night.

"I don't know," replied Riyan. "But I think we best get out of here."

"I'm with you there," agreed Bart.

They kicked their horses into motion just as a cry ripped through the night. "That wasn't a goblin," Riyan said as he came to a stop.

"No," replied Chad, "it wasn't. Sounded more like an old man's."

"He may need our help," Riyan said. All thought of danger to himself vanished when he realized another needed help.

"We don't know that he's even still alive," argued Bart. Just then, a crackling sound followed by another explosion broke the stillness of the forest.

Riyan turned his horse and bolted down the road towards the glow in the distance.

"You're going to get us all killed!" hollered Bart after him. Then to Chad he said, "Every goblin within miles will know something's going on."

"Can't let him face this alone," Chad said as he kicked his horse into motion and raced after his friend.

Bart mumbled a few choice words under his breath before he turned his horse and quickly followed after.

Riyan raced down the road as the glow progressively grew larger. When he came close enough, he discovered the glow to be a fire. The trees were beginning to catch and the fire looked like it was about ready to grow out of control.

Zzzt! Zzzt!

From out of the forest near the growing fires, the sound came to him. He looked to see what it was, but the smoke was obscuring the area quite badly. He turned off the road and moved into the forest as he began working his way around the fire to whoever was there. Behind him, he heard Chad and Bart arrive and begin to follow him into the trees.

Zzzt! Zzzt!

The sound came again, this time he could hear a goblin cry out in pain.

Moving quickly, he finally worked his way around the spreading flames and could see the combatants. A dozen goblins were ringed around two figures as they loosed arrows from their bows.

A circular glow surrounded the two men who were being attacked by the goblins. One was an older man, the other was a youth about Riyan's age. The glow surrounding the two men deflected the goblin's arrows. The older man gripped a gnarled staff in one hand and was dressed in a robe that glowed with sigils of power. Obviously this man was a magic user.

Zzzt! Zzzt!

The man sent two red bolts of energy flying from the hand not gripping the staff into the body of one of the goblins. The goblin was thrown backwards off his feet and hit the ground hard. He didn't get back up.

Riyan assumed the younger man must be the magic user's apprentice. He saw him wave his arms and suddenly two of the goblins were encased in a greenish substance that allowed them no freedom of movement. At the same time, a yellowish light surrounded three more of the attacking goblins. The older magic user had his staff pointed at them and the tip glowed yellow for a brief moment before returning to normal. Riyan watched as the three goblins became immobile and toppled to the side.

Realizing the two humans down below needed his help, he quickly dismounted and pulled his sling from off his belt. Bending over, he picked up four stones just as Chad and Bart came to a stop behind him. The heat from the fire was intensifying as the flames began engulfing more of the forest.

"We can't stay here," Bart urged him. "The fire is growing out of control."

"Then leave," replied Riyan. Turning to the battle, he started working his way closer as he put the first stone in the sling's cup. There was no way he could turn his back on fellow men. The horrors of being captured by goblins that have plagued him since leaving the pass were no fate he could leave anyone to face.

Through the trees and smoke, he kept his eyes on the goblins as he moved into a better position. A crack of a branch beside him announced Chad had joined him. He had his sword out and his face was grim as he nodded to Riyan. "Let's go do this," he said.

He finally reached a point where his stones would be less inhibited by the limbs and trees. Bringing his sling up to a quick spin, he launched the missile towards the nearest goblin. The stone flew true and struck the goblin in the side of the head. The blow knocked it off its feet and to the ground. "Good shot," he heard Chad mumble next to him.

Then another goblin suddenly put his hand to his neck and pulled one of Bart's darts from out of its flesh. The creature glanced around before suddenly dropping to the ground.

The other goblins soon realized the magic users had help and scattered. Those that were trapped by the green goo and lying frozen on the ground were left behind.

"Look out!"

Riyan heard Bart yell as he rushed into the clearing. He was waving his arms and shouting a warning for the magic user and his apprentice to get out of there. Then a tree engulfed in flame that was leaning heavily towards the magic users suddenly gave out with a thunderous crack. Its trunk split and the upper branches fell towards the magic users.

The older of the two saw the fiery hell coming towards them. Moving quickly, he grabbed his apprentice and threw him out of the circular glow surrounding them. The apprentice hit the ground and scrambled away as the tree landed on top of the protective glowing shield in a shower of sparks.

"Master!" the apprentice yelled as he came to a stop and saw his master trapped beneath the burning tree.

Upon striking the circular glow, the trunk of the tree broke in two at the point of impact. The fiery brands the impact sent flying began smoldering in the dry brush of the forest's floor.

"Bart!" yelled Chad as two of the goblins returned with their short swords drawn.

Bart turned and saw them appear at the edge of the clearing as they charged forward with bestial cries. He threw one of his darts and struck a charging goblin in the chest. The goblin took two more strides before he fell to the ground. The other goblin continued its attack.

Drawing his knife, Bart braced for the attack knowing his end was near. Then all of a sudden, Chad bowled into the goblin and knocked him to the ground. They both got back to their feet quickly and faced off against each other.

Bart opened the rolled leather that contained his darts and started to pull out another.

Clang!

The goblin struck out at Chad who brought his sword up to block the blow. When the goblin's short sword struck Chad's, the force of the blow knocked the sword out of his hand. As he watched his sword go flying, Chad tried to backpedal quickly to avoid the goblin's next strike.

The goblin moved incredibly fast as it pressed forward to attack. Chad watched as it came and raised its sword for the blow that most assuredly would end his life. Then all of a sudden, the side of the goblin's head exploded outward from the impact of another of Riyan's stones.

The apprentice had moved as close to his master as he could before the heat from the burning tree grew too great. "Master!" he cried out.

Riyan moved closer to the apprentice and could see his master clearly inside the glowing protective circle for the first time. His master had an arrow through the right leg and another protruded from his side just above his left hip.

"It's not going to hold," the master said weakly to his apprentice. From where Riyan was standing he could tell the man was in a tremendous amount of pain. Blood stained his robes and more kept flowing. The man obviously wasn't going to last much longer.

Reaching into his tunic, the apprentice produced a vial and held it towards his master. The master saw it and shook his head. "The shield which keeps the burning tree from me also prevents the vial from passing through," he said sadly. "Go on." Then for the first time he saw Riyan standing there. "See that he gets out of here," he said as he locked eyes with Riyan.

Not knowing what else to do, he nodded.

"Here," the master said to his apprentice. He tossed his staff through the glowing circle towards him. "Take Wyzkoth," he said. Then he glanced at the glowing circle around him, "Won't last much longer. Remember what I taught you."

"Yes, master," replied the lad, "I will."

"Riyan!" Bart hollered, "We can't stay here." He pointed over to where the goblins had been frozen.

Riyan glanced over to them and saw that they were beginning to stir. He went to the apprentice and placed his hand on his shoulder. "We must leave."

The apprentice turned to Riyan with his master's staff in his hand. "I can't leave him," he said in anguish.

"You don't have a choice," replied Riyan.

Then the shield surrounding his master gave out and the burning tree crashed down upon him. They heard him shriek as the fire touched him then there was nothing but the crackle and roar of the flames.

Bart and Chad joined them. "Come on," Bart said. Chad was putting his recovered sword into his scabbard.

The apprentice nodded. Rushing over to the side of the clearing, he grabbed two packs that were lying in the midst of what must have been their camp before the goblins showed up. Then he joined the others as they raced from the growing inferno.

"They'll be after us sure as anything now," stated Bart.

"With any luck they won't know in which direction we fled," offered Chad.

"Let's hope," said Bart.

Back where they left the horses they found that they were no longer there. A quick check in the direction away from the fire turned them up. They mounted quickly and Riyan offered the apprentice to ride with him. Once he was up behind him, they rode quickly away from the raging fire. Pushing onward, they made the best time as they could to put as much distance between themselves and scene of the battle as quickly as possible. Behind him, Riyan could hear the apprentice sobbing at the loss of his master.

Chapter Seventeen

They rode in silence as each listened for the pursuit that they feared would materialize at any moment. What words that did pass between them were hushed and few. Once they had ridden for an hour and still no pursuit presented itself, they began to relax.

All attempts by Riyan to engage their new companion in conversation was met by silence. The apprentice didn't seem really there, he was drawn inward dwelling upon his own misery. Another hour of riding had the fire far behind them. Its glow could still be seen where it raged in the night. Riyan figured the fire wouldn't come their way seeing as how a gentle breeze was blowing from the north. If it had been blowing in from the south he would have been more worried.

"I can't believe he's gone," the apprentice suddenly said.

So shocked by the declaration was Riyan that at first he wasn't exactly sure what was said. He remained quiet as the apprentice continued to speak.

"We came here to gather components for a spell he was working on," he said quietly. "He lost his life for nothing." Bitterness, anger, and sadness could all be heard in his voice.

"What was his name?" asked Riyan. He wanted to keep the apprentice talking so he wouldn't withdraw back into himself again.

"Allar," he replied.

"I'm sure Allar felt the need was worth the risk," he assured him.

"He did," the apprentice stated. Then he quieted for a moment as the sobbing returned for a short time. "He said they had to be harvested this time of year. That to do so at any other would negate their usefulness."

Riyan waited for him to continue but he had lapsed into silence once more. When it didn't look as if the apprentice was going to continue the conversation, he asked, "What's your name?"

"Kevik," he replied. "That's not my true name. Magic users aren't supposed to go by their true name. Kevik was the name my master gave me when he took me on as his apprentice."

"Very well then Kevik," Riyan said. "It might be a good idea for you to travel with us until we can return you back across the mountains."

"Thank you," he replied. "I would appreciate that."

They rode in silence for some time after that. Kevik seemed to have his emotions under control for there were no more outbursts of sobbing. As they rode, the moon overhead continued its arc across the star filled sky.

Then in the early part of the morning, from out of the trees before them, three goblin warriors suddenly appeared. Both sides were startled to see the other. Kevik cried out a word unintelligible to the others and green goo suddenly materialized around the goblins.

“Ride!” yelled Bart and he kicked his horse into motion. As he raced past the goblins, his horse accidentally brushed up against one of the goo coated goblins. His horse stumbled when the goo covering the goblin attached itself to the upper part of his horse’s rear left leg. Bart looked back when and saw where the goblin was being dragged along with every step his horse took. The goo was acting like glue as it held the goblin to his horse’s leg.

Turning in his saddle, Bart kicked out with his foot in an attempt to dislodge the goblin but only managed to get his foot stuck in the green mess. The goblin was screaming as it struggled to free itself but the goo was too strong, making its attempts futile.

“Riyan!” Bart yelled to his friend who had already disappeared into the trees ahead. “Chad!” He tried to get his horse to move forward, but the added weight in the position it was, made it all but impossible for it to keep going.

Suddenly Riyan and Chad reappeared out of the trees and immediately saw his predicament. “Kevik!” Riyan yelled to the apprentice in the saddle behind him. “What can we do?”

Kevik looked around him and saw the goblin, the horse, and Bart all stuck together. “I can cast a counter spell to dispel it,” he explained. “But it will remove it from the others as well.”

“Do it!” shouted Bart.

Kevik nodded and with a wave of his hand and two words of magic, the green goo vanished. Immediately the goblin fell free and Bart righted himself back in the saddle.

“Let’s go!” Riyan yelled. From the direction they had just fled, he heard the other goblins that were just freed from the goo shouting as they crashed through the brush in pursuit.

They turned their horses away from the sound of the approaching goblins and bolted through the trees. Behind them the goblins shouted in their guttural tongue as they gave chase. Then from just ahead and to the right, other goblins were heard as they begun moving to intercept. In the darkness of the forest they were unable to see exactly where the goblins were, but they couldn’t be very far away.

“Find us a way out of this!” Chad yelled to Bart who was now back in the lead.

“What do you think I’ve been trying to do!” came the reply.

The goblins chased them for what seemed like an hour. Though they never saw their pursuers, they could tell by the continued calls and shouts the goblins made that they weren’t increasing their lead.

Light slowly began to brighten the sky and the stars winked out one by one as the coming dawn hid their beauty. In the light of dawn, they were able to catch glimpses of their pursuers from time to time running behind them. It was incredible that they could still be in pursuit and haven’t fallen behind by now. The only reason Riyan could come up with was that the sheer size of the horses hampered their movement through the tangled undergrowth of the forest. While the goblins, being smaller in stature, were better able to forge through on foot.

“Stop!” Kevik suddenly yelled.

Riyan failed to heed his warning as he glanced back to him over his shoulder. “We can’t!” he yelled. “If we stop they will kill us.”

“But you don’t understand...” he began.

“We’re not stopping!” Bart yelled from his position at the lead.

Kevik opened his mouth to urge them to stop once more but instead kept silent. He knew it wouldn't do any good. How could he make them understand that it might be worse to continue than to stand and face the goblins.

He had seen the totem that they just passed and understood its significance. The goblins have many totems and his master taught him the meaning of the more common visages they used before setting out. Each of the visages held different meanings for those who understood them. Also, the meanings could convey varying degrees of warning depending upon which visages were combined onto the totem and which position each of them held.

The one that they just passed had been overgrown by the forest and he had caught but a glimpse of it as they rode past. His master had been most emphatic about one certain visage, one that should they come across it, must be avoided at all costs. Kevik wasn't able to see the other visages on the totem due to the brush and the speed of their passing, but he had seen the one at the top very clearly. Goblin totems always have three visages or other representations that give the totem its meaning. The one on top is the primary message the totem is there to convey while the other two give added emphasis as to either the degree in which the top one should be taken, or something else.

The one that he saw simply meant, Death.

Riyan was soon to realize that the sound of pursuit behind them had begun to fade away in the distance. He wasn't sure why, but the goblins were breaking off their pursuit. "Looks like they finally gave up," he said. They began slowing down to an easy walk now, seeing as how there was no longer any immediate danger.

Chad grinned. "Guess they realized they couldn't catch us," he said.

"No," announced Kevik, "that's not the reason they are no longer following us."

"Oh?" asked Chad. "Care to enlighten us?"

"Back when I shouted for us to stop I saw one of their totems," he explained. "You may not realize it, but the totems are like markers, warning signs if you will. The one we passed proclaimed that to proceed beyond it meant death for any that do."

"Death?" asked Bart. Bringing his horse to a stop, he turned around and came back to Riyan and Kevik. "What sort of death?"

"It didn't go into that much detail and I only saw the visage at the top," he replied. "My master warned me about that one. He said that they only used it when extreme danger was present."

Chad glanced around at the forest around them. "It doesn't look all that dangerous," he commented.

"Be that as it may, it warned of danger and I think we should be on our guard," asserted Kevik. "Just because there is no visible danger now, doesn't mean we won't run into what that totem was there to warn us about further in."

At that Riyan and Bart suddenly grew quiet. Riyan glanced at Bart and could see that he was thinking the same thing he was. Perhaps the totem was warning them about where they were heading.

Chad saw their expressions and asked, "What?"

Ignoring his question, Riyan asked Kevik, "Do you know anything about this area?"

He shook his head. "No. My master said he's been here a couple times gathering various spell components. He probably would have known more than I."

"Did he ever mention someplace old in these parts?" Riyan asked. "Say ruins or anything like that?"

Kevik's eyes widened. "Is that why you're here?" Glancing first to Riyan then to the others, he knew that it was. "You're a bunch of treasure hunters."

"I suppose you could call us that," nodded Riyan. "We've been told there is a place around here that may hold great wealth."

Kevik thought about it a second and nodded. "He did mention that there were ruins of a place called Algoth somewhere around here," he said.

"What did he say?" asked Bart.

Kevik noticed that they were keenly interested in what he was about to say. "Nothing much," he replied. "Just that it was old."

"Old?" asked Chad. "That's it?"

"Yes," Kevik said. "He said and I quote, 'There once was a realm here long ago, long before the goblins came. A colleague of mine years ago told me that there were ruins of a place called Algoth on this side of the mountains...' From there he went into a lecture about various spell components that grew in this region, the best time to harvest them, that sort of stuff. Did you know that the..."

"Yes, yes, yes," Bart said as he cut him off. "That must be the place we're looking for."

Riyan nodded. "Would stand to reason."

"Then if this Algoth is where we're headed," Chad said, "why would the goblins mark this place as deadly?"

Shrugging, Bart said, "Who knows? Could be they're superstitious about this area. Maybe it's taboo to them?"

"That's not what it said," corrected Kevik. "It proclaimed that to enter here was to die. Period!"

"Alright, calm down," Riyan said. "But you did say that the totem had been overgrown?" When he received a nod from Kevik, he continued. "Then it could be possible that whatever danger there was is no longer present."

"I wouldn't trust to that," Kevik stated.

"What do you two think?" Riyan asked Chad and Bart. "Should we heed the warning of the totem and turn back?"

"Turn back?" asked Chad incredulously. "After all we've done to get this far? You have to be kidding."

"We accepted the possibility of death before we even left the Marketplace," Bart said. "I don't see how this could be any different."

"That's true," agreed Riyan. "We press on then?"

Chad and Bart both nodded their agreement.

Riyan nodded as well. He then turned back to Kevik and said, "If you don't want to accompany us, we'll understand."

"I don't have much of a choice one way or the other," he replied. "The unknown danger ahead with you or take my chance with the goblins behind on my own. Better the unknown than certain death."

"Excellent," Riyan said with a grin. "I was hoping you would say that. Glad to have you with us."

Kevik gave them a halfhearted grin.

Bart turned and resumed leading them northward. With the sun almost ready to crest the horizon to the east, it was easier for him to determine which way was north. He angled slightly more to the east after a bit in order to reach the river flowing south. According to the map on the key fragment, Algoth lay on the western shore of the small lake at the northern end of the river.

As they made their way through the forest, they began to feel relatively safe. Seeing as how this area was warded from goblin incursion by the totem, they rode without fear of being discovered and attacked.

Kevik remained quiet as he rode behind Riyan. He took in his new traveling companions and didn't think much of them. They were all as young as he was, two of them gave the appearance that they may never have done this sort of thing before. The third on the other hand had a definite presence about him. A confidence if you will. He wasn't entirely sure that linking his fate with these three was the wisest course of action for him. But seeing how his alternative was to strike out alone, he had little choice.

"There's the river," Bart said after they had ridden for awhile. Through the trees ahead they could see the sun glinting off the water as it flowed southward.

"How much further to where we want to go do you think?" Chad asked.

"Won't know until we get there," replied Bart. Now that the river was in sight, they began following it upstream. Somewhere ahead is a ruin or something else situated near where the river leaves the small lake.

Kevik at times during the ride would turn inward and remember his master. The things he taught him, the promise of what would have come had his master lived. He had been quite lucky that his master had chosen him to be his apprentice. A magic user of such power and skill was much sought after by those wishing to learn the skills arcane.

He's not really sure why his master had chosen him out of all the others he tested that day. From Kevik's viewpoint, he didn't do all that much better than the others in the tasks that they were set to do. But when Allar had announced that Kevik would be his apprentice, it would be difficult to describe the emotions he felt.

He grinned at the memory of some of the mistakes he made that first month, it's a wonder he's even still alive. All of a sudden he snapped out of his reverie when his eyes passed over another of the totems. "Riyan, stop!" he hollered.

"What?" he asked.

"There's another of the totems," he explained. Pointing toward the river, he directed Riyan's attention to the totem that stood near the edge of the river. It was several feet from the bank on

this side and facing the water. “We need to see what the other two visages are. They may give some insight as to why this place is death to those who enter.”

“Alright,” Riyan said. “Bart!” he hollered up to him. “Kevik wants to stop and examine that totem over there.”

When Bart looked over and saw the totem, he nodded.

Riyan rode over to it and Kevik dismounted. Kevik then moved to the other side and looked up at the faces upon the totem.

He pointed to the top one and said, “That one declares that it is death for any who continue past the totem.” The visage looked to be a representation of a goblin skull.

The visage just below it was one he recognized as well. “The second one means strength.” Just below the skull was carved the semblance of a tree.

“Strength?” asked Chad.

Kevik nodded. “Being in the second position as it is, I believe it’s trying to convey how serious the one on top should be taken. Seeing as how it means strength, I think it is saying that death has a strong presence here.”

“Death itself?” asked Riyan. “Or could it mean the possibility of death?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “My master just gave me a quick rundown on the most used visages and their meaning.”

“What about the third?” Chad asked. The third one was a circle with two wavy lines carved across its center.

He shrugged. “I don’t know,” he replied. “It doesn’t match any of the visages my master told me.”

”What is the significance of the third spot?” Bart asked. “If the top one is the overall message and the second one if I understand you right, tells the observer to what degree he needs to heed the first one, then what is the third one’s function?”

“It is supposed to give the observer some understanding of what lies ahead,” he explained. “Say a totem was placed to warn of a pool of poisoned water. The top one would be the visage representing poison. The second one would state how bad the poison is. And the third would resemble a pool of water. In essence it would say, ‘Poison, strong, pool of water.’”

Bart looked back up at the totem before them. “So here we have, ‘Death, strong, and a circle with two wavy lines’,” he stated.

“Yes, exactly,” nodded Kevik.

“Would be nice to know what that third visage could mean,” commented Riyan. They stood there for several minutes as they tried to come up with ideas as to what it represented.

That’s when Chad happened to glance across the river and noticed a party of a dozen goblin warriors. “We’ve got company,” he said. The others turned towards the far bank of the river.

“They’re not crossing,” observed Bart.

“No,” agreed Riyan. “But it looks like they want to.”

The goblins were acting very agitated. One even went so far as to fire an arrow in their direction. But they easily avoided the missile after it peaked at the top of its arc and came at them.

“Maybe it would be a good idea to move further into the trees,” suggested Chad. “Out of sight out of mind as it were.”

Bart snorted. “We may be out of sight, but I highly doubt if we’ll be out of their minds.”

“Still, let’s get out of here,” Riyan said. Moving back to his horse, he mounted and lent a hand to Kevik as he swung up behind him. The other two were mounted by the time Kevik was settled in behind Riyan and Bart took the lead once more as they left the totem by the river. A few minutes later the trees obstructed their view of the river and the totem.

As they rode, each continued to think about what the totem they saw might mean. None of them were very thrilled by its presence, other than the fact it kept the goblins from coming after them.

A short time after they left the totem, Bart noticed an outcropping of stone that seemed to stick up out of the ground ahead. Its presence seemed rather unusual as the rest of the land was relatively even as it moved over the gently rolling hills. It was covered in moss and overgrown with bushes. The only reason he noticed it at all was that it protruded upward more than the lay of the land would warrant.

The course they were taking led them in the direction of the outcropping. As he rode closer, something about the moss covered rock felt odd to him. When he neared it, he realized what it was. Partially hidden beneath the moss were the unmistakable signs of carving. He brought his horse to a halt and dismounted.

“What are you doing?” asked Riyan. Kevik looked around him to where Bart was moving toward the outcropping.

Bart didn’t reply, instead he came to the rock and scraped off a section of the moss. He could hear Chad’s surprised intake of breath when the section of moss fell away. It had revealed an eye. The eye was on its side and after removing more of the moss, they were able to tell that it was part of a head. Most likely the head of a statue.

The eyes and general features were somewhat eroded away, but the face was definitely that of a human. “Looks like we’ve reached Algoth,” Riyan said as he swung down from his horse.”

Bart glanced behind him and saw the others were coming to examine the statue for themselves. The head looked to have been broken off from a larger statue, since after they pushed back some of the bushes the jagged neck was revealed.

Chad moved further down to see if he could find the rest of the statue but only the head was there. “We better be on our guard from here on out,” said Chad. Returning to the others he added, “Whatever the totem was warning of is likely to be found within the ruins of Algoth.”

“What are you looking for?” Kevik asked. “Why is it so important for you to come here?” The others glanced from one to the other. He could see they didn’t want to let him in on what they were up to. “Don’t you trust me?” he asked, slightly hurt.

“It’s not that we don’t trust you,” Riyan explained. “It’s just that we don’t know you well enough. You understand that right?”

Kevik didn’t like it but could see the logic in what he was saying. He nodded and said, “Yes.”

Riyan gave him a grin and patted him on the shoulder. "Let's go see if we can't find what we're looking for." Returning to his horse, he again helped Kevik up behind him. The staff that his master gave him had been an ever present companion. When riding, he always kept it clutched in his right hand. After they left the head behind and continued on, Riyan asked him if he knew how to use it.

"For the most part," he admitted. "It can paralyze an enemy, that one I know. My master never went into very much detail about it. I'll have to get a king's scroll of identification in order to fully understand what it does."

"What would a king's scroll of identification tell you?" he asked.

"Everything about it," Kevik replied. "But for now I'll have to settle for what my spell of identification can reveal."

"You know how to cast a spell of identification?" Riyan asked hopefully.

"Well, just the basic one," he explained. "As I grow in mastery of the arcane arts, the effects of my spells will become more enhanced."

Riyan grew silent for a moment as he contemplated what he had just heard. He wondered if perhaps Kevik's spell of identification would reveal anything about the fragment of the key. But then he thought that it might be best if he were to purchase one of the scrolls from a scribe like Phyndyr. That way what he learned would remain with just him. He liked Kevik, but he just didn't know if he was one in whom he could trust the secret of what they were doing.

"What other spells can you do?" he inquired.

"Just a couple," he replied. "One of them you already saw. I can restrict the movement of another by encasing them in a green sticky substance." He grinned as he said, "The spell is called, 'Glavir's Miraculous Spell of Binding'. From what I've learned so far, every spell has a fancy name. I just call it my green goo spell." Then he laughed. He was surprised that it burst out of him, he really wasn't expecting it.

"What's so funny," Riyan asked.

"My master would get so mad when I referred to it by 'the green goo spell'," he explained. Then he grew silent as the memory of his loss returned. He had almost been able to put it behind him.

"What else?"

"I can identify objects, inflict damage by sending red bursts of power, and half a dozen cantrips," he told him.

"Must be neat to be able to do such things," he said.

"It is," he admitted. "But it takes a lot of time to learn a new spell. I've been an apprentice now for little over a year and I only know a handful of spells."

"I'm sure that once you've done it longer, you'll be able to learn faster," stated Riyan.

"So my master taught me," he agreed.

They continued making their way through the trees with Bart in the lead. After awhile they came across more evidence of the people who had once lived there. Overgrown sections of walls that once must have stood tall were now little more than shattered remnants of their former glory.

The trees began to thin as they entered an area where the broken remnants of Algoth became more visible. All of it was overgrown and broken. Then all of a sudden a structure appeared through the trees ahead. Rising tall, it was covered in moss and vines. The ground floor and the one above it seemed to be intact, but the jagged outline of the upper walls revealed that it had once stood taller. More structures were visible further behind it.

“Looks like it collapsed,” Chad said as they rode towards the building. No doorway was visible so they went around to the right to locate one. When they rounded the corner they saw that the right wall had crumbled and the interior of the building had completely collapsed in on itself. Over the years dirt had been deposited over the rubble and now trees and bushes grew out of the crumbled remains. One of the trees had grown very large and rose up out of the ruined building to the sky.

Dismounting, they gave the building a once over but found nothing of interest. Moving on, they led their horses over to one of the nearby buildings. This one looked like it may have survived better. It was three stories tall and other than a few cracks coursing through the walls, seemed to be intact.

“This is it!” exclaimed Bart as he rushed forward.

“This is what?” asked Kevik.

When Riyan and Chad saw what had excited Bart, they too realized this was going to be important. For engraved on the front of the double doors that led into the building, was a coat of arms they both had seen before. A sword pointed downward with a dragon grasping the hilt as its body twined around the blade.

Riyan grinned as he looked upon one of the coat of arms they had seen back in the diamond shaped chamber deep within The Crypt.

Chapter Eighteen

“Yes!” Riyan exclaimed in excitement as he ran forward.

Kevik could see that they were getting excited about what was engraved on the doors. “Is this important?” he asked.

“Very,” replied Riyan. He ran his hand across the engraving. At one time it must have been brilliantly colored, but now only specks of the color remained. He turned back to Kevik and asked, “Have you ever seen this before?”

Shaking his head, Kevik said, “No. Should I have?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Riyan told him.

Bart tried the door on the right but it wouldn’t budge. The one on the left was just as immobile. “Going to have to find another way in,” he announced as he backed away from the doors. Gazing upward he looked at the windows staring out from the second and third floors.

“Are you going to climb up there?” Chad asked.

“Not unless there’s no other way,” he replied. Moving out, he began to move around the building hoping to find another way in other than the windows above. As luck would have it, there was another doorway around the back whose door was missing.

The doorway opened up onto a long hallway that looked as if it ran the length of the building. Other doorways sat at intervals along both sides. Light passed through some of those doorways giving the hallway an eerie feeling. Aside from the excitement the three friends were feeling, there was also an undercurrent of trepidation. They haven’t forgotten the implied threat of the totems.

Riyan took the lead and was the first to enter with Chad right on his heels. Dirt covered the floor and leaves were scattered from one end to the other. There were even a couple bushes growing in areas illuminated by the sunlight that streamed in from the adjoining rooms.

“Not very promising,” Riyan commented.

“It’s been open to the elements for a very long time,” countered Chad.

“True,” nodded Riyan. He worked his way down the hallway and paused when he came to one of the doorways to look into the room. Other than a small animal they startled, the only thing they found was more dirt and debris that had been blown in by the wind. Few of the doorways actually held doors and only one stood shut but yielded quickly to Riyan’s boot.

Through another of the doorways they found a short hallway ending at a staircase leading up. The rest of the rooms held nothing of interest. One looked like it had at one time been used as some animal’s den, bones and such littered the floor.

Disappointed, Riyan led them up the stairs to the second floor. Again just as the first, they found rooms that held nothing other than dirt, leaves, and a few struggling bushes that were trying to make it in the debris the wind had deposited beneath the windows over the years. Another staircase had been discovered that led up to the third and final floor.

Disappointment was all that the third floor held for them. They did find a few bird’s nests built in a couple of the rooms, but they didn’t even have eggs. “Nothing,” Riyan stated as they finished searching the last room.

Bart went to the window and looked out over the ruins of Algoth. Other buildings similar to the one they were in stretched for a quarter of a mile before the forest once again claimed the land. “This could take awhile,” he commented.

The others came to stand next to him. “What are you looking for?” Kevik asked. “If you were to tell me, perhaps I could prove more helpful.”

“What we are looking for will most likely be found in the building the lord who use to rule Algoth called his own,” Bart explained. He continued gazing out and saw a building larger than the others. Where the rest of the buildings were predominantly one and two stories, with a scattering of three stories here and there, this one was easily five stories tall and twice as wide as

the largest building out there. It also held a centralized position among the buildings, sort of like a hub. Pointing, he directed the other's attention to it. "There."

Riyan saw the building and nodded. "That could be it," he agreed.

"We still have several hours of daylight left," Chad commented.

Bart turned towards him and asked, "Your point being?"

"I don't think it wise to linger here after dark," he replied. "Whatever the totems warned of might be more active once the sun goes down."

"Or it might not," countered Bart. "Besides, where are we to go? Maybe the goblins have an inn just the other side of the totems where we could stay." He shook his head. "No, we're stuck here until we decide to leave."

"Your friend is right," Kevik said to Chad. "We have nowhere else to go."

Riyan glanced from one to the other then said, "No sense in lingering here. We should head over there now and find a place to hole up before night comes."

The others agreed with him and they were soon heading out of the room and down the stairs. Once back outside the building, they mounted their horses and rode in the general direction of the central building.

As they made their way through the ruins, they passed many remnants of buildings long fallen to ruin. A few structures had withstood the passage of time well, showing only minor cracking and crumbling. All were overgrown with vines, some even sported bushes and small trees growing out of the cracks in the walls. Over time, they too will add to the erosion of Algoth. On several buildings they passed, they noted the dragon-sword coat of arms that had been on the front doors of the earlier building they searched.

The large centralized building quickly made its appearance above the ruins ahead. Of all the buildings, it had withstood the ravages of time and weather the best. Its walls showed only minor cracks and still looked strong.

Here more than any of the others they've come across, the coat of arms was most prominently displayed. The two large double doors that marked the main entrance each had the coat of arms inscribed upon its surface. Twice as large as any they've yet seen, the coat of arms seemed to project power and prestige.

"If this isn't the place," stated Riyan, "I wouldn't know where else to look."

"You got that right," replied Chad.

They came to a stop before the double doors and dismounted. Nearby grew a tree and it was to its branches that they secured the reins of their horses. They shouldered their packs and approached the doors. Kevik took the two packs he had taken from his and his master's last campsite when they fled the battle and set them on the ground.

Riyan noticed that he was opening them and transferring the contents of one to the other. He took out a large book with what looked like magical writing inscribed upon its cover and placed it in the other pack. Along with the book he removed two potion bottles and several other miscellaneous items. When he finished, the one pack was much lighter yet still contained a few things. That one he secured back onto his horse. Then he turned and saw the others watching him.

“Spell book?” asked Riyan.

“My master’s,” he explained.

“Really?” Riyan asked. “What’s in there?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “He never confided its secrets to me. Besides, it isn’t wise to open another’s spell book. Such an action often comes with serious repercussions.”

Bart nodded. “I believe it.”

“There will come a time when I have gained the knowledge and experience to open it safely,” explained Kevik. “Until that time, it shall remain closed.” He took his master’s staff, guess you could call it his now, and moved to join them at the doors.

“Understandable,” Chad said.

Riyan and Bart turned back to the doors and approached. Riyan grasped the handle of the door to the right and pushed. To his surprise, it opened. Pushing harder, he worked against centuries, perhaps millennia, of disuse and shoved the door open far enough for him to be able to pass through.

He moved through to the other side and entered a very large hall. The ceiling reached upwards for at least three floors, and on the far side of the hall were two winding staircases that went up to the second floor.

“Wow,” Chad said as he entered after Bart. “What a place.”

Bart nodded, “It must have been something in its heyday.”

“Yeah,” agreed Riyan.

Four statues of men were placed in various points around the room. Smaller busts of men were sitting in wall niches along the walls. The walls themselves appeared rather plain, but when Chad inspected them closely, found traces of faded paint. There were also remnants of old couches, chairs and tables which were all but gone.

“Where should we start looking?” asked Chad.

“I hardly think it would be sitting out in the open,” replied Bart. “In all probability it will be in a hidden room.”

“Hidden room?” exclaimed Chad. “How are we to find that?”

“First order of business is to search every nook and cranny of this place,” Bart explained. “What we are looking for are sections of walls wide enough to house a secret room or passage. Once we’ve located those, then we begin trying to discover which one actually does.”

“Your father taught you this?” Riyan asked.

“Not exactly, no,” Bart replied. He turned to Riyan and asked, “Do you have any of those coins with you?”

Riyan nodded and after removing his pack and searching it, produced a handful of the copper coins.

Bart took one and held it up so the symbol was facing the others. “Anything with this or the dragon-sword coat of arms on it could indicate something of interest,” he stated. “So be on your guard and keep your eyes open.”

Kevik looked at the symbol a moment. “Is this what you’re after?” he asked.

“You’ve seen this before?” Riyan asked.

“My master had a coin with this symbol inscribed upon it,” he explained. “Never said where he got it though.”

“Maybe he got it from here?” suggested Chad.

“Possibly,” shrugged Kevik.

“There’s still over an hour of daylight left,” Bart said to the others. “I suggest we split up in pairs so we can cover more ground.” He glanced to Riyan. “I’ll take Chad and search the lower two floors while you and Kevik search the ones above.” He waited until Riyan nodded before continuing. “Don’t open or touch anything. Get me first if you find something of interest.”

Riyan and Chad both understood that he was talking about the possibility of traps. “You got it,” agreed Riyan.

“Good,” he said. “Let’s meet back here in the hall a little before sunset.”

“See you then,” said Riyan. To Kevik he said, “Let’s go.”

As he and Kevik headed for the stairs, Kevik asked, “Why does he want us to get him before we open anything?”

“There could be traps,” Riyan explained. “He has a knack with such things.”

Kevik glanced at Bart and nodded in understanding.

They headed to the staircase on the right and started up. It was made of stone, or perhaps marble, so had kept its strength through the years. Once up to the second floor, they quickly found another staircase leading up to the third floor where they were to begin their search.

Beginning with the first room on the third floor they came to, they began their exploration. The room held little of interest, a single window looked out to the west over the ruins. A breeze was felt as it made its way into the building. What furniture once was inside has long since fallen to the ravages of time and the elements.

Riyan sifted through the debris scattered across the floor with the toe of his boot. The only thing he turned up was moldy old leaves and dirt. “Maybe the next one,” he said.

“We’ll see,” Kevik said from where he was looking out the window. “It’s quiet.”

Riyan came and stood next to him as he too looked out over what was left of Algoth. Nothing stirred but the wind through the trees. Try as he might, Riyan couldn’t even find an animal moving anywhere.

Turning to Kevik he said, “We need to search as much as we can before it gets dark.”

Kevik glanced at him and nodded. “You’re right.” He then followed Riyan as he moved away from the window and made for the room’s exit.

The rest of the third floor was pretty much the same. Only one room held anything that could be considered of interest. It was a faded mural of knights riding horses across grass covered hills. The sun was shining and the whole scene inspired confidence and majesty.

Riyan noted how on the shield of the man leading the knights was the dragon-sword coat of arms that they have seen on several buildings including the doors to this one. He pointed it out to Kevik. “This must have been the lord of this area.”

“Or an ancestor,” Kevik offered.

“Could be,” he replied.

They then returned to the stair they had discovered earlier that led up to the fourth floor. Once they ascended the stair, they once more began searching all the rooms. These were a bit smaller than the ones on the floor below. It almost seemed like they were administrative offices, which was likely the capacity in which they were used.

Within one office that looked much like all the others, they found the rusted remains of a broken sword lying under a layer of leaves and dirt that had accumulated near the open window. Two inches of jagged metal was still attached to the hilt. A little more searching found the rest of the blade across the room. "Wonder how this came to be?" Kevik asked.

"Can you find out with your identification spell?" Riyan asked.

"Perhaps," he replied. "But keep in mind, my version of the spell is very basic and it won't reveal much."

Riyan held out the two pieces. "Give it a try," he said.

Kevik nodded and took the two halves. "You will need to be quiet as I cast the spell," he explained. "The slightest distraction may break my concentration."

"Alright," agreed Riyan.

Kevik searched the room for a relatively clean spot on the floor before sitting down. He laid the staff on the floor next to him while he placed the two halves of the sword on the floor before him.

He held his hands over the broken pieces of the sword, closed his eyes, and spoke a magical incantation. Riyan watched as the pieces of the sword began to glow an off blue.

In Kevik's mind's eye, a scene began to play:

Hammers struck metal as the blade took form under the skill of master craftsman. Then the scene blurred, and when it clarified...It felt like a hundred years had passed since its forging. It hung at the waist of a man in armor. Again the scene blurred... The sword was being wielded in battle, the distinct clang of metal striking metal was heard before a blow took it broadside midway from hilt to tip that broke the blade in two.

When the spell finally ran its course, the blue glow vanished and Kevik opened his eyes.

"Well?" Riyan asked.

Kevik related the vision to him.

"Was that all?" Riyan asked again.

"Yes," replied Kevik. "I told you it wouldn't have given much information." He took hold of his staff and with a hand from Riyan, returned to his feet.

"On the contrary," Riyan told him, "I think it gave some good information."

"Like what?" Kevik asked as they left the room to head to the next.

"For one thing, since we found both pieces of it in this room," explained Riyan, "it would be safe to assume that the battle that broke the blade took place in this building." As they entered the next room and began searching through the debris littering the floor he asked, "Did you see who or what the one wielding the blade was fighting?"

Shaking his head, Kevik said, “No. A more experienced magic user would have been able to learn more from the blade, unfortunately I’m just an apprentice.”

“Still, it’s useful information,” Riyan assured him.

“Thanks,” he said.

Riyan was searching through the piles of debris littered about the room when the light suddenly dimmed. He glanced to the window and said, “Uh-oh. The sun just hit the tops of the trees.”

Kevik hurried to the window and saw that the shadows had grown long. “We’ve been here longer than I thought,” he said. Turning around, he gazed at Riyan. “It’s almost dark.”

“Let’s go find the others,” Riyan said as he ceased rooting through a pile of dead leaves near the window. With Kevik following close behind, Riyan hurried down the two flights of stairs. When he came to the winding staircase that led down to the floor of the large hall, he looked out and saw that Chad and Bart had yet to return. Taking the steps quickly, he descended down to the ground floor.

“Should we go look for them?” asked Kevik.

Shaking his head, Riyan said, “Better not. They’ll return shortly.”

Kevik nodded and went out to where the horses were tied to the tree while Riyan remained within the hall.

After Kevik left, Riyan realized just how large and empty the hall really was. “Bart! Chad!” he cried. “It’s time to go!” When the sound of his cry died out, the only reply was silence. He went to the window and saw the shadows growing longer. “Come on guys,” he said under his breath, “we don’t want to be here after dark.” Glancing around at the lengthening shadows, his nervousness that had been absent while he and Kevik searched the upper floors, returned.

Bart had decided for them to search the second floor first as he didn’t really believe they would find anything of note there. And after searching for an hour or so through the rooms up there, he confirmed his suspicions. Nothing.

So he and Chad had returned to the bottom floor and went through things piecemeal. Bart started by searching the statues and the busts in the wall niches for possible secret compartments. Nothing again.

Then he led the way with Chad right behind and started searching through the rooms adjacent to the hall just within the entrance. The first couple of rooms yielded nothing but leaves. One room boasted a rather scraggly bush that had begun growing in one of the piles of leaves and other dead plant material beneath one of the windows.

“Looks like an inside garden,” joked Chad when they saw it. His smile quickly disappeared when Bart failed to see the humor in the situation. They checked the bush room thoroughly then went to the next.

“Do you think Riyan understands the gravity of the situation?” Chad asked him.

Bart entered the next room and saw a faded mural on the wall. As he went over to investigate, he asked, “What do you mean?”

“He thinks this is all one big holiday,” Chad explains. “I wonder if he realizes the consequences that we face.”

Bart glanced back at him. “You mean like us dying?”

Chad nodded. “Yes! Exactly. I don’t think that possibility has even registered with him yet.”

“You haven’t exactly been much help in that respect,” Bart said. Turning back to the mural he began running his hand along the wall. “What was it you said? ‘What price adventure?’ You haven’t exactly shown what I’d call the proper appreciation for the gravity of the situation either.”

“Well, that’s beginning to change,” he said. “The run in with the goblins has curbed my enthusiasm for this whole venture somewhat.”

“Yeah,” replied Bart distractedly. “Near death experiences will do that to you.”

“I just hope he calms down a bit before he winds up getting himself, and us, in some real trouble.”

“He will I’m sure,” Bart said. Not finding anything such as a pressure plate within the mural, he turned back to Chad. “Just as soon as the boredom sets in.”

“We’ll see,” Chad said.

Having given that room a thorough search, they moved on. Once out of the room, they headed down the hallway to the next doorway. Room after room, hallway after hallway, they worked their way through the ground floor. They had found a couple spots that could possibly have hidden a secret room or stash of treasure, but the cursory look Bart gave them turned up nothing.

Somewhat discouraged, they continued the hunt. They found themselves back at the large hall at the entrance and entered the last hallway they had yet been down. The first several rooms they checked turned up nothing, but then they came to one that was slightly different. This time there was a sturdy wooden door set in the left wall at the other end of the room.

“This might be something,” Bart said. He crossed the room to the door and tried to open it only to find it locked. He pulled his lockpicks from his pack and set to work on it.

While Bart was working to unlock the door, Chad went to the window and looked out. “The day’s almost gone,” he observed.

“We’ll search here and maybe one more room then return to the hall,” he said.

“Sounds good,” agreed Chad. He kept looking out the window towards the ruins until he heard Bart say, “Got it.” Then he turned and joined him in front of the door as he started to swing it inward.

When the door swung open they found that beyond the door was a short narrow passage extending fifteen feet away from the door. The light coming in through the window in the other room gave just enough illumination for them to see the chest sitting against the far wall.

“Well, well,” said Bart. “What do we have here?”

“It looks like a chest,” replied Chad.

“Of course it’s a...” he began to say to Chad then stopped when he saw Chad grinning. “Very funny,” he said not at all amused, which only gave Chad an even bigger reason to smile.

They entered the short passage and approached the chest. When they were almost to it they heard a creaking noise behind them and saw the door beginning to swing shut.

“The door!” yelled Bart.

Chad saw the door closing and raced back toward it but was too late.

Wham!

The door swung shut with a bang and plunged them into darkness. “Damn!” cursed Bart. It took him a minute to get his tube lantern lit, it being the only source for light they had brought with them.

When he shined the light at the door, he groaned.

“What?” asked Chad.

“Look for yourself,” he replied.

Following the beam of light, Chad saw where it illuminated the door. “So?” he asked, not entirely sure what Bart was referring to.

“There’s no lock or handle on this side,” he explained. Turning to look at Chad he said, “We’re locked in here.”

Chapter Nineteen

“Where are they?” Riyan asked. It’s been a quarter hour since their return to the hall and he was beginning to get worried. Chad and Bart should have returned by now.

“Maybe something happened to them?” suggested Kevik.

“I don’t think so,” replied Riyan. “We would have heard something, a cry at least.”

Riyan stood by the window, anxious now that the sun has all but disappeared. Gazing at the sky, he saw the first star of the evening appear. “We better go look for them,” he finally said.

“Let’s take a lantern with us,” advised Kevik. “It’s going to be dark soon.”

“Good idea,” agreed Riyan. Returning back outside to where the horses were tied, he retrieved his lantern and lit it. He then made his way back into the building and nodded to Kevik. “Alright, let’s go find them.”

From their experience of searching the upper floors, they knew the building was large and it would take some time to completely search every room. “I hope they don’t return while we’re gone,” Kevik said.

“I hope that they do,” replied Riyan. “At least they would be alright.” He held the lantern up high as he gazed at the ground. With all the times he and Kevik had crisscrossed the hall, it was

hard to determine which way Bart and Chad had gone by the footprints in the dust and dirt. He was quick to realize that this was getting him nowhere and began examining the hallways and rooms to see which way their path led.

There were two places where footprints were clearly visible, one was a hallway and another was a room. He couldn't help but remember the times he had to hunt for Black Face when he wandered off. There were times when the stupid sheep wouldn't make any noise that would help in finding him. Nine times out of ten Black Face would be found contentedly munching the leaves of the berry vines he liked so much.

"Which way?" asked Kevik.

"I'm not sure," replied Riyan. Putting his fingers to his lips, he whistled loudly three times just as he would to call his sheep. After the third whistle, they held still to listen. Silence was all they heard.

"Come on," Riyan said as he entered the hallway. Their trail was clearly visible and they had no trouble in following it. At the first doorway they saw two sets of footprints, one entering the room and another leaving. They followed the trail as it went into the room. Inside they found where Chad and Bart had rooted through the dirt and leaves before leaving. With no other exit and the entirety of the room clearly visible, they stepped back out into the corridor and continued on.

Room after room the path of footprints led them onward in their search. Each room they came to, they made a quick scan to be sure Bart and Chad weren't still there before continuing on. When a room held another exit such as a door or hallway, Riyan would try to determine which way their tracks went. Whichever way they led, he and Kevik would move to follow.

Bart finished checking the door for the third time. There was no handle or keyhole on this side. He even went so far as to wedge his knife in the space between the door and the doorjamb to try and pry it open with the blade. He felt the door move slightly before the locking mechanism stopped it.

"There's no way out," he said as he gave up and turned back toward Chad.

Chad stood there with the tube lantern in hand. He had been holding it to give Bart light with which to work. "Now what?" he asked.

"Wait for Riyan and Kevik to find us," he explained. "Though as big as this place is it could take some time."

"Maybe you could take a look at the chest?" suggested Chad. "Seeing as how we're not going anywhere for awhile."

"Sure," agreed Bart. "Stay just behind me and shine the light on the lock." He took out his lockpicks and selected the two he normally used on locks such as these. "Up a little," he said when Chad had let the light drop down too far. "You need to hold it steady and level. If you hold it at an angle, the candle will burn off center and the wax will melt all the faster."

"Alright," agreed Chad as the light came back to the locking mechanism.

Bart worked on the chest while the light wavered at times in Chad's hand. He found a trap and quickly disarmed it. It was a rather simple trap, a variant on the Prick of Poison where instead of coming out and pricking, this one would actually shoot out.

Once the trap was taken care of, the lock itself was easy. A few moments later, Bart was putting his picks back in the rolled leather carrier. Then while Chad held the light, he opened the lid.

Immediately upon opening, the light from the tube lantern was refracted by the two dozen gems held within. Not only gems but a large pile of coins as well. There were a multitude of bright shiny coppers, with many of the silver mixed in. But what drew their attention were the golden coins. Larger than the silvers, these gold coins were stamped with the same symbol and face as were the copper and silver coins.

Bart picked one up and held it in the light. "This has to be worth quite a bit," he said. Then he gauged its weight as it lay in his palm. "Easily twice the weight of our own gold sovereigns."

"Oh man," Chad said as he came forward.

Also in the chest were three identical bottles, a scabbard with a knife's hilt sticking out, and a three inch long ivory tube. Chad took one of the potion bottles and held it up to the light. He grew excited when he saw there was liquid still inside.

Bart grabbed the scabbard with the knife. When he removed the knife, to his astonishment, he found the blade still serviceable. No trace of rust marred its surface and when he ran the edge along a finger, discovered that it still held an edge. Putting his bloody finger to his lips, he worked to stop the bleeding while he tucked the scabbard with the knife safely held within, into the waistline of his trousers.

The ivory tube, now that was definitely odd. It had writing inscribed upon it and one end looked as if it would pop off. Chad held it in his hand. "What is this?" he asked Bart.

"Not sure," admitted Bart when he moved closer to look at it. "It may hold something though." He then pointed to the end that could come off. "Removing this end might open it."

"Should I?" he asked.

Bart shrugged. "It's up to you."

Chad contemplated whether to open it or not for a moment before handing the tube lantern to Bart. He held the tube vertical and gripped the end. Twisting the end he was pleased to feel it turn in his hand. Emboldened, he twisted and pulled the end completely off.

"Well?" asked Bart when Chad looked into the hollow opening.

"Not sure," he replied. "May be something in here." He cupped his other hand and brought it to the opening to catch whatever might come out as he slowly upended the tube. He slowly tipped the tube on its side until three small granules of white crystal spilled from the end and landed on his palm. He then raised the tube back in an upright position and replaced the end back onto it.

Holding his palm up to the light he asked, "What are these?"

"I've never seen anything like this before," Bart said as he took a closer look.

All of a sudden, it looked as if the crystals turned into liquid and sank into the skin of Chad's palm. No sooner did the liquid disappear than his hand began to grow numb. The numbness started spreading outward from where the liquid had entered his skin.

"Bart!" he cried as he started shaking his hand.

"What's wrong?" Bart asked as he saw Chad shaking his hand and rubbing it on his pant's leg.

"I can't feel my hand!" he cried hysterically.

Bart grabbed the wrist of the affected hand and stilled his thrashing. There were no discolorations or swelling as one would expect from a poison. He poked the palm with his finger. "Did you feel that?"

"No!" exclaimed Chad, fear of what may be happening to him causing him to blurt it out with more feeling than he had intended. "My wrist is growing numb now too," he said in a slightly calmer voice though there was still an undercurrent of fear audible. Chad's eyes grew wide as he saw Bart set the tube lantern on the floor and then remove his belt knife. "What are you going to do?"

"Prick your palm and see if you feel it," he explained.

Chad tried to pull back his hand from the knife's point but Bart had too strong a grip. "Hold still." He brought the tip to Chad's palm and pricked it. "Did you feel that?" he asked.

Shaking his head, Chad said, "No." A small drop of blood welled out from the wound.

Bart began pressing Chad's skin as he worked his way from his palm, past his wrist, and up the arm. By the time Chad said he could feel what he was doing, Bart had made it midway up his forearm.

"I think it's stopped spreading," Chad said. He then tried to flex his fingers but couldn't. Then he concentrated hard as he worked to flex his fingers and only managed a small twitch from his forefinger. With a panicked look, he turned his gaze to Bart. He held up his hand and practically screamed, "I can't move them!"

They had been following the trail left by Bart and Chad for a half hour now, and still hadn't come across them.

"Do you think they might have left the building?" asked Kevik.

Riyan came to a stop as that possibility hadn't even crossed his mind. "Man I hope not," he said. The thought of having to search for them in the dark ruins outside sent a shiver down his spine. "I doubt if they would have gone anywhere."

Lowering his voice Kevik said, "Maybe it was whatever the totem warned us about? Maybe it has already got to them?"

A chill passed through Riyan at his words. "Now don't start talking like that," he told him. "They are here somewhere."

"Then why haven't we found them yet?" replied Kevik.

"I don't know," Riyan said. Then with conviction he said once more, "But they're here!" As he left the hall and proceeded down to another room, the shadows began to have a more ominous

feel to them. Scenes of what could have happened to his friends played through his mind, none of which offered him any comfort.

At the entrance to the room, he noted that the trail of footprints they had been following didn't extend past the doorway into the next room. Rather, they entered the room but didn't come out.

It was a fair sized room, similar in nature and size to the ones they had already checked. At the far end of the left wall stood a sturdy door. They did a quick check, found the door to be locked, and reentered the hallway. Then just as he had done a dozen times the last half hour, he blew three sharp whistles.

"Did you hear that?" asked Chad. He was sure he had just heard three whistles, reminiscent of the ones Riyan would use to call his sheep.

"Hear what?" asked Bart.

"I think it was Riyan," he replied. He moved to the door and began banging on it with his good hand. His other hand was still numb and hung at his side. Fortunately, the numbness still hadn't travel any further than midway up his forearm. "Riyan!" he yelled.

Bart came next to him and added his effort in banging on the door.

Riyan was about to walk away from the room when an ominous thumping began to be heard. In the state that he was in, what with beginning to believe that something malign had taken off with his friends, the banging sounded to him like the whisper of heartbeats from those long dead.

"It's coming for us," he said, fear beginning to take hold. His imagination suddenly kicked into high gear which only tightened fear's hold on him.

Kevik drew close to him as he too heard the thumping of the telltale heartbeats. Riyan's fear was contagious and he yelled, "We've got to get out of here!"

Fleeing down the hallway, they ran as fast as they could and didn't stop until they were back in the large hall by the entrance. When they neared the door leading outside, they came to a halt. "I think it's gone," stated Kevik as the heartbeats of the dead could no longer be heard.

Riyan nodded as he worked to quiet his rapidly beating heart. "That was close." He glanced in the direction of the mouth of the hallway from which they had just escaped. The part of the ground floor they have yet to search still lies down that hallway, beyond where they heard the heartbeats of the dead.

Outside, night had fallen with a vengeance. The stars overhead gave an eerie feel to the ruins and his imagination began working overtime once again. When he thought he saw a ghost passing from one building to the next, he quickly turned away from the window.

"It's not real," he told himself. Then he forced himself to look out again and found the ghost was gone.

"You okay?" asked Kevik.

"My imagination is running away with me," he said. Rather unnerved right now, he took a few deep breaths and tried to calm himself. He realized he won't be good for anything if he continued to let his fears control him. Turning towards the hallway, he steeled himself to reenter

it again. He must be brave for his friends. Just to reassure himself, he cast a look outside one more time and was relieved when his imagination didn't bring another ghost to haunt him.

"We're going back!" he said with conviction as he glanced to Kevik.

"Alright," Kevik said with less courage than Riyan was displaying.

Riyan took a moment to remove his sling and ready a stone within its cup. Then with lantern in one hand and sling in the other, he crossed the hall and entered the hallway. Behind him he could feel where Kevik was gripping the back of his shirt.

When they drew near to the spot where they heard the heartbeats last time, he paused and listened for a moment. He sighed in relief when the heartbeats could no longer be heard. Maybe it had only been his imagination after all.

Coming to the doorway of the last room they searched, he again saw where the trail of footprints ended. The floor of the hallway extending past the doorway looked as if no one had been on it for ages.

"They entered this room," he said, "then vanished." He again looked at the door he checked the first time, the one that had been locked. Other than the one he and Kevik were standing at, and the window, it's the only other possible way out. He was certain they wouldn't have gone through the window.

Then his gaze settled on the door and he stood there in thought for a moment. "Maybe it wasn't spirits we heard," he said to Kevik. Entering the room, he crossed to the door. "Maybe it was the pounding of fists on this door?" Now that fear no longer held him in its grip, he could come at this with more logic and less emotion.

He came close to the door and whistled three times loudly. No sooner did his third whistle end then banging could be heard coming from the other side. Moving his mouth right next to the door he hollered, "Bart, Chad, are you in there?"

Their response was muffled by the door but he distinctly heard them say, "Yes!"

Riyan grinned and turned to glance at Kevik. "We found them," he said. Then he sobered up and added, "There's no need to tell them we ran away the first time thinking they were ghosts or anything."

Kevik nodded and returned his grin. "No problem there."

Turning his attention back to the door, he tried to open it. "It's locked!" he hollered to those on the other side.

"It's locked he says," Chad says sarcastically to Bart. "Of course it's locked," he yelled through the door. "If it wasn't we wouldn't still be in here."

"Get away," Bart said as he pulled him from the door. "You're not helping any."

Chad gave him a less than pleased look as he came to a stop three feet from the door.

"Riyan!" Bart yelled.

From the other side he could barely hear Riyan reply, "Yes?"

"You have to open the door from your side," he hollered. "Do you understand?" A moment's quiet then he heard, "Yes."

He and Chad stood there for a moment and then heard thudding noises coming from the other side. Bart glanced to Chad and shook his head. "I think he's trying to smash through by running into it."

"Isn't the door a bit strong for that to work?" Chad asked.

"Exactly," Bart replied. He waited until another thump came then hollered. "Riyan!"

"Yes?" the reply came.

"That's not going to work, you'll have to pick the lock," he hollered.

There was another moment of silence then he heard Riyan ask, "With what?"

Bart took a moment to try and think of what Riyan might have that would work.

Unfortunately his lockpicks were in here with him. "You'll have to use your knife!"

"Okay," replied Riyan. "How?"

Realizing he was going to have to talk him through it, he got comfortable. This could take awhile.

Ten minutes later, Riyan now had a fair understanding of how locks worked. He had the tip of his knife inserted in the lock and was working more by feel than anything else. From the other side, he heard Bart ask, "Do you feel the groove?"

"Yes," he replied. It took Bart some doing but he had finally gotten it through to him what groove he was talking about.

"Okay," Bart said. "You have to move it along the groove until something stops it."

He very carefully moved the tip of the knife along the groove until the point was stopped by a piece of metal. "I'm there."

"Listen carefully to what I say before you begin," Bart told him. "First of all, you have to push the metal that stopped the tip of your knife upward and slightly to the left. At the same time you have to push inward. If you do it right, the lock will disengage and then you will be able to open the door."

"Alright!" he hollered back. As he began, he heard Kevik say, "Take your time."

He held the knife in both hands as he began doing as Bart had explained to him. He gradually lifted the piece of metal and pushed inward at the same time. Then all of a sudden he felt the piece of metal resting against the blade slip off and move back into its original position.

"It slipped off!" he hollered to Bart.

"That's okay," Bart assured him. "Just keep trying until you have it."

It was on his sixth try when he finally felt the piece of metal click into place. Almost hardly daring to breathe, he nodded for Kevik to try the door. When the handle turned and the door began to swing inward, he about jumped for joy.

"You did it!" Bart exclaimed with a wide grin as he pulled the door the rest of the way open. "Make a thief of you yet."

Chad came out and actually gave him a hug. His left hand was hanging limp and Riyan asked him about it. He explained about the ivory tube and the crystals that caused the effect. "It's beginning to tingle," he said. "I think whatever it did is going away."

"Good," Riyan said happily.

Bart showed him the opened chest at the far end of the room. "Everything it held except for the bulk of the copper is in our packs," he said. Once they were all out of the small room, the door began to swing closed again. They didn't try to stop it.

They showed Riyan and Kevik the potion bottles, the ivory tube, and the knife Bart had taken for his own.

Kevik took one of the bottles in hand and a bluish glow surrounded it. "What's he doing?" Bart asked.

"He's casting a spell that will tell what it is," Riyan explained. "It's one of the few spells he's learned so far."

When the blue glow disappeared, he said, "It's a healing potion."

"That could come in handy," Bart said. Since there were three of them, he gave one to Chad and Riyan to keep in their packs.

Chad handed the ivory tube to Kevik and asked him if he could find out what had affected him. Kevik nodded and the bluish glow enveloped it for a couple seconds before disappearing. "The crystals contained within were used by healers," he explained. "They would use them to deaden an area before cutting into it, so their patient wouldn't feel any pain."

"Never heard of anything like this," stated Bart.

"There are some leaves that do the same thing but not to this degree," Kevik told them. "This could be a derivative of something similar." He then glanced to the new knife Bart had. "Would you like me to do that as well?"

Shrugging, Bart said, "Why not?"

Kevik took the knife and once the spell had run its course handed it back. "It's imbued with magic. There are two properties to the magic, one keeps it sharp and from succumbing to the elements which would ruin it, such as rust."

"What's the other?" Bart asked.

Kevik shrugged, "My spell didn't get that far. Like I was telling Riyan earlier, the spell I am able to do only gives a few general items of information. I do know that it was forged several hundred years before it was put in that chest."

"I thank you for what you could tell me," he said. "Perhaps one day I'll be able to figure out the rest." He undid his belt that secured his other knife around his waist and began sliding the new scabbard onto it. As he was positioning it for an easy draw, he paused and glanced back to Kevik. "It isn't malignant is it?"

Shaking his head, Kevik said, "No. I felt nothing like that."

"Good," he replied. When he had the scabbard on where he wanted it, he buckled the belt back on around his waist. Now he had two knives, one on either side of him. The new knife he positioned on his left side for an easy draw with his right hand.

"Now," he said as his gaze took in Riyan and Kevik, "did you two find anything?"

Chapter Twenty

When they returned to the large hall, Bart and Riyan went out and brought the horses in. If there was something going on around here at night, they didn't want their only mode of transportation disappearing by morning.

In one of the front corners of the hall they laid out their bedrolls and made a fire. None of them desired to be out among the ruins in the dark searching for another place to make camp. They closed the front doors and allowed the horses to wander at will within the hall.

Riyan sat eating a bowl of hot stew that Chad had thrown together in their cook pot over the fire. Taking a bite he glanced at the others sitting around the campfire. "In the morning we'll finish searching the rest of this building."

"We came across a couple places large enough to hide a secret room," Bart said. "Once we've completed our search, we should be able to narrow down the possibilities."

"I'll be glad when we find it," Chad said. He glanced to one of the windows and the darkness outside. "Can't wait until this place is just a memory."

"I know what you mean," agreed Riyan.

They turned in shortly after their meal. Chad pulled the last watch while Riyan got the unpleasant slot of just after midnight. You never seem to get a good night's sleep when your rest is interrupted that way.

Kevik, happily enough, had the first watch. The first one was always the best. You usually weren't that tired right away and once you did get to sleep, you remained that way until morning.

The night felt chilling to Kevik despite having ample wood to keep the fire going. He found himself wandering around the hall, at times stopping before the different windows and staring out into the dark. His watch passed without incident.

Riyan took over from Bart sometime after midnight. "Everything okay?" he asked groggily as he made it to his feet. Eyes half closed and rimmed in red, he definitely did not feel like getting up.

"So far," he said. "Things have been quiet." Then he let out with a yawn. "See you in the morning."

"Good night," Riyan said before he went over and put another couple thick branches on the fire. After the branches were in position and had begun to burn, he glanced over to where Bart was laid out on his blanket with head propped on his pack. He was already asleep.

Riyan grinned at his friend, then wrapped his arms around himself as he tried to rid the coldness from his bones. It was supposed to be midsummer, but the temperature here felt more like early fall. Not freezing by any means, just cold enough to sap the warmth from you.

When the heat from the fire finally purged the cold from his body, he started walking about the hall in order to stay awake. He could feel sleep's soft soothing touch as it tried to convince him to return to his blanket.

He went and checked on the horses and found them standing peacefully nearby. Then he went to the window closest to the fire and looked out to the shadowed ruins outside. A shiver ran through him. With only the light from the stars and moon above, the ruins were a maze of shadows and darkness.

Clang!

For the briefest moment he thought he had heard the sound of two swords striking together, such as one would hear during a battle. Obviously it was his imagination again he assured himself.

Clang!

There it went again. He looked around the hall and saw that his companions were still sleeping. The horses too remained as they were, still and quiet. He tried to determine from which direction the sound was originating but couldn't be sure. At one point he was almost ready to go over and wake the others, but then stopped. After all, what could he say? They would just think it was his imagination playing tricks on him.

Riyan returned to the window and gazed out, all traces of sleep by this time having vanished. Nervousness had begun creeping in as visions of the goblin totem, and what it may be there to warn against, ran through his mind.

Clang!

There it went again! This time he was able to tell where it came from. It sounded like it was just outside the main doors. He knew this was not simply his imagination. Looking through the window again, he still saw nothing but darkness outside. No lights, nothing. Just the moon and stars above.

Leaving the window, he moved over to where Bart was sleeping. He hated to disturb him but felt this was rather important. Placing his hand on Bart's shoulder he gave it a slight shake. "Bart," he whispered.

Bart's eyes flew open and he quickly sat up. He looked around and when there was no apparent threat, turned his eyes on Riyan. "What is it?"

"I...I heard something," he told him.

"What?" he asked. "What did you hear?"

"I'm not entirely sure," he explained. "It sounded like swords striking together in battle."

Bart looked at him quizzically as he cocked his head to listen. "I don't hear anything," he said. "It must have been your imagination."

Riyan shook his head. "No, it wasn't. I heard it three times. The last time it sounded like it came from the other side of the doors." They both turned to look at the closed double doors leading out.

He could see in Riyan's eyes that he believed what he was saying. "Was it a solitary sound, or more like a continual battle?"

"Each time it was but a single clang," he answered.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," Bart said as he laid his head back on his pack. "Probably just the wind blowing something around that's making the noise."

"I don't think so," he argued.

"We've all been a bit jittery since coming here..." Bart began.

"I'm not jittery!" insisted Riyan. "I want you to come with me to see what's on the other side of the door."

"You're serious aren't you?" asked Bart.

"Yes, I am," he replied.

Bart saw in his eyes that he wasn't likely to get any sleep until they checked the other side of the door. "Alright," he said as he got to his feet. "But if there's nothing there, you'll let me go back to sleep and not bother me again?"

"Yes," Riyan said gratefully. "I promise." So with Bart beside him, they walked to the doors.

Clang!

"There!" exclaimed Riyan. "Did you hear that?" Again the sound came from the other side of the door.

Bart nodded. "Yeah," he said, "I did." Now not so sure it was Riyan's imagination, he strode toward the doors. The doors loomed before them and have now taken on an ominous aspect with the coming of night and the sound coming from the other side.

They both paused when they came to stand before them. Bart glanced to Riyan. "You ready?"

"Yeah," replied Riyan. "Open it."

Bart moved forward the last couple steps and gripped the handle of the door. Then with a final glance to Riyan he pulled it open.

Riyan was braced for anything but what they saw. Nothing. He watched as Bart stepped through the door and looked around before returning inside.

"There's nothing out here," he said.

"Are you sure?" Riyan asked.

"Come see for yourself if you don't believe me." Bart stepped aside to allow Riyan the chance to check.

Riyan stepped through the doorway and into the night. He spent almost a full minute just outside the door looking around. "But there has to be something here that was making the noise," he said. Returning back inside, he glanced to Bart.

"I don't know what it could have been," Bart replied. "But there's nothing out there, just the night." He closed the door. "I'm going back to sleep."

"Sorry," Riyan said as he walked with Bart back to where his blanket was laid out on the floor.

"Don't wake me unless there's something actually happening," he said.

"Alright," replied Riyan. He went back by the fire and spent a few minutes warming himself after the time spent in the cold of outside. It didn't take Bart long before he was once again asleep. Riyan felt bad about waking him, but there must be some explanation as to why he had heard what he did.

It took him some time before the fire warmed him sufficiently. He stared into the fire and watched the flames dancing along the wood. When he was finally warm enough, he put more wood on the fire and then started walking around the hall. The need to sleep began to come to him again, and as long as he stayed in motion, he wouldn't succumb to it.

At one point he reached down to pick up a rock that had somehow made its way into the hall from outside. He was sort of close to one side and he looked over to the windows on the far side across the hall. Figuring he could make it through one of the window frames, he arched his arm back and threw. The stone soared through the air and struck the wall next to the window with a loud Crack!

He glanced over to his sleeping comrades and was glad the noise failed to disturb their sleep. Then he walked across the hall and picked up the rock. "I'm going to make it this time," he mumbled to himself.

Aiming for a window gaping in the far wall, he took a few deep breaths to settle himself. When he felt he was ready, he launched the rock towards the window. As it sailed through the air, he braced himself for the impact against the wall. But it flew true and before it reached the window he knew it would make it through the opening.

Smash!

As the rock entered the window space, a loud sound likened to the smashing of glass, split the night. The sound made Riyan jump for there wasn't any glass in any of the windows throughout the ruins. The sound hadn't come from the window the rock sailed through, it had come from the one behind him.

Turning around, he saw a pale ghostly form dressed in armor. It held a sword in his hand and appeared as if he was fighting someone or something that was trying to get in through the window.

Smash! Crash! Bang!

The sound of glass breaking filled the hall as other ghostly forms began to appear before the rest of the windows. In each case, it looked as if they were battling with something that wanted in. The only problem was, it didn't look as if there was anything there at all.

"Bart! Chad!" he yelled. "Get up!"

The horses suddenly reared and bolted to the back of the hall and into one of the hallways.

As he yelled to the others, he raced across the hall to their camp. The horses had disappeared by the time he reached the fire.

Bart sat up and one glance around the hall brought him fully awake.

"We're under attack!" Riyan yelled.

Bam!

The front doors slammed open and more ghost soldiers appeared at the entrance. Swords rose and fell as they attacked whatever was trying to pass through from the outside.

"What's going on?" Chad asked as the four comrades backed into the corner to defend themselves.

"I don't know," replied Riyan. "There was the sound of breaking glass, then this." He and Chad both had their swords out and Bart held his new knife in hand. Though there appeared to be

a furious fight going on between the ghosts and unseen adversaries, they didn't seem to take any notice of the four comrades.

More of the ghost soldiers appeared, each bearing the coat of arms depicted on the front of the building, the dragon coiled around the sword. The ghosts at the windows looked to be holding their own but the ones by the door were falling to the blades of unseen enemies.

"Maybe we should get out of here," Kevik said.

"That would be a good idea," agreed Bart. "But how would you suggest we do it? They're fighting at every exit."

"Not at the hallways at the rear of the hall," he said. Indeed, the fighting was contained along the sides and at the entrance.

"Look!" Chad said as he pointed to the winding stairs leading up to the second floor. There at the top was a group of five, ghostly men. They practically ran as they raced down the stairs to join the fray. The one in the lead had to be the lord of Algoth. His shield and armor were emblazoned with the dragon-sword coat of arms. As the lord came to the bottom of the stairs, he began shouting orders to his men.

"Come on," said Bart. "They don't seem to be paying us much attention so let's try to get to the back."

"I'm with you," Riyan said.

As Bart began to wind his way through the fighting, the lord joined the fray. He moved to the fore of his men and began laying into the unseen attackers with great skill. While those around him fell, the lord continued to fight. He was unwilling to give ground.

Around the four companions, the ghosts fought fiercely, but their numbers continued to dwindle. Despite the ferocity of the lord's attack, he began to give ground.

"Watch out!" Kevik yelled from where he was bringing up the rear.

From the side, a magic user appeared on the second floor and began raining death on the unseen attackers. Bolts of flame flew from his outstretched hands and erupted in massive balls of fire by the front entrance. More bolts of energy such as what Kevik's master used flew like a swarm of arrows towards the windows.

For a brief moment, the soldiers defending the building were able to recover ground. But then they began being pressed back once more.

"Where are the horses?" yelled Bart.

"They fled deeper into the building when all this started," explained Riyan.

He and the others reached the far end of the hall just as a large explosion rocked the area near the entrance. Whatever the magic user had done was very powerful. Bart had them pause there as they watched the battle rage.

All of a sudden the defenders begin falling in droves. The magic user that had slowed the advance of the attackers fell from the second floor and landed on the winding stairs. He didn't get back up. The lord still fought at the fore of his men but then was practically dragged from the lines by what must have been his lieutenants.

The four friends watched in awe as the lord was pulled from the battle. His men sacrificed themselves to allow their lord the chance to break away from the battle. Then the lord and the

four men with him began moving directly towards the hallway in which Riyan and the others were standing.

“They’re heading this way!” exclaimed Chad.

“Down the hallway,” Bart said, “quick!”

They turned and fled down the hallway. As they passed rooms situated against the outer wall of the building, they found defenders fighting unknown assailants who appeared to be breaking in through the windows there as well. “What’s going on?” Riyan asked.

“Their being slaughtered is what’s going on!” replied Bart. Then up ahead there was an opening where another hallway opened up going deeper into the building. “Here!” he cried. “Follow me!” Turning into it, he ran for all he was worth.

The others entered into it after him and Kevik, who was still bringing up the rear, glanced behind them to see whether or not the ghosts were going to follow. When the ghosts appeared, they continued on down the other hallway.

“They’re not following,” he told the others.

Bart brought them to a halt. “Back!” he yelled. “We’ve got to follow them!”

“Are you mad?” questioned Chad. “We could get killed.”

Bart passed them as he headed back to the previous hallway. “They could be heading to where the key is!” he hollered.

Riyan and Chad glanced at them quickly then turned back to follow Bart.

“What key?” Kevik asked as he too turned and raced after the others.

Bart reached the other hallway and immediately turned to follow the direction the lord and his comrades went. Back the other way he saw where the hallway was filled with battling defenders as they slowed the advance of the attackers.

“Hurry!” he yelled to the others. They had yet to make it back to the hallway down which the lord had fled, and the defending ghosts were falling back quickly.

Riyan reached the junction of hallways and fled down the other one just as the defenders reached the mouth of the hallway he just fled from. Chad and Kevik came to a quick stop as the battling defenders moved backwards and blocked the way.

“Riyan!” Chad shouted as he stood there not five feet from the battling spirits.

“Find another way!” Riyan yelled back to him.

“Come on,” Chad said as he turned and raced back down the hallway. Behind them, the battle raged.

Bart kept the lord in sight as he and the others moved quickly deeper into the building. They were traveling down the hallway that ran past the room where he had been trapped with Chad earlier that day.

He raced past the room and continued following the lord. The end of the hallway opened up onto a large kitchen, large enough to feed a thousand men if it had too. Bart was surprised that the lord had come here.

The lord and his men went to the edge of one of the large ovens and appeared to depress three separate bricks in the side of the oven. They paused there for a moment, then seemed to

walk into it. When the lord and his men disappeared into the oven, the kitchen was plunged into darkness. The light which the ghosts had been emitting was gone.

“Bart?” hollered Riyan from the hallway.

“In here!” he yelled. He moved back to the hallway and was almost bowled over by Riyan as he emerged into the kitchen.

“Where did they go?” Riyan asked.

“Into the oven,” he replied.

“The oven?” he said incredulously.

“That’s what it looked like,” admitted Bart.

Then down in the hallway the last defending ghost fell. The fallen ghost laid there for a second, then an unseen tremor seemed to roll through the building. When the tremor subsided, all the fallen ghosts simultaneously disappeared and the building was again plunged into darkness.

Bart and Riyan stood there in silence for a few moments before Riyan asked, “Is it over?”

“I think so,” Bart said. “We need to get back to the hall where our equipment is.”

“Why?” Riyan asked.

He heard Bart chuckle. “In our haste, we forgot our packs. So unless you want to continue to be in the dark, we need to get back there.”

“Alright,” he said. He then turned around and with his hand laid against the wall of the hallway, began returning to the hall.

After a minute or two, their eyes began acclimating to the darkness. Vague shadows formed from where the moonlight filtered in through the windows in the side rooms.

“Riyan!”

He heard Chad call out from far away. “Here we are Chad!” he hollered back. “Meet us back in the hall. It seems to be over.”

“On the way!” Chad replied.

As they came closer to the hall, the light from their fire became a beacon in the dark. The two groups met back at the hall at about the same time. Riyan and Bart arrived first. Just after they arrived they saw a white light, brighter than what a flame would produce, coming from another of the hallways. At first they thought it might be one of the ghosts but then Kevik appeared with a white, glowing sphere that moved and bobbed in the air around him. Then Chad appeared leading their three horses. They had found them in a room where they fled after the initial onslaught of the ghost soldiers.

“What is that?” Bart asked as he saw the glowing sphere.

“Just a simple cantrip I know,” replied Kevik. Then the light went out and a second later, it reappeared. “It doesn’t last very long though.” He let it continue to bob even though the light from the fire was more than sufficient. “This was the first cantrip I learned. Actually it was the very first magical skill I ever mastered.”

“It’s pretty neat,” Chad said. After a few more minutes, the light went out.

The front doors were once again closed and there was no evidence whatsoever of the battle that had raged here a little while ago. “So what happened here?” Bart asked. “Were the ghosts real?”

“I don’t know,” Kevik replied. “They seemed real. I have heard there are places haunted by spirits. Some ghosts have even been rumored to replay the events leading up to their deaths. Of course that’s just conjecture.”

“It seemed pretty real though,” Chad said. “The sound, the intensity, it all felt as if it was actually happening.”

They grew silent as each considered the events, then Kevik said, “I guess we now know why this area is marked as death by the goblins.”

Riyan nodded. “If any of them had ever witnessed what we did, I could understand them thinking this place was death.”

“Did you feel something when the spirits vanished?” Chad asked Riyan. “We felt a tremor or something like it wash over us.”

“Yes, we did too,” he replied.

“But you are all not asking the right questions,” interrupted Kevik. “Who were they fighting and why? Could whoever or whatever it was have been the reason this civilization fell?”

Bart glanced at him a moment then nodded. “You’re right. But I doubt if any of us here will ever know.”

“Do you think this happens every night?” Riyan asked. “If our search takes longer, will we have another battle rage through here again?”

“As to that,” replied Bart, “I don’t expect us to stay here much longer.”

“Why do you think that?” Chad asked.

“Because I found what we were looking for.”

They all turned and stared at him.

He picked up one of the burning brands from the fire and said, “Come on I’ll show you.” Standing up, he indicated for the others to follow. When he was certain they were going to follow, he led them to the hallway through which the lord fled the battle. Down its length he walked until he came to the kitchen at its end.

“When I followed the lord here,” he explained as he crossed through the kitchen and came to stand next to one of the ovens, “I saw him and his party stop here. Then they pressed this,” he reached out and put the tips of his fingers against one of the bricks and pushed. The brick slid in a quarter of an inch. “And here,” he said as he pressed a second brick, “and here.” Pressing the third and final brick, he watched as the oven began sliding across the floor away from him.

Staying next to the wall, the oven slid back half a foot then came to a stop. Bart brought the burning brand toward the base of the oven and the light revealed an opening. He got down on his knees and peered through it. “There’s a stair leading down.”

“But why didn’t the oven move further?” Chad asked. “There’s no way we’ll be able to squeeze through that small space.”

Bart returned to his feet and said, “I think the mechanism is just old and gave out.” He glanced at the others and then nodded to the side of the oven. “Give me a hand and let’s see if we can push it out of the way.”

The others moved into position then Bart said, “On a count of three. One...Two...Three.” At three they shoved with all their might. At first the oven didn’t budge, but then very slowly it

began sliding across the floor. They kept up the pressure until the opening was wide enough for them to enter.

“An escape route?” asked Riyan.

“Absolutely,” replied Bart. “I would also bet that somewhere down there we’ll find what we’re looking for.”

“The key?” asked Kevik. All three turned to look at him. He pointed to Bart and said, “He mentioned it earlier during the battle.”

“I did?” asked Bart. Then after a moment’s reflection he nodded. “I guess I did.”

“What key?” Kevik asked. He looked at the three friends and could see that they were still reluctant to share their secret.

“Part of a key really,” Chad finally said and that was all anyone was willing to tell him.

“As you will,” he conceded.

“Now,” replied Bart. “We are all still rather tired, and after the events of the night it might be hard for us to return to sleep. However, I feel it would be wise to get what rest we can before we descend these steps.”

Riyan nodded. “I agree. It’s not going anywhere.”

They each cast a final look down the secret stairwell before returning to their camp. Once back at the fire, they settled in again to sleep until dawn. Chad, who had pulled the last watch, was forced to remain awake while the others were able to nestle in their blankets. For the rest of the night every little noise made him jump. Not until the sun’s first rays of dawn entered the eastern windows did he finally relax.

Chapter Twenty-One

Kevik was the first to awaken. He saw Chad over by the fire sitting and watching the flames. When he sat up, Chad glanced over in his direction. He grinned and waved for him to join him.

Getting to his feet, Kevik walked over and sat next to Chad. He held forth his hands to the fire and warmed them. “You guys don’t trust me much do you?”

“It’s not that,” Chad replied. “We simply haven’t known you all that long is all. You seem nice enough.”

“But only with time will you come to trust me,” he concluded.

“Isn’t that the way with anyone?” asked Chad.

"I suppose it is," Kevik agreed. He knew he was a trustworthy person, but he could understand why his new companions wouldn't immediately recognize that. He sort of felt the same way about Bart. Something about him put him off even though he's done nothing to warrant it.

"You three came all this way through goblin territory for a key?" he asked.

Chad nodded. "That's right."

"I hope the risk was worth it," Kevik said.

"Oh it will be," Chad assured him. Then he glanced over to where Bart had just sat up. Next to him Riyan was beginning to stir as well. "Good morning," he said to the newly awakened.

"You too," Bart said. Standing and stretching, he came over to the fire. After a minute, Riyan joined them.

"I've been thinking that we should take everything with us when we go down the stairs," Chad said. "It wouldn't do to be stuck somewhere like Bart and I were in that small room yesterday without our equipment."

"I agree," said Bart.

"What about the horses?" Riyan asked. "They can't stay in here, they need grass."

"I would hate to leave them outside where anyone or anything could make off with them," Bart said.

"In that case we need to at least take them out for water and a quick graze before we lock them in here while we're down below," Riyan said. It pained him to have to say that, for he knew it meant prolonging the time before they would be able to explore the secret passage they found the night before. But having been around animals as much as he has, he knew how they would suffer if neglected of food and water.

The others agreed with him. So they took the horses outside and found where a fallen wall had created an area that held water. From the looks of the pool, which was only about seven feet wide, the wall must have fallen years, maybe even decades ago if not longer. Its banks had already formed above the broken masonry as over time, dirt was blown into the water by the wind and subsequently deposited on the edges by the water. After allowing the horses time to drink of the water, they let them graze for an hour before returning to the hall.

While they were out, the ruins gave Riyan a discomfiting feeling, especially after the ghosts of the night before. He could tell the others were affected just as he was and none of them were able to relax until they returned to the hall.

Once back within the hall, they made sure to close the front doors. Bart even took two pieces of broken masonry from the remains of the neighboring buildings and placed them before the doors so they wouldn't open while they were gone. As soon as the doors were blocked and they were ready to go, each slung their pack over their shoulder. Along with his pack Kevik took Wyzkoth, the staff his master had given him.

Riyan lit his lantern, then followed Bart into the hallway and down to the kitchen where the secret stairs lay. When they entered the kitchen, the light from the lantern illuminated the oven where it still sat after they had pushed it aside to reveal the hidden steps.

“Ready?” Bart asked. When the others nodded, he stepped onto the top step and began his descent into the darkness below.

The height of the stairwell wasn’t all that high and forced them to bend slightly over in order to avoid scraping the tops of their heads on the ceiling. After descending fifteen steps they reached the bottom. A short passage extended forward from the bottom step for about ten feet before reaching a junction.

Another passage crossed over theirs that ran from left to right, while the passage they were in continued on past the junction. The walls of the passages were lined with bricks though the floor was dirt. Sconces were set in the walls every so often where torches could be placed to give the passages light.

“Which way?” asked Bart as he came to a stop at the junction. None of the directions showed anything more than a continuation of the passage past the point where the light from the lantern reached.

“The right maybe?” suggested Riyan.

“Good as any,” replied Bart. Turning right, he and the others left the junction behind. They didn’t go far before another passage branched off to their right. It was slightly smaller than the one they were in.

“Let’s check it out,” Chad said.

With Bart still in the lead, the group moved into the branching passage. They followed it for a few feet before the lantern’s light revealed a sharp turn to the right. Moving forward, they turned the corner and came to an abrupt halt. The passage ended a short distance ahead where a chest sat against the end of the passage.

“That’s suspicious,” Bart announced.

“What do you mean?” asked Chad.

“Why in the world would anyone put a chest in such an accessible spot?” he asked.

Kevik glanced to the chest and said, “We are in a hidden area.”

“True,” admitted Bart. “But this just doesn’t seem right.”

“Are you going to open it?” Riyan asked.

Bart sighed. “We have to. It could hold what we came here searching for though I find that unlikely in the extreme.” He glanced to the others, “You should stay back.” While the others remained where the passage turned, he moved forward. His senses were telling him that this wasn’t right, but what else could he do.

He took a single, careful step at a time towards the chest. His father had told him of situations like this where chests were placed in catacombs and other places as a lure to the unwary.

Almost his entire concentration was directed to the floor before the chest and where he’s placing each foot. He worked his way gradually closer until he felt an ever so slight shift beneath his foot and froze. It was a pressure plate of some kind, he was sure of that. He had a few guesses about what it would do when he removed his foot, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

He brought his other foot, which was still hovering in the air a couple inches off the ground, back down next to the other. Then he slowly crouched down into a squatting position. Beginning

to slowly rock back and forth on the balls of his feet, he braced himself. When he finally rocked backwards to the right angle, he leaped with all his strength back towards where the others were standing.

As soon as his feet left the floor, a section of the floor stretching from one side of the passage to the other, and extending from two feet behind the point where his feet had been to just before the chest, opened up.

“Catch him!” Riyan shouted as he raced forward and caught Bart by the arm as he came to land. His leap had cleared the trap opening by a solid foot and he quickly steadied himself.

“Thanks,” he said to Riyan.

“What happened?” Kevik asked.

“Sprung a trap,” Bart replied. He turned around to face the others and said, “This place could prove quite deadly.”

“Yeah,” agreed Riyan as he stared at the pit, “I can see that.”

“Who’s got the rope?” Bart asked.

“I do,” replied Chad. He opened up his pack and pulled out the coil of rope. “What do you need it for?”

As Bart took the rope he said, “To see if there are any more traps over there.” He nodded over to the two areas of the floor on the far side of the pit, situated to either side of the chest.

The pit as it turned out was fifteen feet deep. When Riyan took the lantern to look into it he found the sides to be sheer all the way down and the bottom looked to be covered in long spiny spikes. The floor that had fallen in was actually hinged to the floor on their side. The gleam of bones among the spikes said this trap had caught the unwary before.

Bart tied the rope to his pack and moved to the edge of the pit. He swung the pack like a pendulum until he had enough momentum then released the rope so the pack would sail over the pit and hit the floor on the right side of the chest. The other end of the rope was firmly held in his hand so he could retrieve his pack after it landed.

When the pack hit the floor next to the chest and nothing happened, he hauled in the rope. Then he did it again, this time having his pack land on the left side of the chest. As soon as the pack hit the left side, the floor tilted towards the pit at a forty five degree angle.

“That’s why you never assume it’s safe,” Bart said as he pulled his pack back in. “First you encounter the pit. If you survive that, and you’re foolish to believe the pit was the only trap, you jump across. The thief would then have a fifty-fifty chance of landing on the solid side. If he landed on the other, he would lose his balance when the floor tilted and would plummet down to the spikes below.”

“Nasty,” said Chad.

“I’m sure that was the intention,” he said. Bart didn’t untie his pack from the rope when he opened it to get his lockpicks. “Might need it again,” he told them.

“You’re not planning on opening that chest are you?” asked Kevik.

“Yes I am,” he said. He then took the other end of the rope and secured it around his middle. Then he handed the rest of it to Riyan. “Make sure that if I fall you stop me before I hit the bottom.”

"I thought it was safe," said Riyan, indicating the floor on the right side.

"The trigger might have rusted over the years," he explained, "or it could be set to only go off when the weight of a man is on it. In case a thief did what I just did with my pack."

"Oh," Riyan said, then he nodded. "I get you."

"Hold on tight but give me enough slack to reach the other side." When he's sure there's enough slack and Riyan gave him the go ahead, he turned back to the pit. Then with a running start, he leaped and cleared the pit opening and landed on the remaining small section of floor next to the chest. Once there he waited a moment to be sure nothing untoward happened.

"Alright," he said to the others, "I think it's safe. Still, don't let go of the rope."

"We won't," Riyan assured him. Chad was there with him holding the rope.

He gave the lock a once over before taking out two of his picks. Pretty sure that there wasn't a trap in the chest itself, he still moved slowly and carefully when he inserted the picks into the lock. After a moment, he felt the tumbler move and the lock was open.

Before he opened the lid, he replaced the picks back in the rolled leather. Then he gripped the lid and very carefully opened it. Inside he could see the glimmer of gold coins. There were a dozen of them lying on the bottom of the chest. They were exactly the same as the others they had found in the chest yesterday.

"Got some more of the gold coins," he said.

Then he collected them and put them in the pouch hanging from his hip. Once he had them all, he closed the lid and jumped back over the pit.

"How many?" asked Riyan.

"A dozen," he replied. He pulled them from his pouch and gave each of them three, including Kevik.

Kevik held up one of the coins from his share and took a really close look at it. When he was done, he saw that the others were staring at him. "What?" he asked.

"Uh, we would appreciate it if you wouldn't tell anyone where we found these," Bart said.

He met Bart's gaze for a moment then asked, "Why?"

"It might arouse certain questions that you will be unable to answer," Riyan said.

"Then maybe you should explain things to me," he suggested.

Riyan and Bart glanced at one another for a moment, then Bart nodded. Riyan turned back to Kevik and asked, "You ever heard of the King's Horde?"

"Sounds familiar," he replied. "What is it?"

"It's a treasure people have been trying to find for centuries," explained Riyan. He then held up one of his coins with the symbol side towards Kevik. "This is the King's insignia, or so we believe."

"Not just us but many others do too," added Bart. "If word got around that you had a coin bearing it, you would be inundated by people wanting to know where you found it."

Kevik glanced at the coin in his hand when Bart finished.

"A stash of copper coins bearing the same markings as these was discovered years ago and sparked a massive surge in treasure hunting," Chad said.

Kevik looked from one to the other then finally settled on Riyan. “You guys are looking for the King’s Horde yourself?” he asked. They didn’t reply but he could see the truth in their eyes. “And the trail led you here.”

Riyan nodded.

“Then the key you expect to find here...?” he asked and trailed off.

“That’s right,” admitted Riyan. “It will hopefully open the Horde’s hiding place.”

“Do you know where it is?” he asked.

They grew silent. “We have an idea,” Bart finally said.

“Alright,” Kevik nodded. “I’m in.”

“What do you mean you’re in?” asked Chad.

“I mean I’m willing to help you in your search to find the key and open the Horde’s lock,” he clarified.

“We never...” Chad said as he began to argue.

“Very well,” Riyan said, cutting him off. “A magic user would be most useful in this endeavor I’m sure. Besides,” he said as he glanced at Bart and Chad, “he now knows about it.”

Chad looked like he was about to argue the point when Bart said, “Fair enough. An equal share.” Then he turned to Kevik, “But you have to keep this secret. If word got out...”

“I understand,” he assured them.

A moment of silence hung between them before Riyan cleared his throat. “Maybe we should continue searching for the key?”

Bart nodded and led them back to the main passage. They turned down to the right again and went a short ways before another passage branched off to their left. Ahead of them they could see where the passage they were currently following turned sharply to the right.

“Continue on ahead,” Riyan suggested.

Bart nodded and passed by the passage on the left then turned the corner to the right. After the turn, the passage went another ten feet before ending at another passage running left and right.

“Left this time,” piped up Chad.

Since one way was as good as another, they turned to the left. The passage continued on for a ways before turning sharply to the left. A little further they came to where a passage branched off to their left and extended past the light of the lantern. Ahead of them the passage went forward several more paces before turning to the right.

“Left again,” said Chad.

“Why not?” agreed Riyan.

Turning into the passage branching to the left, they followed it. The passage went straight for a short ways then turned to the right. After another short walk it turned back to the left, went a little further then turned once more to the left. Shortly after that the passage ended at another one moving left and right.

“Try right this time,” suggested Riyan.

So Bart led them down to the right and they came to a narrower passage branched off to their left. Bart turned down the new passage, then when it turned to the right, they saw a chest with an open pit before it.

“We’ve already been here,” Bart said.

“This place is a maze,” observed Riyan. “How on earth are we ever going to find our way without getting lost?”

They returned back to the main passage and thought about different strategies they could employ. Finally Riyan came up with one they thought would work. They would use the copper coins found in the chest above to mark which way they’ve already gone. When they came to an intersection, they would put one coin in the passage through which they just approached the intersection, and two coins at the beginning of the passage through which they leave the intersection. That way if they returned to a passage, they would know which way they had come from originally, and which way they had taken when they departed.

So they took a few minutes to go up the stairs and opened the door behind which the chest lay. Riyan stood next to the door to make sure it did not close on them this time. Then the others began filling their packs, including Riyan’s, with copper coins. There were easily a couple hundred coins, and they put fifty in each pack. They didn’t want to overload themselves. They could always come back for more.

Finished with filling their packs, they returned back to the kitchen and went down the stairs. This time when they returned to the junction just outside the stairs, Riyan placed a single copper coin on the ground at the mouth of the passage with the stairs, indicating that they had come this way. Then when they returned down the passage to the right, he placed two coins at its mouth to indicate this was the way they went.

When they followed the passage back down to the branching leading to the chest and pit, he put two coins on the ground just within the passage saying they’ve been down there. They continued to retrace their steps until they had gone over the exact same path as they had before.

“Okay,” Bart said when they returned to the passage leading to the stairs, “now we can continue.”

“This sure seemed complicated,” Kevik replied.

“It is,” agreed Bart. “But if this place is set up like a labyrinth, then this will help.” Bending over, he made an arrow of coins that pointed towards the stairs. “Just in case,” he said as he stood back up.

“There’s still that one passage off that way,” Riyan said as he pointed down the way they went the first time, “that we have yet to explore.”

“Okay,” Bart said then headed off down the corridor. Starting at the junction with the arrow of coins, they continued down and turned right. Then a short ways further the passage ended at another running left and right. They saw one coin in the one they’re exiting and two coins to their left.

Turning left, they followed this passage to where it turned to the right, then continued forward until they came to another passage branching off to their left. Again, a single coin from the way they came. Two coins in the passage to their left, so they continued forward into the

passage that had no coins. Thus they were entering uncharted territory. Riyan placed three coins on the ground in the new passage to continue marking the order in which they took the passages.

The passage quickly turned right, then after a short way turned right again. A long passage, the longest single passage they've yet come across, then a turn to the left. Another short passage before they again turned left, then another very long passage ending at a door.

"This must be it," Riyan said. He was about to move forward when Bart stopped him.

"Haven't you learned anything yet?" Bart asked. "Stand back and let me take a look."

Riyan looked sheepish but backed out of his way. He and the others remained ten feet back from the door as Bart moved forward to examine it.

Bart stepped carefully as he approached the door and made it safely all the way to it. Before touching the handle he gave it and the lock a once over. Everything looked normal so he grabbed the handle and tried to pull the door open only to find it locked. Taking out his two picks, he set to work on the lock and felt it click open. Replacing the picks in the rolled leather, he put it back into his pack. Taking the handle, he pulled it open.

Whoosh!

Suddenly the door slammed open and a violent flow of water poured out. It picked him and the others up and carried them down the passage. The water extinguished the lantern and they were plunged into darkness. A bobbing light appeared just as the water washed them into a vertical shaft. They plummeted downward.

Riyan screamed as he knew his end had come. Then all of a sudden, something sticky grabbed hold of him and stopped his fall. He slammed into the side of the shaft but his downward fall had halted. A moment later the torrent of water subsided, then came to a halt.

He was quick to realize that the sticky object happened to be Kevik's arm. He was encased in his own green goo spell and had Chad stuck to him as well. Hanging upside down, he was stuck to the side of the wall. Bart was nowhere to be seen.

"You okay?" Riyan asked Chad.

"Yeah," he replied. "You?"

"A bit rattled but I'll be okay." Riyan then glanced to Kevik and saw his eyes moving. "You alright?"

A muffled reply came out from the goo and he took that as an affirmative.

"Bart!" Riyan cried out. He looked down the shaft but saw only darkness. "Bart!"

"What?" came the reply. Only it came from above not below.

"Man I thought you were a goner!" Riyan yelled up at him.

"Me too," he said. "I managed to catch the lip and somehow held on while the water poured over me. Almost lost my grip a couple times."

"Get us out of here," Chad hollered up to him.

"Hang on," he said. Then they heard him laugh to himself. "I guess you guys are kind of 'stuck' down there." More laughter came as he began lowering the rope.

Riyan watched the rope descend and when it came within reach he and Chad both grabbed hold of it. The only problem was they were still stuck to the goo coating Kevik. "Can you hold all three of us if the goo was gone?" he hollered.

“Maybe,” he said. “But there’s no way I could pull you up. Someone would have to climb the rope to the top and give me a hand.”

“Chad,” Riyan said. “How good are you at climbing a rope?”

“About like you,” he replied. “Lousy.”

“Yeah.” Neither one of them ever climbed a rope before. It wasn’t likely they’d be able to do it now.

“What are you guys doing down there?” Bart hollered down to them.

Riyan ignored him as a plan came to him. “Kevik, can you dispel the goo then recast it fast?” He could see his head nod slightly. “Alright,” he said to Chad, “this is what we’re going to do...”

Bart was waiting impatiently for them to do something but the rope remained slack. “Bart!” he heard Riyan holler. “When you feel tension on the rope, haul Chad up.”

“You got it!” he yelled back down. Bracing himself, he waited. Then all of a sudden, the rope jerked as Chad’s weight pulled at it. Bart began hauling him up until he appeared at the lip of the pit. From there Chad was able to use his free hand to help haul himself out while Bart continued to pull.

“Thanks man,” Chad said when he was fully back in the passage.

“You’re welcome,” Bart said. He then went to the lip and looked over the edge. It looked as if Riyan and Kevik were further down the shaft than they were before.

“Kevik dispelled the goo,” Chad explained. “Then he and Riyan fell past the end of the rope before recasting it again and sticking to the side of the shaft once more.”

Bart nodded, “That was a good idea.” Then to those still in the shaft, “Here comes the rope.” He began lowering the rope. If they had fallen much further the rope wouldn’t have been long enough, but as it was, they had a foot to spare.

“You guys get this right,” Bart hollered. “We don’t have any more slack.”

“Don’t worry,” Riyan hollered back, “you and Chad just work on hauling us up when Kevik dispels the goo.”

He and Chad gripped the rope and braced themselves in the passage. “Okay!” Bart hollered. Then all of a sudden, the rope jerked in their hands and they almost lost their grip.

“Damn!” cursed Chad as the weight of Riyan and Kevik pulled on the rope.

“Okay, together,” said Bart through clinched teeth. It took great effort to maintain his hold on the rope, and even more to begin hauling it up. Hand over hand, they slowly drew their friends out of the depths.

When they reached about halfway up, Chad grunted, “I’m not going to be able to continue.”

“Yes you are!” asserted Bart. “It’s not much further.

Chad gritted his teeth and through sheer force of will, kept his protesting muscles moving as Riyan and Kevik drew ever closer to the top.

Finally, the top of Riyan’s head appeared over the top and the bobbing orb of Kevik’s appeared as it bobbed into view.

“Chad,” said Bart with great effort. “I’ll hold them. You help them up.”

Chad let go of the rope with relief and moved to the edge while Bart held them all by himself. First Riyan, then Kevik came over the lip and onto the passage. When the rope was free again, Bart let go and collapsed to the ground. "Oh my arms," he groaned.

"You okay?" Riyan asked as he came close.

"Just give me a minute," he replied. "I think we need to take a break."

Riyan nodded, "That might not be a bad idea."

The four of them settled against the walls and broke out some rations. It was a bit damp from the dousing of water. Riyan discovered that his lantern must be at the bottom of the pit. Fortunately Chad had a spare attached to his pack and soon light once more filled the passage.

"It would seem we need to have a bit more caution from here on out," Chad said.

"Where did this shaft come from anyway?" Kevik asked. "It wasn't there when we came through the first time."

"Just part of the trap," Bart explained. "I never even heard one like this before. But apparently when the door was opened, the trapdoor opened too. Then the water was to wash the intruder into the shaft and that would be that."

Riyan glanced to Kevik and grinned. "You earned your place with us after such quick thinking," he said. "How did you ever think to use the goo spell in such a way?"

He returned the grin and replied, "My master said that as a magic user, we were at the mercy of the spells we knew. He insisted that I be versatile in applying them, always thinking of different ways in which they could be used. In this case, the picture of how the goblin stuck to the side of your horse back when we first met came to mind and I acted."

"A good thing you did too," Chad praised. "Or it would have been the end of all three of us."

"Just did what I had to," he said. Inside he was beaming though he tried not to show it. His master would have been proud.

Chapter Twenty-Two

After they finished eating and everyone had rested, Bart explained to the others he planned to go and look at the room where the water came from. He told them to wait on this side of the pit until he returned. Taking the lantern from Chad, he jumped to the other side of the pit and began walking to the room. Behind him, the glow from Kevik's bobbing light appeared.

There was still a trickle of water making its way down the passage from the room. He walked through the door and into the room. It was large, the light from the lantern failed to reach its

uppermost reaches. In a couple areas there were steady trickles of water coming from the dark heights of the room. All but one of the trickles made their way down the sides of the room. The other one however fell freely and splashed on the floor.

He inspected the door and the frame. He discovered how once the door was shut, it would create a tight seal with the doorjamb. This would allow the water trickling down to begin filling the room for the next intruder. He admired the work that must have gone into putting this particular trap into effect.

After a quick search to make sure there was no other exit, he left the room and made his way back to the others. He left the door open so the water could escape.

"That was a pretty clever trap," he told the others upon his return. Hopping over the pit, he saw they were ready to continue the exploration.

"Clever enough to almost get us killed," Riyan said.

"I know," replied Bart with a grin. "Impressive."

He set out back the way they had come with the others following along behind. From that point they began the systematic search of what they've begun to call the Labyrinth. They called it that because of the many turns and branching passages.

Every time they would come to a junction, the first thing they checked for was the presence of copper coins. If some were present, they would take the passage that didn't have any as yet. Each time they crossed through the junction, they would add a coin. So if they came to one they already had gone through, there would be two passages marked with coins. One passage would be marked with one coin, which would indicate from which direction they had originally entered the intersection. There would also be a two coin passage indicating the direction they had gone that first time. Then when they took a third way, they would set three coins down, and then four if they happened to pass through a junction where four ways to go were possible.

Their search led them down one passage after another. Truly this place deserved the name, Labyrinth. Finally, they came to a room at the end of one of the smaller, branching passages. It held two chests sitting across from each other at either end of the room.

"Stay out in the hallway," Bart said to the others as he made to enter the room. Carrying the lantern with him, he moved slowly and carefully to the chest on the right.

"Be careful," offered Kevik.

"Don't plan to be otherwise," replied Bart. He worked his way closer to the chest and stopped five feet away. The memory of the last time when the floor opened up was still vivid in his mind.

Taking his pack which was still tied to the rope, he began tossing it onto the floor in front of the chest. When that failed to produce a reaction, he tried the area next to the chest and then finally began hitting the chest itself. Still, nothing happened.

"Maybe this one doesn't have a trap," suggested Chad.

"I wouldn't bet on it," Bart replied.

"We've come across others before that failed to go off," said Riyan. "Maybe it's the same thing here."

“That might be,” nodded Bart. He set the lantern on the floor so the light shone brightly upon the face of the key hole, then he took small steps toward the chest. The face of the chest was nondescript, it looked like all the others. He checked near the keyhole for any markings that the chest maker might have put there to indicate a trap was present, but it was clear.

He thought to himself that this chest might actually be safe. After removing his two picks, he knelt down before the lock and began working on it. As he worked, he took his time and finally the lock clicked open. Breathing a sigh of relief, he replaced the picks back in the rolled leather and put it in his shirt before lifting the lid.

Bracing himself, he lifted the lid. Again, nothing happened. Inside he found a small book with red bindings centered in the bottom of the chest. He turned his head to where the others were waiting and said, “There’s a book in here.”

He reached inside to pick it up. Just as his fingers touched it Kevik asked, “Are there any markings on it?”

That question may have saved him from being blinded. He turned his head towards Kevik to reply as he lifted the book from the bottom. He said, “No, there isn’t...” then a spray of liquid shot from the back side of the chest and hit him in the side of the head just behind the ear. When the liquid hit him, he cried out and jumped backwards.

“Bart!” exclaimed Riyan as he came close. The smell of smoldering hair permeated the room. He quickly got his water bottle and began pouring it over the affected area. When the last drop was poured, Bart’s hair in that area looked singed. The skin was a bit red underneath and the top of his ear sported a blister, but other than that there was nothing serious.

“If that had hit your face...” Chad began.

“It would have blinded me,” replied Bart. He felt the affected area and then allowed Riyan to inspect it.

“I think you’ll survive,” Riyan told him. “It doesn’t look as if anything permanent was done.”

“Thank goodness,” he said. He held up the book that was in the chest.

Kevik came closer and took the book. “It doesn’t look magical,” he stated. He looked it over, gave the front and back careful consideration, but didn’t open it.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” Bart asked.

“Not yet,” he replied. Then suddenly the book began to glow blue, telling the others that he was casting his identification spell. The others waited until the glow faded then looked to him expectantly.

A grin came over him as he stared at the book.

“What?” asked Riyan.

He glanced up at them and said, “There are two spells within this book. Both are new to me.”

“Can you use them?” Chad asked.

“Perhaps,” he said. “I will need to study them for some time, but first I’m going to copy them into my spell book.”

“Not right this second though,” Riyan said.

He shook his head. “No. I’ll do it when I am not otherwise occupied.” Opening his pack, he placed the book inside with the two spell books already there.

“Still one more chest,” Bart said as Riyan gave him a hand up. As he turned and began using his pack tied to the rope to test for pits, he overheard Chad asking Riyan, “Why would they put such a thing here?” He meant the little book.

“To encourage thieves to keep pressing their luck,” Bart replied for Riyan. He tossed the pack and pulled it back only to toss it yet again. “If you had something of extreme value, say the key we’re looking for, you would want to kill off any thief that found their way in here before he got to it. Right?”

“Absolutely,” replied Kevik. “Better to lose less valuable items.”

“Correct,” Bart said as he threw the pack again. “Now, the best thing that could happen is for the thief to die before he even gets to the treasure you’re trying to keep hidden. That’s what this place is designed for. A thief would hardly continue to trip the various traps you have spent such time in constructing if every time he opened a chest, there was nothing in it. You have to put the carrot before the mule if you want the mule to walk into quicksand.” He grinned. “That’s a saying my father used to use.”

Finished with testing the area with the rope and pack, he tossed it over to the others and began slowly working his way towards the other chest. “That’s why it’s worthwhile to open each chest we come to.”

“But at the same time you risk serious injury and death,” argued Riyan.

Bart paused and glanced back to him. He shrugged then said, “Such is the life of a thief.” Turning back to the chest he resumed his slow, methodical progress. “Think on this too. If the thief was to find enough of the smaller treasure, he might feel the risk no longer was worth it and leave. After all...” he paused a moment as he concentrated on the floor before him. Not finding anything, he took another step. “...if someone has the wherewithal to build a complex like this, he surely can afford to lose a few trinkets here and there.”

“I think I get what you’re trying to say,” Riyan said.

“Good,” Bart replied. He finally arrived at the side of the chest. “Could you move the lantern closer for me,” he said to Chad.

“Sure,” Chad said. He then went and picked up the lantern and set it down where Bart indicated. After it was on the floor he returned to where the others were watching.

He knelt down before the chest and was running his fingers lightly along the front. “I don’t think so,” they heard him mumble to himself. He took out two picks again. Only this time he didn’t remove the two he usually did. These were slightly longer with long flat heads.

He placed the head of one into the seam on the right side of the chest between the front and the edge binding, then did the same with the other on the left side of the front. Slowly, he began working the two tools into the seams. When the two heads were completely inserted within the seams, he began prying the front cover. After only a moment of effort, the front side of the chest popped open to reveal a handful of gems glittering inside.

Bart glanced back to the others and grinned. “The top is a fake,” he explained. “No matter how much you work at it, there’s no way to open it. In fact,” he paused while he pointed to the keyhole, “if you were to try to pick the lock, that would trigger the trap.”

Reaching in, he removed the gems and handed them to Riyan who put them in his pack. He replaced his tools back with his other picks and slid the rolled leather inside his shirt. Standing up, he indicated the passage leading from the room and said, "Shall we?"

Bart led the way out and they resumed their exploration. After a search down a dead end loop, they turned back and began following another of the main passages, one they hadn't been down before. Not too long after they entered the passage, another smaller one branched off to their right. Thus far, the smaller ones seemed to have yielded treasure of one kind or another.

Turning into it, they followed it down until it turned to the left. There it came to an end ten feet past the turn. The light from the lantern glittered off of a pile of coins and jewels sitting in the middle of the floor at the end of the passage.

"If that isn't a blatant declaration of a trap being present, I don't know what is," Bart said as he glanced at the others.

"Are you going to try and get it?" Riyan asked.

Bart turned back to him and nodded. "We could use the money. Stay here." Turning back to face the treasure, he began using his pack-on-the-rope to test for pitfalls. When none were detected, he set the pack down and slowly moved forward. Everything his father ever said to him screamed that this was trapped. No one ever left treasure lying out in the open like this unless it was being used as a lure.

Whoever built this place has so far used vastly different, ingenious traps for every circumstance. He still couldn't believe that water one. Whoever had devised it certainly deserved a bonus.

He stopped when he was three feet from the pile. Holding up the lantern, he scanned the walls but didn't find anything unusual. The area of the floor around the treasure appeared as it should, which only made him all the more nervous. Something here has to trigger something. It has to!

Crouching down, he ran his hand over the surface of the floor between himself and the treasure. After a minute of careful examination, he found nothing out of the ordinary. He crept forward a little further, close enough for him to actually be able to touch the treasure.

He removed his belt knife, not the new one but the older knife he's had for years and moved its tip towards the edge of the pile.

"Find anything?" Chad suddenly hollered to him.

Chad's question startled him and the knife point accidentally dislodged three of the coins from the pile. He froze as he expected something nasty to develop, but nothing did. Turning back to Chad with an angry expression he said, "Keep quiet!"

With a guilty look upon his face, Chad replied quietly, "Sorry."

Bart took a deep, calming breath then returned his attention back to the pile. The three coins that had fallen lay next to the pile and he picked them up. They were regular gold coins similar to those they had found earlier. He placed them in his belt pouch before moving his knife back towards the pile. It's possible one of the coins or gems could in some way be the trigger. It took a rather special type of triggering mechanism to use an item so small, but he's heard tales of it being done.

He slid the point of the knife carefully beneath a coin. When enough of the blade was beneath it, he lifted the coin very slowly from the pile. Once it was free and nothing happened, he put the coin into his pouch. Then one by one, he repeated the process and put the liberated coins and gems into his belt pouch.

After ten minutes of this, the others realized he was going to take awhile and made themselves comfortable against the wall of the passage where it made the turn.

Bart's back was beginning to ache by the time there were only seven coins and three gems left in the pile. He was amazed he made it this far without anything happening. It was possible though, that whatever trap was here could have become deactivated over time, that does happen.

Moving his knife forward once more he went for the largest of the three remaining gems and slid the knife's point beneath it. Before the tip had even reached halfway beneath the gem, it met resistance. Bart couldn't help himself but grin. There was a trap and it would be triggered by the removal of this gem. Unfortunately the gem happened to be the largest one of the pile and therefore worth a lot of coins.

Two of the remaining coins were positioned beneath the gem, the rest were not. He quickly picked up all the remaining coins and gems but the two that were under the trapped gem. Glancing back at the others he said, "I found the trap."

"Can you disarm it?" asked Riyan.

"I'm not sure," he replied. Then he showed them the sizable gem still there on the floor. "It's attached to that one," he said. "If you were to take the gem up off the floor, it would pull the cord it's attached to and that would set off the trap."

"Can you cut it?" asked Kevik.

"Often traps such as these will go off if it's cut," he explained. "It might be a good idea if you three were to go back and wait out in the main passage until I'm done."

"Just leave it if you think it's too risky," Riyan told him. "It's not worth your life."

He had already thought about that. Unfortunately there's this little matter of a death mark hanging over him and he'll need all the coins he can to get it removed. He seriously needed that gem. Plus he hated to walk away from a challenge.

"I'll be okay," he said. "You just wait out there for me."

"Alright," Riyan said. "If you're sure?" When he received Bart's nod, he and the others left the smaller passage and returned to the main one. Kevik's bobbing sphere appeared to give them light while Bart retained the lantern.

Once they were gone, Bart unrolled the leather pack containing his lockpicks. For this he would need a more specialized tool than the ones he's been using. Another invention of his father's, he removed a three inch tool. In the middle of the tool was what his father called a vise grip. It was designed for situations such as this. You placed the cord or whatever the triggering mechanism was, provided it was thin and narrow like a string, within the vise grip. Then you tightened the grip until the trigger was held tightly. After that you would be able to cut what you were after from the trigger safely.

The first thing he did was to very carefully move the two coins beneath the gem ever so slightly away from each other. He needed a gap between them wide enough through which to

slip the tool. Once he had the space, he got down on his belly and very gently maneuvered the tool beneath the gem between the two coins.

When he felt it was in the correct position, he gradually worked the tool sideways until he felt the triggering cord slip into the vise. Then ever so carefully, he turned the screw at the end of the pick and closed the vise on the cord. He had to be careful for the cord was incredibly old and was likely to break under the slightest pressure.

As soon as the screw was turned as far as it could go, he took out another of the tools. This one was a five inch narrow rod with a blade shielded by a small piece of hardened leather on the end. This was actually the first time he ever had occasion to use this particular instrument. His father had said that when he came up with this one, he ruined many a pick case before he learned to put a cover over the blade.

After removing its cover, he slid the rod under the gem next to the pick holding the cord. Then he began cutting the cord above the pick holding it. Very slowly, one strand of the cord at a time, he sawed through it. When he felt the tool cut the last strand, he braced himself but nothing happened.

He lifted the gem and saw his pick still there holding the cord between its vises. Flipping the gem over, he discovered the cord had been attached to the bottom of the gem by a small metal staple. The holes that the ends of the staple made in the gem would lower its overall value. However, a creative jeweler could set it in a necklace or other ornamental item where the back would be covered by something else. After that, only an expert jeweler would be able to tell.

Quite happy with himself, he pocketed the other two coins that the gem had been resting upon. His knife-pick he replaced back in with the others. That only left the vise-pick. He did not want to leave without it. With the way things were, he may never see another one again. But if he removed it from the cord, it would trigger the trap.

"You okay in there?" Riyan's voice came to him from the passage.

"Yeah," he hollered back. "Be just a minute."

"Alright," came the reply. "Hurry up, Kevik's bobbing light is beginning to drive me crazy."

Bart grinned for he found the constantly bobbing light annoying too. Why anyone would create a spell like that was beyond him. Then he returned to the problem at hand. The vise-pick.

Coming up with an idea, he pulled out the long string he had in the bottom of his pack. Then he secured one end of the string around the screw at the end of the vise pick. After that, he picked up his pack-on-a-rope and the lantern then began walking backwards to the other passage. As he went he played out the string until finally arriving in the main passage with the others.

"What's that for?" Chad asked when he saw the string.

"I'm recovering a tool," he explained. "But it's going to trigger the trap when I do."

"So you got the gem?" Riyan asked.

Bart patted his belt pouch and nodded. "Now all I need to do is get my tool back." He took the end of the string in hand and then began gently pulling on it. The last thing he wanted was for the string attached to the screw to come off or break.

Then suddenly, the strain that had been building on the sting was gone. He could hear the metallic clinking of the tool as it bounced along the floor of the passage.

“Bart!” hollered Riyan. “The ceiling’s coming down!”

He looked above him and saw where a stone block, the width of the smaller passage opening, was falling at him. Jumping back out of the way, he quickly pulled the string. The tool bounced along the passage as it headed for the rapidly closing opening. Then just before the stone settled to the floor, the tool emerged from beneath the falling stone.

With a thump, the stone settled against the floor, completely blocking the mouth of the passage. “That was close,” commented Kevik.

“I would hate to have been in there when that stone began to fall,” observed Chad.

“Me too,” agreed Bart. Untying the string from the screw, he put the string back in his pack and the vise-pick in with the others. After that he distributed the coins and gems to the others. He kept the largest gem, the one that the trigger had been attached to, for himself.

“Need a break?” asked Riyan.

Bart shook his head. “No, let’s keep going. The sooner we’re done with this the better.” Taking the lantern, he stepped out and once again they began combing the passages for the key.

They didn’t come across anything other than more crisscrossing passages and dead ends. Neither treasure nor rooms, just passages. After awhile they began coming to areas they have already been to, and even with the coins placed on the ground at the junctions, they’ve begun to get turned around.

Finally they came to the end of a passage with a door. “Man if this isn’t it I say we call it a day,” Riyan said. The past hour of wandering through passages has left him tired and discouraged.

“I think there is still one more area off that way,” Bart said pointing behind them and to the left, “that we haven’t been to yet. We passed by a passage with no coins on the way here.”

“Okay fine,” Riyan replied. “Check here and back there, then we call it a day.”

“Agreed,” said Bart. In fact, he was becoming rather tired as well. Sighing he said, “Stay here,” then went to the door. He went forward to do his pack-on-a-rope trick again. But same as the last dozen times, he failed to find anything. Of course he knew that the one time he didn’t do it would be the time he runs afoul of one.

Moving to the door, he grew cautious as he recalled the water behind that previous door he opened that almost killed them. He glanced behind him to tell the others to back away, but they had already done so.

Turning back to the door, he approached and began to notice how there were specks of soot on the door and the surrounding walls. Fire? How would there have been a fire here? Unless the trap somehow dealt with fire?

Then he began examining the walls leading away from the door and saw how they too held evidence that fire once raged through here. The specs of soot finally ended twenty feet away from the door.

“What is it?” asked Riyan. They had been watching him closely examining the walls.

“Soot,” he replied. Glancing down to them he said, “This whole end of the passage shows signs of there having been a fire here.”

“Fire?” asked Chad. “How is that possible?”

“I’m not sure,” he replied.

“Better leave the door alone then,” suggested Riyan. “No sense in risking it.”

But then Bart’s suspicious nature kicked in. What if this area had been treated like this in order to convince a thief not to try the door? After all the other traps a thief would have come across by this time, he would be getting rather paranoid about a stone passage with soot lining the end. He had almost walked away from it himself.

He turned back to Riyan and said, “I’m going to open the door.”

“Are you crazy?” Riyan asked him. “It’s not worth it. We can always come back if there is no other way.”

But Bart was already moving back to the door as he ignored Riyan. He checked the door again and found it locked. The lock was rather complicated, more complicated in fact than most locks he had come across down here. Despite its complexity he had it opened in just a few minutes.

After putting the lockpicks away, he took the handle of the door and opened it. The smell of lantern oil hit him a split second before gallons of lantern oil poured through the door and engulfed him.

Kevik was the first to realize what was happening and only his quick reflexes saved Bart from a horrible death. In the blink of an eye, he cast his goo spell and completely encased the lantern where it sat a few feet behind Bart. When the oil hit the lantern, the goo kept it upright and airtight. Otherwise the burning wick in the lantern would have ignited the lantern oil flowing out of the door into a fireball.

A string of expletives erupted from Bart at his own stupidity. The signs were there, he had just misinterpreted them. Now his clothing was soaked with lantern oil, and the fumes were making him cough.

He turned around and saw the others staring at him. They had backed up quite a bit to avoid coming into contact with the oil. “Don’t say anything,” he said.

Riyan shrugged, “I’m just glad Kevik reacted as fast as he did. I didn’t even realize what was happening before he had already reacted.”

Kevik grinned. “You have to react fast when you’re a magic user. Slow magic users tend not to survive very long.”

Bart nodded. “I see that.” He glanced to the goo coated lantern, the light coming from the burning wick within cast a green pall to the passage as it made its way through the goo. “I think you can get rid of that now,” he told Kevik.

“You sure?” Kevik asked. “Fumes are still present that may be ignited.”

Bart glanced to the lantern and could see the flame was dying out from lack of oxygen anyway. “Fine,” he said. “Wait until the flame dies out.” Bart then heard Riyan groan as Kevik’s bobbing sphere appeared to give them light.

“Isn’t there some other spell you could use?” Riyan asked.

“Sorry,” he replied. “This was the only light spell I’ve learned. At the time I thought having a light like this would be petty neat.”

“Seeing as how you are the only one with a light,” Bart said to Kevik, “how about checking out that room.” He indicated the room from where the oil poured out. “Don’t worry,” he added when he saw Kevik grow nervous, “I’ll come with you.”

“Alright,” Kevik agreed and began walking forward. Riyan and Chad accompanied him.

The oil fumes were very strong and they covered their nose and mouths with cloth to avoid breathing the worst of it. Inside the room, they found that it wasn’t really all that large, merely five feet square and ten feet high. A small round opening in the ceiling must be where they would pour in the lantern oil after resetting the trap.

“Pretty effective,” Bart commented as they left. “Open the door and the oil would be ignited by whatever source of light the thief had on him.”

“Unless he had an annoying bobbing light,” said Riyan dryly.

Bart chuckled.

By this time the flame in the lantern had died out and Kevik dispelled the goo spell. He picked it up and carried it with him as they quickly left the oil coated passage. When they made it back to the junction of passages, they came to a stop.

“I need to get this washed out,” Bart said indicating his oil soaked clothes. “My eyes are beginning to sting from the fumes.”

“What about that last area we have yet to check?” Riyan asked.

“Do it tomorrow,” he said. “There’s no way I can work traps and such as I am now.”

“Alright,” Riyan said. “Back to the surface.” In order to better find the area where they still needed to search, at every junction they came to, he took the coins that had been placed there to mark their passing and formed them into arrows pointing the way back to the unexplored area. That way on their return, they would have only to follow the arrows.

It took them some doing but they finally found the stairs leading back up to the kitchen. “It’s still light out!” exclaimed Chad. “I thought we had been down there longer.”

They went to a nearby window and looked out. From the position of the sun it looked like they still had a couple more hours of daylight left. Leaving the kitchen behind, they quickly made their way back to the hall where they found their horses safe and sound.

Bart went outside and to the small pool where they watered their horses and began to strip. He was quickly naked and used dirt to work the lantern oil out of his clothes. When the others showed up and saw what he was doing, he said, “Better dirty clothes than ones full of lantern oil.”

“But you’ve fouled the water,” complained Kevik. “What are we and the horses supposed to drink now?”

Giving him an irritated look, Bart said, “I’m sure there are other places around here. Go find one.”

“Come on,” Riyan said and then he and the others took the horses in search of water. As they left Bart behind, they heard a splash as he entered the water and began scrubbing the oil out of his hair and off his skin.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Later, they were back in the hall after watering the horses and allowing them to graze. Bart's clothes still had a touch of odor from the oil about them but it wasn't nearly as strong. They had decided, or rather Bart had decided, that they should rest before resuming their exploration. "After everything that happened today, I need a break."

"Not to mention the fact that we didn't get all that great a sleep last night either," Chad added.

"You could say that again," Kevik replied. "It took me over an hour to get back to sleep after the ghost battle."

A thoughtful look came over Riyan as he glanced outside. "You know, it might not be a bad idea to find another place to spend the night before it gets dark," he said. "If the battle we witnessed is a nightly occurrence, we'll not get much sleep tonight either."

Bart grinned. "You do have a point."

The others agreed and so it was decided to move to another building that had enough room for them and their horses. They searched the neighboring structures until they came across one that still had all four walls and most of its ceiling. It was a single story structure with a room large enough for their needs.

One wall of the room held windows that looked out towards what Riyan called the 'Command Building' as it held a commanding presence here in the ruins. They made their camp near that wall and put their horses on the far side of the room. There were a few scraggly bushes on that side they could munch on if they needed.

After a short stint of hauling in wood to last them through the night, they soon had a fire going. Seeing as how there was still some light left, Riyan took Chad with him to the edge of the ruins to hunt for a couple rabbits for dinner with his sling.

Chad followed his friend silently for a few minutes until they reached the forest's edge. Then he said, "Adventuring isn't what I had thought it was going to be."

Riyan glanced over his shoulder at his friend. "Oh?"

"I mean, we've narrowly escaped death a couple times now," he explained.

"What did you think it was going to be like?" Riyan asked. "A carefree adventure with no risks?" He glanced to his friend again and grinned. "You can't have one without the other you know."

"I realize that," Chad admitted.

“Remember all those tales we used to tell each other?” When he saw Chad nod, he continued. “This is just like those.”

“Yeah, but one of us usually died in those stories,” he said.

“Relax,” Riyan said reassuringly, “Bart’s with us, not to mention we now have a magic user on our side. Kevik seems a rather capable person.”

“True,” replied Chad. “He’s definitely quick with his magic.”

“So just relax,” Riyan told him as he turned his attention back to the forest. “A tale is a tale, but this is real life. A person is always more careful in real life than in a story.” Then from up ahead he saw the bushes move. “Shhh,” he said to Chad.

Moving forward, he began to twirl his sling. When the animal poked its head out, they readily recognized it as a kidog. Riyan then rapidly increased the twirl of his sling and released the stone. It flew straight and true, striking the kidog in the side.

With a cry of pain, the kidog lurched back into the bushes in an attempt to flee. The stone didn’t immediately kill it, rather it had crushed its left hindquarter. Riyan noticed it dragging its leg as it fled. He was amazed at how fast the kidog moved despite its useless extremity.

“After it!” hollered Riyan and then he and Chad raced into the bushes. They quickly overtook the kidog and came to a halt as it backed up against a tree. It bared its teeth and growled as it set to defend itself.

Chad pulled forth his sword and advanced upon it. “I got this,” he said confidently.

“If you say so,” replied Riyan. Just to be on the safe side, he placed another stone in his sling.

The kidog snarled and growled with its ears low against its skull as Chad closed the distance. “Be careful,” he heard Riyan say behind him. Gripping the sword in both hands, Chad moved to within striking distance. He and the kidog locked eyes for a brief moment before he yelled an inarticulate cry and swung the sword.

The kidog dodged clumsily to the side due to its injured leg but it needn’t bothered. Chad’s sword struck the tree half a foot above where he had been aiming. The blade sank in deep and lodged in the tree. Then the kidog snarled and leaped at him as he was trying to pull forth the sword from the trunk.

“Watch out!” yelled Riyan at the unexpected attack.

Chad failed to react in time and the kidog’s teeth sank into his left forearm. A cry of pain exploded from his throat as he forgot all about the sword and fell to the ground.

Then Riyan was there with his sling. He kept it closed with the rock in it as he began striking the kidog in the back with the stone filled cup.

“Get it off!” Chad yelled as he struggled to free himself. Already, blood was beginning to flow pretty good from where the kidog’s teeth were embedded in his flesh. Riyan kept pummeling the kidog with the stone in the sling until it finally let go. The animal backed away and moved off into the bushes.

Once it let go, Riyan immediately removed his shirt and began wrapping it around the wound on Chad’s arm. Out of the corner of his eye he kept alert for another attack by the kidog but it had slipped away.

“Is it bad?” asked Chad. His face was a bit pale and Riyan could tell he was fearful of what he might tell him.

“No,” he lied. He didn’t want to tell his friend that he had seen the white of the bone before he bandaged it up. “Let’s get you back to the others so we can fix you up better.” He tied it tight to lessen the blood loss, Chad had already lost quite a bit.

“Alright,” Chad said. With Riyan’s help he made it back to his feet. Then with his good hand he pulled the sword from the tree and somehow managed to return it to his scabbard.

Chad indicated where the kidog had gone and said, “It couldn’t have gotten far. We still could use its meat.”

“You sure?” questioned Riyan. His friend looked like he was one step away from passing out.

“Yeah,” he replied. He placed his good hand against the tree and leaned against it for support.

“I’ll take a quick look,” Riyan told him. He held his sling ready as he moved into the bushes after the kidog. It had only made it three feet before it had settled down beneath a large bush. Riyan could see its tail sticking out.

He stopped a few feet away and hollered back to Chad, “I found it.”

“Good. Kill it and let’s get out of here,” he said. From the sound of his voice, Riyan could tell that it was more a sense of vengeance than the desire of meat that prompted him wanting Riyan to kill it.

Riyan stared at the tail and saw it move ever so slightly. The kidog wasn’t dead. He could see why the town council of Quillim had posted a bounty on this animal. It was one mean critter.

Riyan began twirling his sling and then loosed the missile. It sailed toward the bush and he could hear it hit the kidog but it didn’t make a sound. He then removed his sword and walked forward. The tail was no longer moving and when he reached the bush he poked his sword in until he touched the kidog. It didn’t move.

Not for a second did he consider the animal dead. He cautiously reached down and grabbed the tail, all the while ready to jump back at the slightest evidence that it wasn’t dead.

He began pulling the animal out and when it completely cleared the bush, saw where his stone had smashed its chest area. The animal was definitely dead now. Picking it up, he carried it back to where Chad was waiting then helped his friend back to the others.

When they returned to the building where they were spending the night, Bart and Kevik were quick to realize something was wrong. After all, Chad had Riyan’s blood soaked shirt wrapped around his forearm.

“What happened?” Bart asked as he came forward.

“A kidog got hold of him,” Riyan replied.

Kevik waved them over to the fire. “Come here and let’s have a look at it.”

Riyan aided Chad who had grown a little wobbly from loss of blood over to sit next to Kevik.

“Now,” said Kevik, “let’s see what we have here.” While he undid the makeshift bandage from around the wound, he listened to Riyan as he related how this came to happen. When the

shirt came free, he saw the damage done by the kidog. "This is bad." Tendons were ripped and his whole forearm was a mass of torn flesh.

"How bad?" asked Chad weakly. His face had grown very pale when he saw his forearm and felt like he was about to pass out.

"Not so bad that we can't fix it," he replied. He motioned to get Riyan's attention. When he had it he asked, "Could you hand me my pack please?"

"Sure," said Riyan then went over to where they were stacked together and brought it over to him.

"Thank you," Kevik said as he took his pack. He set it on the ground before him and pulled out a vial.

Riyan recognized the vial as the one Kevik had tried to give his master when he was beneath the burning tree. "Healing potion?" he asked.

Kevik nodded. "Yes." Then he removed the wax seal from the top of the vial and pulled out the cork. He gave the vial to Chad and said, "Only drink half."

As Chad took the vial and began to drink, Bart asked, "Why only half?"

"My master once told me that if you poured some onto the wound itself, it accelerated the healing process," he explained.

Riyan nodded at the logic and stared at Chad's mauled forearm while he drank the potion. Once Chad consumed half as Kevik had instructed, he handed the vial back to him.

Kevik then took the vial and moved its mouth to an inch above the worst section of the wound. There he began pouring drops of the liquid onto the torn pieces of flesh.

Riyan, Bart, and Chad watched in wonder as the flesh seemed to be moving of its own volition as it moved back into place. Blood began filling the cavity formed by the wound as Kevik continued to drip the potion drop by solitary drop on various sections of the wound.

"What does it feel like?" Riyan asked Chad after the first few drops entered the wounded area.

"It stopped hurting," he told him. "It itches something fierce however."

"Whatever you do," cautioned Kevik, "don't scratch."

"I wasn't planning to," replied Chad.

The blood, now that it had filled the cavities of the wound, began spilling over the edge and dripping down his arm. "Flex your muscles," Kevik advised. "That way the potion will better understand what needs doing." He poured another dozen or so drops of the healing potion onto the wound before the vial was empty. He stoppered it once again and put it back in his pack.

Chad began making a fist with his hand and bending his arm at the elbow.

"I once heard of a man who had a much more severe wound than this on his leg," Kevik continued to say as the wound kept healing over. "He used a healing potion but made the mistake of remaining still. The potion worked fine in repairing his leg and it did save his life."

"But?" asked Bart.

Kevik glanced to him and grinned. "But, the magic of the potion didn't understand the difference between tendon, muscles and regular skin. You see the potion itself knows that it has to heal the body. From what I understand, it takes what's torn or damaged and binds it back

together. Of course, it doesn't always discriminate between what it should bind together or leave separate. So when the potion had run its course, it had healed the man alright. But where the wound had been in his leg, was now nothing more than one solid muscle that never worked right again."

"I had never heard that," said Chad as he continued to move and flex his elbow, wrist, and fingers.

"Not too surprising," replied Kevik. "Those who make the potions try to suppress such tales. It hurts their business."

"That's understandable," said Riyan.

"Bart," Kevik said to him, "let me see your water bottle."

Taking it off his belt, he handed it over and said, "Sure."

Kevik opened it and began pouring it over the blood drenched arm. When the first of the water hit his arm, Chad flinched in anticipated pain, but instead only felt a cool sensation.

The water began washing off the blood and soon they could see fresh skin underneath the blood. "It's healed!" exclaimed Chad excitedly. Kevik kept pouring the water until the blood was completely gone. Where a gaping wound had been just minutes before, was now a layer of smooth pink skin.

"How do you feel?" asked Kevik.

"Good," replied Chad. He glanced to Bart and Riyan. "There's no pain."

Kevik pushed his pack toward Chad with his foot. "See how it feels when you pick this up."

Chad reached down with his newly healed arm and picked up the pack. "There's a little pain," he said, "and some stiffness."

"But otherwise it feels okay?" asked Riyan hopefully.

Grinning, Chad said, "I think so." He set the pack down and turned his gaze to Kevik. "I don't know how I can thank you."

"You three saved me," he replied. "It's the least I could do. Now you better get some food and water in you. The potion may have healed your wound, but it took what it needed from you to do so."

"Just stay there and rest," Riyan told his friend. Then he patted him on the shoulder as he went and began to dress the kidog and make a spit to roast it over the fire. Once it was set and the aroma of roasting meat began filling the room, he took his bloody shirt outside and washed it.

Before the sun went down, the kidog was finished. Despite Chad's objections, they gave him most of the meat, while they satisfied themselves with a smaller portion augmented by stale rations.

After they ate, Chad quickly went to sleep since the healing potion had taken much of his energy. He curled up near the fire in his blanket and was out in no time. The others remained awake and talked as the ruins outside grew darker with the setting of the sun.

They were unanimous in deciding to allow Chad to rest through the night instead of pulling a watch. Bart took the first watch, Riyan the second, and Kevik wound up with the third. Riyan was less than happy about the situation, he hated the mid watch. But as Bart explained it, he needed to be rested since he will be the one risking life and limb disarming any traps they may

come across. Considering how many they have already come across, it's a fairly safe assumption that there will be more tomorrow. Kevik, he argued, will need to be alert in case he's called upon to cast magic in a hurry as he's done twice before.

Logic. What can you do when you're faced with unwavering logic? Not a dang thing. So Riyan rolled out his blanket near Chad and laid down in an attempt to get what rest he could before Bart woke him. Sleep wouldn't come, the events of the past few days kept running through his mind. Finally he forced his mind to still by concentrating on nothing but his breathing. He listened to his ever inhale and exhale, and when an errant thought tried to intrude, he squelched it. At last, sleep came.

"Riyan," he heard Bart say as he shook his shoulder lightly. Eyes snapping open, he actually groaned with the effort of coming awake.

"It's your turn," Bart said.

"It feels like I just fell asleep," Riyan said. He sat up and looked around. Chad and Kevik were still sleeping and the fire was burning merrily.

"You were out about four hours," replied Bart with a yawn. "It's been quiet."

Riyan got to his feet and went to the window overlooking the Command Building wherein the entrance to the secret underground network of passages lay. "Anything happen over there yet?" he asked Bart.

"Not that I've noticed," he said. Lying down, Bart pulled his pack close to use as a pillow and tried to make himself comfortable.

Riyan turned back to the window and looked out. Overhead the quarter moon was beginning its arc across the sky, a hint of a breeze was blowing in, and the place was unnaturally quiet. He remembered how last night it had been quiet too, just before all hell broke loose. At least they're not going to be in the middle of it again if it should happen tonight.

He continued to gaze out the window for a few more minutes. Then he noticed the fire could use more wood and walked over to put a couple more pieces on the fire. "That's better," he said to himself when the wood began to catch and the fire came back to life. The flames gave a comforting light that pushed back his feelings of unease. Just looking out at the darkened ruins gave him the creeps.

For the next couple of hours he walked around the room they were in, at times stopping to peer out at the ruins through one of the many windows. Now and then, he would return and place more wood on the fire when it began to burn low.

It was during one of the times when he was staring out the window that the horses began to grow restless. He glanced back to where they were huddled together at the far side of the room. His nervousness spiked when he saw all three were awake and acting skittish.

Riyan glanced to the sleeping forms of his comrades. They were still sleeping soundly. Even though the fire wasn't really low enough for more wood, he went over and placed most of their remaining fuel in the flames. He kept an eye on the restless horses as the flames grew higher and higher. When all the shadows were at last banished by the fire, he didn't see anything at the other side of the room except the occasional flash of equine eyes reflecting the fire's light back to him.

Clang!

“Oh no,” he said to himself as he heard the clang of metal on metal. It was the same sound he had heard last night before the onslaught of the ghost battle. He immediately moved to the window and looked out over to the Command Building but the night remained quiet.

Clang!

There it went again. His anxiety was definitely peeking as he tried to ascertain where the sound was coming from. At the other end of the room, the horses began to grow even more agitated.

Riyan couldn't take it by himself anymore and he went to awaken Bart. Before he could reach his sleeping friend, the horses began screaming and the smell of blood filled the room.

“Bart! Chad!” he yelled as he looked in horror as two of their horses fell to the floor. Numerous wounds covered their bodies as even more materialized.

Bart was the first one up and saw where Riyan was looking. He turned his attention to the horses just as the last horse fell. Horror filled him as before the final horse hit the ground, something sheared its head off and sent it flying across the room.

Chad and Kevik were up by this time and staring at the carnage. “Run!” Kevik yelled.

They turned and bolted for the door. Chad and Kevik made it through the door first, while Bart dove through the window. “Where do we go?” Kevik hollered.

“There!” yelled Riyan as he fled the building. He was pointing to the Command Building. “It's our only hope.” Sprinting, they headed for the building.

“What's happening?” asked Chad. Then he stumbled and fell to the ground. Riyan was quick to his side and helped him to his feet. With an arm around Riyan's neck, he hurried as fast as he could.

“I don't know,” Riyan replied.

Clang!

The noise of the swords striking one another followed them to the double doors of the building.

Clang!

Bart reached the doors first and swung one open. “Hurry!” he yelled as he held it open for them. Within the darkness behind Riyan and Chad he could see a barely visible shimmering. “Don't look back!” he hollered as he urged them on.

Kevik flew through the doors first and came to a stop just inside. He turned back just as Riyan and Chad appeared. He cast his bobbing sphere spell to give them light.

Clang!

Bart followed them in and slammed the door shut. He and the others came together as they stared at the doors, afraid of what might be out there.

Smash!

A noise like breaking glass came from behind them. They turned and saw a ghost in armor with a sword, fighting with something that could not be seen at the window.

“Here we go again,” moaned Chad.

Smash! Crash! Bang!

Throughout the room, the sounds of shattering glass could be heard as other ghostly forms began appearing and fighting unseen opponents. All around them ghostly forms continued to materialize just as...

Bam!

...the front doors burst open.

“Back!” yelled Bart. “Back to the hallways!”

They turned and fled the hall until they reached the hallways leading further into the building. No sooner do they get there than the lord and his entourage appeared just as they had the night before. Moving to the fore of his men, the lord again fought whatever was attacking them.

“Over here to this hallway,” Bart told the others. He led them over to the hallway leading back to the kitchen, the one the lord had escaped through the previous night. He entered the hallway and moved down until reaching one of the hallways branching off. There he paused and motioned for the others to enter the side hallway before him.

He waited there at the junction for a second or two. Then he heard the explosions announcing that the ghost magic user had joined the fray. “It won’t be much longer now,” he said.

“What do you mean?” asked Kevik.

Still standing in the junction of hallways, he glanced at Kevik and said, “It’s just like the night before. If I’m right, then the lord should run past here on his way to the kitchen. Then, shortly after that, the last of the ghosts will fall and it will be over.”

Bart turned his attention back down the hallway and saw the ghostly form of the lord entering the hallway. He nodded as he said, “Here he comes.” Stepping back into the branching hallway with the others, he has them step back from the junction a dozen feet or more before coming to a stop.

They turned to look back at the junction just as the lord and his men rushed past. “Follow me,” Bart said as he moved to reenter the hallway and follow the lord.

Riyan helped Chad as they followed Bart. When they entered the hallway they could see ghosts fighting at the end that opened up on the hall. “They’re covering his retreat,” commented Chad.

“Exactly,” Bart said. “Just as they did the night before.” He continued to lead them towards the kitchen. When he arrived there, the lord and his party were just entering the secret stairwell.

“Aren’t we going to follow?” asked Kevik when Bart hesitated.

Bart shook his head. “No. All of our equipment, including my lockpicks, is back in the other building.” He kept an eye at the ghosts fighting in the hallway. Then, when the last one died, it laid there for a minute before an unseen tremor rolled through the building. When the tremor died, the fallen ghosts vanished.

By the light of the bobbing sphere, they glanced at each other. “Do you think it’s safe?” asked Kevik.

“It was last night,” replied Riyan. He glanced to Bart and received a nod in agreement.

Bart took the lead and they made their way slowly back down the hallway to the large hall. As long as they kept the pace slow to moderate, Chad was able to keep up on his own. His body still hadn't recovered the strength that had been sapped by the potion.

That had actually been the first potion ever used on him. He never realized how healing potions used the energy, or strength, of the one they healed. In all the stories he heard growing up, the hero drank down a healing potion and was cured. There was never any mention of recovery time to regain strength. But then that wouldn't have been a very exciting point to include in the story.

Back out in the hall, they found the door they came through closed. Again, no sign of any ghosts, nor was there any evidence of ghosts having been there. Just as it had been last night.

"You know," Riyan commented as they headed for the open door, "they may do this every night."

"That occurred to me too," Bart said. "Every night for who knows how long."

They left the Command Building and returned to where they had been spending the night. The smell hit them before they even came close. Death. Bart was the first to enter, and when Kevik followed him in with his bobbing sphere, they saw what was left of their horses.

The fire was still burning. Bart and Riyan both grabbed a burning brand before they crossed over to the horses' remains. "What did this?" asked Chad. They were a gory mess on the floor, almost unrecognizable as the horses had been so horribly mutilated.

Bart and Riyan glanced at each other. Bart shrugged.

"I'm not sure," Riyan replied after a moment. "I heard the clanging of metal on metal again just before the horses were attacked. It was the same as I heard last night before all hell broke loose."

"Now what are we to do?" Kevik asked. Everyone suddenly realized what Kevik already had. Without the horses they'll be forced to walk out of the goblin's territory. A prospect none of them looked forward to.

"We still need to finish our search below," Bart said. "Once that's completed, we'll worry about how to get out of here."

Riyan was still looking at the remains of the horses. He turned to the others. "This could very well be what the totems had warned against," he said. The other three turned to face him as he continued. "I wonder if what happened to the horses happens to anything caught outside in the ruins at night. Maybe the only safe place is in the Command Building the ghosts were defending."

"You may have a point," agreed Bart. "It hit here first, then almost seemed like it followed us there."

"That's true," added Kevik. "It wasn't until after we got there that the ghost warriors appeared and began fighting whatever it was."

They returned to the fire and settled in on their blankets for a little while longer, debating the whys and wherefores of what happened. When they came to the conclusion that they really didn't know what was going on, they decided to return to sleep while Kevik kept watch until the

morning. The remains of the horses on the far side of the room didn't bother them nearly as bad as returning to the dark ruins outside.

Kevik threw more fuel on the fire and huddled close to the comforting flames.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Early the next morning they gathered their things and returned to the Command Building. They agreed that if they were going to still be in the ruins of Algoth come nightfall, they would spend the night in the kitchen where the secret stairs were located. At least that way they should avoid most of what would take place out in the hall.

When they arrived at the kitchen, they deposited most of their equipment there except for their packs. Those they were taking with them when they descended below, just in case they came across any more treasure, which of course they were all counting on.

"I hope we find the key today," announced Chad. He was feeling better as much of his energy had returned. A good breakfast and most of a night's rest had done wonders.

"So do I," replied Riyan.

As soon as Bart had the lantern lit, they made their way down the stairs and resumed the search for the key. Riyan was quite happy that he had the foresight to make arrows out of the marker coins at all the intersections to point the way back. It was now a simple matter to follow them to what they believed was the last area yet to search.

"What do we do if after searching we fail to find anything?" asked Kevik.

The three friends were silent for a few minutes before Bart replied. "In that case, we'll wait until tonight. When the battle manifests again, as I'm convinced it will, then when the lord makes his way down here, we'll follow him. He should lead us to something."

"Good idea," said Riyan. "Let's just hope it doesn't come to that."

They passed through two more junctions as they continued following the path indicated by the arrows. When they reached the junction containing the final arrow, Bart took the lead. The passage through which they went continued for twenty feet before ending at another cross passage. There were no coins positioned at any of these passage openings so they knew they were in unexplored territory. A quick glance down to the left and right revealed both ways extended past the light of the lantern.

He glanced to Riyan who shrugged. "I'd say left," was Riyan's suggestion.

“Left it is,” Bart replied. He waited a moment for Riyan to place marker coins in the appropriate spots on the floor to mark their progress. Once Riyan was done, Bart entered the left hand passage.

They followed it down for a ways before coming to another passage branching off to their left. Again, this one had no marker coins. They decided to proceed forward and Riyan marked the way appropriately. Then not too far past the left hand branching, they reached where the passage ended at another ‘T’ junction. After the marker coins were placed, they turned to follow the right hand passage.

This one continued forwards a good distance before turning to the left, then a short way to another right hand turn. They followed this passage until the lantern’s light showed where it turned once again to the left.

Ahhhh!

Before they came to the turn, Kevik screamed as the floor suddenly opened up directly beneath his feet. He must have stepped on a pressure plate and triggered a trap.

Kevik plummeted down and only his fast thinking saved him. Casting his goo spell again, he encased himself in the sticky substance, then started thrashing about in an attempt to make contact with the wall of the shaft. His fall was abruptly halted when his hand touched the wall and the goo adhered to it.

“Kevik!” yelled Riyan.

It was hard to look up, but Kevik was able to see the other three standing at the opening in the floor.

“Make your light if you can!” Bart hollered down to him.

Suddenly his bobbing sphere appeared. “We see you,” Riyan said.

Riyan turned to Bart, “You’ll have to lower me down on the rope,” he said.

“Can’t,” Bart replied. “I won’t be able to haul you both up here on my own.” Indicating Chad he added, “With his arm recently healed, he’ll be no help.”

Riyan stared at him and was about to argue when he realized Bart was right. “What do we do?” he asked.

Bart began uncoiling his rope and went to the edge of the pit. “Kevik!” he hollered as he tied a loop in the end, “I’m going to tie a loop on the end of the rope and then lower the rope down to you.” He paused and listened but no reply came.

“If he’s covered in that goo stuff of his,” Riyan said, “he won’t be able to reply.”

Lowering the rope down to where the bobbing sphere was, he said, “Here comes the rope. When it’s in the right position, cancel your light then make it reappear.” He continued to lower the rope rapidly until he saw the bobbing sphere disappear, then a few seconds later, reappear.

Riyan grasped the rope behind him. “Now,” Bart hollered, “you’ll have to grab hold of the rope so we can pull you up.”

Chad stood next to the edge of the pit to watch what happened below. He could barely make out where Kevik was stuck to the wall. All that was readily apparent was the bobbing sphere. Then suddenly, he saw movement as Kevik went for the rope.

Bart and Riyan felt tension begin to drag on the rope for a second before it again went slack.

“He didn’t make it,” said Chad. He and the others watched in horror as Kevik’s body fell until coming to a sudden stop when he hit the bottom. As soon as he hit, the bobbing sphere went out.

“Kevik!” Riyan hollered. They listened for a reply but none was forthcoming.

“Is he dead?” asked Chad.

“Maybe,” replied Bart. “My rope isn’t long enough to reach him.”

“We can’t leave him down there,” insisted Riyan.

“How do you propose we reach him?” Bart asked. “He’s not even conscious.”

“There has to be a way,” said Chad.

Bart considered it for a minute and tried to recall what his father had told him about situations such as this.

‘Always keep in mind,’ his father had said, ‘if a pit is deep enough, they had to have a way for those who dug it to get out. At times it could be depressions carved into the sides of the pit to enable them to climb out, or a passage of some sort leading away at the bottom.’

‘But wouldn’t that allow the thief a chance to escape the trap?’ Bart had asked.

‘If the pit is deep enough,’ his father explained, ‘the builder wouldn’t worry about that as the fall would either kill the thief, or damage him to such an extent that he couldn’t get away.’

“There may be a way to reach him,” Bart said as he came back to the here and now. “Check the sides of the passage for anything that might be used for handholds.”

A quick check revealed there were none. “It’s possible there’s a way out at the bottom,” Bart told them. “We just have to find the other end.”

“So we are to just leave him?” Chad asked. “That doesn’t seem right.”

“What else is there for us to do?” replied Bart. “We can’t get to him from here. By the time we managed to get back to the Marketplace to procure a rope, providing of course there are any there to be had, and returned, he’d be dead. His only chance is for us to continue and hopefully find a way to him.”

“If he’s alive, he does have another healing potion,” offered Riyan.

Bart nodded. “So I suggest we stop standing here talking and press onward.”

Riyan felt bad about leaving Kevik in the pit, but in the face of Bart’s logic, there seemed no other alternative. Leaning over the edge, he stared down into the darkness and hollered, “Kevik! If you can hear me, we are not going to leave you there to die. We’ll find a way to you, I promise.” The pit remained dark. Had he been conscious, Riyan was sure his bobbing sphere would have been present.

“Here,” Bart said to the others as he held out his rope to them. “I suggest we tie ourselves together in the event we trigger another such pitfall.” Bart of course took the lead with Chad in the middle. Riyan anchored them at the rear. He knew that if what happened to Kevik happened to Bart, it would be up to him to prevent them all from falling.

Before he set out again, Bart turned to them and said, “Single file from here on out. There could be other traps such as what Kevik ran afoul of.” When Riyan and Chad nodded

understanding, he began to move away from the pit. Riyan cast a last glance at the opening in the floor before the rope pulled him forward.

Bart stayed on the left side of the passage as he quickly led them forward. All the time the possibility that he could meet the same fate as Kevik was foremost on his mind. He turned the corner to the left, proceeded forward another short distance then followed the passage as it turned left once more. From there it ran forward down a longer stretch until it ended at a room.

When the lantern's light began to illuminate the room, a monstrous apparition appeared before them. The shock of seeing it startled Bart so badly that he actually backpedaled into Chad.

Chad stopped him with a hand against his back and asked, "What's wrong?" He hadn't seen what had scared Bart so badly.

Bart didn't reply, only stared at the darkness within the room. When his nerves settled down, and nothing materialized from out of the darkness, he started forward again. The monstrous apparition turned out to be a statue, one of two that sat prominently in the room.

Both were nearly identical. The statues were of life size demonic creatures. The fact that they were standing upon two foot high pedestals gave them the appearance of looming over Bart and the others. Their faces were bestial with small horns sprouting from their foreheads. A long scaly tail extended outward behind them.

"Look familiar?" asked Riyan as he turned his gaze to the other two.

"Yeah," replied Chad. "From The Crypt."

"Exactly," said Riyan. "Remember the mural we found there? The knights were fighting creatures like these."

"Then perhaps they weren't just an artist's rendition to magnify the glory of the dead," supposed Bart. "They may have actually existed at one time."

"Do you think they still do?" asked Riyan.

Bart shook his head. "No. If they did I'm sure we would have heard about it by now." He gave the two statues a cursory examination, especially the base. It looked as if the bases were solid and didn't hold a hidden compartment, there were no seams.

Another exit led from the room ten feet further down along the same wall they had entered through. "Shall we go?" asked Bart.

Riyan and Chad were transfixed by the creatures. A shudder went through Riyan as he gazed into the eyes of one. They seemed so real. Then the spell was broken as Bart laid a hand on his shoulder. He turned to Bart just as he said, "We shouldn't dawdle here. Kevik could need our help."

Riyan nodded. "Right." Then he and Chad followed Bart from the room.

Once into the passage leaving the room, they followed it in single file just as before. It went straight for a bit, then turned left and continued on for the same distance before turning left again. They continued to follow the passage until it turned back to the right.

The passage then continued forward ten feet before opening up onto a large circular room. Emanating from the room ahead of them was a subtle, yet noxious odor. The light from the lantern revealed the floor was smooth as glass, though its light didn't illuminate far enough to show the other side of the room.

Bart came to a halt at the opening. The sight of the floor sent warning signals running through him.

When Riyan came to stand beside him and saw the floor, he too was leery. "What is it?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," replied Bart. "You have any more of those copper coins?"

"A couple," Riyan told him.

"Hand me one will you?"

"Sure," Riyan said and removed one from his belt pouch. "Here." He handed one of his few remaining coppers to Bart. There weren't that many left, most were still sitting on the floors of converging passages as arrows.

Bart took the coin and tossed it into the room.

Plunk!

When the coin hit the floor, the surface splashed. It was a liquid of some kind. "Give me another," Bart told Riyan. When he had the coin in hand, he knelt down by the edge of the room's floor and very carefully dipped the coin into the liquid.

As soon as the coin hit the surface, he noticed a very faint acrid odor coming from the point of contact. He dipped the coin halfway into the liquid and then pulled it back out. The surface of the coin that had been within the liquid was pitted and scarred.

"Acid," he said.

"Acid?" asked Chad incredulously. "Why would they fill the bottom of a room with acid?"

"That would seem pretty obvious," replied Bart.

"To keep us from continuing?" guessed Riyan.

"Exactly." Standing up, he pitched the ruined coin into the room and they watched as it disappeared beneath the surface. "At least we know we're finally on the right track." Turning back to the other two, he pointed to the pool of acid and added, "They wouldn't have gone to the trouble of creating that, unless there was something of incredible value on the other side."

"Such as the key?" asked Riyan.

Bart nodded. "Exactly."

"And a possible way of reaching Kevik," said Riyan.

"First thing we have to do though, is to get past this pool of acid," Bart told them.

"Any ideas?" Chad asked.

"I think it would be a safe assumption that this would be part of the escape route the lord took when he fled the battle," began Bart. "If so, then there has to be an easy and quick way to get through here in an emergency."

"That would make sense," agreed Riyan.

"But how?" mused Bart.

"A secret way around it?" suggested Chad.

Nodding, Bart said, "Could be. There has to be a secret trigger somewhere that will do something to enable us to continue." He pointed to the edge of the acid pool. "Let's begin here and work our way back."

So they began to check the floors and walls starting at the edge of the room and began working their way back down the passage. It was a slow and painstaking process, but they were left with little choice.

Riyan had the idea that they could wait for the lord to show up and find out where he pressed. But then Bart reminded him that Kevik was still down the shaft and might not have that much time. It would be half a day yet, or longer, before the ghost battle manifested.

They finally worked their way back to the turn in the passage and continued to search for some sort of triggering mechanism as they went. It was when they were about halfway past the turn when Chad triggered the trap.

He had been working on one side of the passage while Riyan and Bart had been doing the other. Somehow his foot must have hit a pressure plate for the floor opened up on him just as it had for Kevik. If it wasn't for the rope that still bound him to the others, he would have been a goner.

When he fell, both Riyan and Bart were caught off guard. Riyan was pulled into the opening and barely stopped himself in time by grabbing onto the edge. Bart had hit the floor and came to a stop at the edge of the pit.

They held their positions for a moment, none daring to breathe for fear of disrupting the delicate balance they held. Bart spoke first when his heart stopped racing so fast. "Is everyone alright?" he asked.

"I'm fine," replied Riyan. He had both arms braced above the pit while the rest of him hung within the pit. Chad's weight was a heavy burden and it was all he could do to keep himself from being dragged down with him.

"Chad!" hollered Bart when he didn't answer. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," he replied. "I would really appreciate it if you could get me out of here!"

Riyan couldn't help but give a halfhearted chuckle at that.

"Riyan, you hold still while I pull him out," Bart told him.

"Not a problem," he assured him.

Bart very gingerly began to maneuver himself into a better position for pulling Chad up. Once he was braced, he hollered down to Chad, "I'm going to pull you up. Don't move!"

"What? Did you think I was going to start swinging down here?" came the reply.

Bart just shook his head as he began pulling in the rope. Foot by foot, he brought Chad closer to the opening. Riyan was keeping an eye on his progress and gave Bart updates from time to time. After a couple minutes of pulling, Riyan said, "He's almost there."

"Just stay where you are," grunted Bart. "Don't do anything until he's up and out."

Riyan nodded and then said to Chad as he came abreast of him, "Have a nice fall?"

"You could say that," Chad replied, though from the expression on his face, it had been anything but pleasant. When Bart finally had him near the opening, he reached up and helped by gripping the edge and pulling himself the rest of the way. Once he was up he gave Bart a hand with Riyan.

"Whew," said Riyan. "Glad we had the rope tied about us."

“Should have had us do it after that very first pit trap we encountered,” admitted Bart. “But I just didn’t think about it.”

“You know, I heard what sounded like a river flowing down there,” said Chad.

“A river?” asked Riyan.

“Sounded like it,” he said.

Riyan moved to the opening and looked down. “Wonder how far it is?”

“Further than we can get to,” Bart said as he returned to his feet. “We still need to find that trigger.” Chad and Riyan got to their feet and they resumed their search. From that point on while they were searching, they stepped most cautiously. Fortunately, no further pitfalls opened up.

It took them some time, but they finally ended up back at the room with the two demonic statues. “Somehow I figured we’d end up back here,” said Riyan.

“So did I,” agreed Bart. He undid himself from the rope. “You two check the walls. I’ll go over the statues.”

“You already went over them once,” Chad told him.

Bart shrugged. “I wasn’t looking all that hard and could have missed something. This time, I will take more care and be a bit more thorough.” He began at the head of the first statue and very carefully pushed, twisted, and pulled anything that could possibly be used as a trigger. It wasn’t until he was checking the area of the statue where the tail left the main body that he came across something interesting.

Just underneath the tail, where the creature’s butt would’ve been had it been alive, he found a small opening. It was barely large enough for a single finger. He inserted his finger into it to the second knuckle before his fingertip encountered resistance. The resistance shifted slightly under pressure but otherwise didn’t move.

Excited by the find, he removed his finger then went to the other statue to see if a similar opening was present there as well. Sure enough, when he checked under the tail, he found an exact duplicate of the previous opening. Sticking in his finger, he tried pushing the resistance. But just like the other one, it only shifted a little bit.

“Riyan,” he said. “I need your help.”

Turning away from the section of wall he had been checking, Riyan asked, “You find something?”

“I think so,” replied Bart. “Come here and give me a hand.” When Riyan came to his side, he showed him where the opening was. “There’s another just like it on the other statue. I think we may need to press them simultaneously.”

While Bart moved to the other statue, Riyan commented, “If this is the trigger, it would have thwarted a lone thief.” Indeed, the statues were sitting too far apart to allow a single individual to reach both openings at the same time.

Bart reached the other statue and placed his finger in the opening under the tail. Then just as he was about to tell Riyan to press it, Chad started laughing. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

Chad was shaking his head as the laughter rolled forth. “You guys have no idea what you’re doing looks like.” He stood there staring at them and the laughter bubbled up again. Riyan and

Bart were both standing next to the statues with their fingers, 'up the butt' as it were, of the demonic creatures.

Bart ignored him and turned his attention to Riyan. He saw Riyan had a big grin on his face too as he came to realize what he must look like. "Riyan!" Bart said loudly and got his attention. "When I count to three, press it."

Riyan nodded.

"One...two...three..." When Bart said three, he and Riyan simultaneously pushed against the resistance. This time, Bart felt it slide back an inch. When nothing in the room changed, he quickly led them back through the passages to the acid room.

That was definitely the trigger they had been searching for. A line of stepping stones had risen out of the pool and led across the center of the room. Just within the room before them, there were two stones sitting side by side. Then another set of two stones past the first set before the line became single stones.

"Not yet," Bart said as he stopped Riyan from stepping on the stones.

"Why?" asked Riyan.

He pointed to the two pairs of stones before them. "Step on the wrong one and something bad could happen," he explained.

"Then which one should we step on?" Chad asked.

The first pair was a foot and a half from the edge of the passage. The next pair was the same distance away from the first. Bart thought about it for a second then said, "You two hold onto my arm while I lean out and put my weight on each of the stones."

Riyan nodded as he and Chad both gripped his arm. Bart placed his left foot two inches from the edge of the acid pool. Then leaning outward, he brought his right foot down on the left stone. He no sooner had begun to put weight on it than the stone receded back into the pool.

Riyan and Chad pulled him back as soon as they saw the stone begin to sink. Then they tried it again with the other one and found it to be secure. Once Bart had his full weight upon the stone, they let go.

"One more time," Bart said as he looked to the next pair of stones.

"There's not enough room there for all three of us at the same time," Riyan said. In fact, the stone barely had enough room for two of them to stand on it at the same time.

Bart nodded. "Riyan, you come and help me then."

Riyan untied the rope from around his middle and gave it to Chad. "Hold onto this," he said.

"Be careful," Chad said as he took the rope.

Bart then gave him a hand as he passed from the mouth of the passage to the stone. Once there, he took Bart's arm and provided the counter weight while he leaned out to check the stones. Again, it was the left hand stone that sank into the acid.

"The rest of the stones should be alright," Bart said. "Just take your time and don't fall in." Then he had Chad hand Riyan the lantern who in turn passed it to him. With the lantern now in hand, Bart began moving from one stone to the next until he crossed the room and reached the passage leading away on the other side.

Once there, he noticed a lever mounted in the wall several feet within the passage. He figured it would reset the stones to beneath the surface of the acid pool. Once Riyan and Chad joined him, he showed them the lever and told them what he thought it would do.

“Are you going to pull it?” Riyan asked.

Shaking his head, Bart said, “No. We may need to return this way for some unforeseen reason. I think it would be best to leave the stepping stones where they are.”

“Very well,” agreed Riyan.

Before setting off down the passage, they tied themselves in tandem once again just in case of another pitfall trap. Bart took the lead with the lantern in hand.

The passage soon turned to the right. From there it continued straight ahead for fifty feet or so before turning to the left. Bart took it slow and careful as he studied the floor of the passage as they went. After the last turn to the left, the passage continued for some time before coming to an end.

At the end of the passage was a single large door, much larger than any they had thus far encountered. Emblazoned upon the door was the coat of arms that has been so prevalent in the Ruins of Algoth. A sword pointing downward with a dragon grasping the hilt in one claw while its body twined around the blade.

“This has to be it,” said Riyan when the light illuminated the coat of arms.

“Most likely,” agreed Bart. He moved forward to the door and after a quick check for traps, tried to open it. To his amazement, it actually swung upon. He had expected it to be locked. This was far too easy. When the door swung open enough for the lantern’s light to shine within the room on the other side, they gasped by what they saw.

“The lord’s treasure room!” Riyan practically shouted. For when the door opened, the light revealed that the room contained six chests. Two sat against the wall across from them and two each against the walls to their right and left.

Upon a stand in the middle of the floor sat an ornamental wooden boat that looked to have survived the passage of time well. The coat of arms that had been on the door was engraved into the side of the boat and the prow boasted a carving of a dragon’s head. The boat was large enough to sit eight men comfortably and looked to be made most sturdily.

Bart had to physically stop Riyan from running into the room in his excitement. “Wait a minute!” he shouted as he grabbed him by the arm. Yanking him out of the room and back into the passage, he said, “You better calm down right now!”

Riyan glared at him for the way he had been treated.

“If you go running around in there,” Bart began to explain to him, “you may wind up getting yourself killed.” He gazed into Riyan’s eyes. “Let me search it first.”

Riyan gave him a kind of embarrassed smile. “Sorry,” he apologized. “Forgot myself there for a moment.”

“You two stay here,” he told them. Then he turned back to the doorway and entered the room.

First thing he did was to make a quick circuit around the room to get a good feel for the layout. He also discovered that further down the wall from where the door stood, was a very

large depiction of the coat of arms engraved into the wall itself. It went from floor to ceiling and was encrusted with many gems. The lantern's light was refracted in a myriad of color.

Once he made a complete circuit of the room, he returned to Chad and Riyan. "I think it's okay if you come in," he told them. "Just don't touch anything." As they entered the room, he went to the first chest and began inspecting it for traps.

"This is amazing," observed Riyan. Upon entering the room, his eyes naturally went to the gem encrusted coat of arms on the wall. He and Chad stood in front of it and marveled at the gems. They had to be worth a fortune.

"I couldn't take any of those," Chad said indicating the gems. "It wouldn't seem right."

Riyan glanced at his friend and nodded. "I get that feeling too."

After a few more moments admiring the coat of arms, they went over to the boat. What once must have been some of the finest cloth ever made draped the seats inside. There was also a small chest sitting on the forward seat directly behind the dragon's head.

"Bart," Riyan hollered over to him. "There's a small chest in here too."

"Alright, I'll get to it in a minute," came the reply. "This one's open, you two can go through it now." He glanced over to where they were standing by the boat as he held the lid of the chest open. "I think you're going to like this."

"Really?" asked Chad excitedly. He and Riyan crossed the room quickly to the open chest. It was filled with dozens of gems of varying sizes. The majority were small ones, but at least five were pretty big. As they began removing the gems and putting them in their packs, Bart moved on to the next chest.

It took Bart the better part of an hour to disarm and open all six chests. Only one of the traps went off while he was working on it. Fortunately, it was a variation of the Prick of Poison and when it went off, his fingers were nowhere near the lock.

The second chest held coins, hundreds of coins. More than half of them were gold, the rest being silver.

The third chest held jewelry. Fourteen rings, seven necklaces and a smattering of other smaller paraphernalia like broaches and such. Each was worked in precious metal, some even held gems of varying sizes.

The fourth chest held a well crafted longsword that had resisted the ravages of time. The scabbard was plain and nondescript, as was the hilt. Engraved in the nexus of the crossguard was the dragon-sword coat of arms. Attached to the belt along with the longsword's scabbard was another scabbard holding a knife. When Riyan pulled it forth, he could see the dragon-sword coat of arms was engraved in the knife's crossguard as well.

Riyan glanced to Chad questioningly. "Do you mind?" he asked. Chad looked longingly at the sword and knife but nodded for Riyan to have it. "Thank you," he said as he began unbelting the scabbard he was currently wearing and quickly belted the new one with the knife on around his waist.

"Next sword we find I get," Chad stated.

"You got it," agreed Riyan. "And if we don't come across another one, you get to have first pick of something else."

The fifth chest held a piece of cloth. It was a foot and a half long with runes inscribed along its length. From the uniform bulge running from one end to the other, it was easy to see that it held something. Chad reached in and picked it up. The cloth was actually a long, thin, carrying pouch. Inside was something long and firm.

One end of the cloth pouch opened up and he pulled forth a long stick. It looked rather plain with no markings or inscriptions on it. He held it up to Riyan and asked, "Could it be a wand?"

"Perhaps," replied Riyan. "Better leave it alone for now."

Chad nodded and slipped the wand back in its cloth pouch before placing it in his pack.

The sight of the wand made him think of Kevik and what may have happened to him. He hoped he was okay and that they could get to him soon.

Unable to do anything about it now, he returned to the matter at hand. Leaving behind the fifth chest, he and Chad moved to the sixth where Bart was just finishing with picking the lock.

"Done?" asked Riyan as he and Chad came to a stop several feet away.

"Just about," replied Bart. "Give me another minute, this one's kind of tricky."

They waited patiently while he worked and then he announced that he had it. They hurried over just as he was pulling up the lid and all three looked in to see what the final chest held. Riyan was half hoping the rest of the key to the King's Horde would be inside, but he was disappointed.

Inside the chest were two items. One was an intricately carved small box. The other was a folded cloak. Riyan picked up the box and opened it. Resting within on a soft cushion, were two rings. Unadorned and plain, they didn't seem all that important.

Riyan showed them to Chad. "Could be magic you think?" he asked.

"Perhaps," nodded Chad. "Better keep them in the box until we know more about them."

Riyan agreed with him. He remembered the tale that a bard had told one night he had stayed at the Sterling Sheep. It was about a group of adventurers that had uncovered some lost temple or other. During their exploration, they had come across a ring. Thinking it magical and valuable, one of their members had put it on. Turned out to be cursed, a trap laid by the former occupants of the temple against thieves. The man had died a few days later. Closing the box, Riyan put it in his pack. Then he glanced over to Bart who held the cloak.

"This is fine material," Bart said. "I think I'll keep it if you two don't mind?"

They both shook their heads. If anyone deserved to have what they wanted, it was Bart. After all, he was the one putting his life on the line with every chest and trap.

Bart grinned and said, "Thanks." He folded it into a smaller square then placed it within his pack. After that he went over to the boat and soon had the small box Riyan had found open. Within was a grey powder. He quickly shut the box again and locked it. He didn't want something like what happened to Chad happening to him. After putting the box with the powder in his pack, he began looking around.

"What?" asked Riyan.

"If this was the place where the lord ran when his forces were overrun," he began to explain, "then it would stand to reason that there has to be a way to continue from here."

"You think so?" asked Chad.

Bart turned to him and nodded. "Most definitely." He indicated the open chests around them. "I hardly think this is the lords true treasure room. I would imagine it's here to satisfy thieves who made it this far so they wouldn't continue to search."

"I don't know," argued Riyan. "This all seems rather valuable."

Bart thought about that for a moment then shook his head. "No. Maybe if I wasn't aware the lord had come this way as an escape route I would feel different."

"So what do we do now?" asked Chad.

He glanced around the room with a sigh before replying. "We painstakingly search this room until we find the way the lord went."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Dark. Pain filled darkness greeted him as he regained consciousness. He tried to move and alleviate the pain but it only increased his agony tenfold when he attempted to move his left leg. It must be broken, he thought to himself.

Light suddenly filled the bottom of the shaft as his bobbing sphere blossomed to life. He looked in shock at his left leg. It wasn't the fact that it was broken that was causing him such pain. Rather it was due to the fact that one of the many foot long spikes that were set into the floor had impaled its way through it from one side to the other. When he fell and hit the bottom, his leg must have struck it. The tip of the spike protruded two inches out of his skin.

Kevik did a quick check of the rest of him, and other than a few places that will likely form bruises, he was alright. Except for his leg.

"Riyan! Bart!" he called up to the top of the shaft. When no answer came, he cancelled his bobbing sphere of light to see if the light from their lantern could be seen at the top of the shaft. He grew despondent when all he could see was darkness. Realizing they were no longer there, he recast his bobbing sphere spell and light once more filled the bottom of the shaft.

First order of business was his leg. He didn't think the bone was damaged, it felt like the spike had gone through the muscle. Before he attempted to remove his leg from the spike he looked around the bottom of the shaft to find his pack. There was still one healing potion left that his master had brought with them when they set out from Gilbeth, the town where his master had lived.

His eyes widened when he saw the skeleton lying in the midst of the spikes. Obviously here was another soul who had fallen to the traps of this place. There was not a speck of flesh left

upon his bones and what clothes the person had been wearing are all but gone. After his cursory inspection of the skeleton, he returned to the more immediate matter of finding his pack and the healing potion.

He panicked at first when he couldn't see it. Then he realized he was still wearing his pack and that it was underneath him. Shifting around as best he could without causing his leg any more pain than absolutely necessary, he worked the pack out from under him.

When he had it sitting next to him and opened, he was quite relieved to find the vial containing the healing potion to still be intact. He had feared that it might have suffered damage during the fall. Removing it, he placed it on the ground next to him then turned his attention back to his leg.

A pool of blood had collected at the base of the spike. Fortunately, the spike itself was 'plugging the hole' so to speak and kept his blood from flowing more freely. But once he pulled his leg off the spike, he wouldn't have much time before blood loss was going to render him unconscious. He unstoppered the vial and then grabbed his leg.

The anticipation of the pain this was going to bring him almost made him vomit, but he steeled himself. After taking two deep breaths to calm his shaking nerves, he gripped his leg. Then in one fluid motion, he pulled it off the spike.

Pain erupted and a cry escaped his lips as his leg slid upward and came free of the spike. When his leg came free, blood flowed dangerously fast. Dots danced before his eyes and he feared the pain was going to cause him to pass out. He fought unconsciousness and reached for the vial. He brought it to his lips and quickly drank half of it then sat up as he poured the rest of the elixir into the wound. He didn't drip it carefully into the wound as he had with Chad. Instead he upended it and dumped the rest of it out onto the wound. Once the last drop fell, he let go of the vial and laid his head back on the ground, panting.

He could feel the potion beginning to dull the pain as it worked to heal. A warm feeling began to radiate from the site of the injury as the muscles and flesh of his leg started to knit back together. He continued to lie there and fought off the onset of unconsciousness until the warmth began to subside.

There at the bottom of the shaft, he laid there for several more minutes as his body calmed down and the last vestiges of pain faded away. Then he moved to the wall of the shaft and sat against it while he inspected his leg. Pulling his trousers' leg up, he inspected the wound. It had completely healed over and a jagged circle of pink flesh now covered where the spike had exited his leg. He'll bear a scar there for the rest of his life, but at least he'll now have the rest of his life.

If I can get out of here, he thought to himself.

For the first time he really gave the bottom of the shaft a good look. One of the walls held an opening. It looked as if it was a natural fissure that had been artificially widened at some point. Wide enough for a man to pass through, it looked to be his only hope in getting out of here.

His staff was lying on the other side of the pit. He worked his way over to it on his hands and knees, careful to avoid the spikes. When he had it in hand, he used it to help him to his feet. To

his surprise, the leg that was injured bore him with strength. Still, he used his staff to support himself anyway as he didn't wish to strain the newly formed muscles.

On the way back across the spiky bottom of the shaft to retrieve his pack, a glimmer caught his attention. He turned his attention towards it and realized it came from the skeleton. There was a ring upon the man's right hand. Intrigued, Kevik moved closer for a closer look.

As he came closer, he reached down and pulled the ring from the skeletal finger. It was made of silver and had a red stone set in the top. There were markings inscribed on the inner side of the band but they were in a language he was unfamiliar with.

He thought about using his identification spell on it, but was just too tired. So he put it in his belt pouch and continued on to get his pack. Once he had it on his back again, he headed to the fissure in the side of the shaft.

At the opening he could see a narrow tunnel extending away from the shaft, past the edge of the bobbing sphere's light. Ducking his head, he entered the opening and began making his way through the narrow tunnel.

It led him for perhaps twenty feet. Along the way, Kevik encountered two sections that bore marks where the tunnel had been widened to allow a man to pass. When he reached the end, it opened out onto a wider passage, actually it was more like a subterranean cave. There were rock formations such as stalactites and stalagmites, and along the side of the cavern to his right, a small flow of water cascaded down. Where it reached the floor of the cavern it formed a pool of water before overflowing into a rivulet that worked its way across the cavern's floor.

The shadows of the cavern were in constant motion due to the bobbing of his sphere. He began to agree with Riyan about how annoying this form of illumination was. First opportunity he has, he's going to learn a normal type of light spell. Now he understood why his master thought it amusing when he chose to learn this particular spell.

The rivulet flowed away from him down the cavern as it meandered from one side to the other. Kevik followed the water as he began working his way through the cavern. He kept his eyes open for any possible way out.

Not long after he began moving through the cavern, he started hearing a noise coming from further ahead. At first he thought what he was hearing came from the rivulet as it flowed through the cavern. But after another minute or so, he began to realize that the noise was coming from something else. He quickened his steps and soon realized the sound was that of an underground river.

The sound continued to grow the further he went. He soon came to where the cavern began tapering off until it became only a narrow passage a couple feet wide. The rivulet which he had been following flowed out of the cavern and through the narrow passage.

He didn't relish the idea of stepping into the rivulet, he knew the water was bitterly cold from when he quenched his thirst earlier. But what choice had he? So bracing himself, he stepped into the cold water. It only went up to his ankles but the water soon began seeping into his shoes. Not for the first time since joining Riyan and his companions did he wish he wore boots.

The water sent a shiver through him as he squeezed his way to the other side of the opening. The narrowness of it lasted for at least ten feet before ending at a ledge overlooking an

underground river. Sitting a scant foot above the flowing river, the ledge was slippery from where spray would at times be thrown by the crashing water. The underground river itself wasn't flowing all that fast, it was just the many rocks protruding out of the water that made the water a bit frothy.

The ledge was very uneven, slippery, and barely wide enough to enable him to sit upon it cross-legged. He looked out over the flowing water but couldn't see the far side, the light from his bobbing sphere didn't extend far enough. Then he turned his attention to the river itself. The thought of entering its dark, bitterly cold water made him shiver.

Kevik sank down on the ledge and did his best to avoid the water flowing from the opening behind him into the river. Despite his best efforts, he started to become soaked. Sitting there in the dark, he began to give into hopelessness. He knew that to remain on the ledge would be his death, if not now then when his food ran out and he starved. He leaned back against the cavern wall as he perched on his ledge and rested, knowing full well that at some point, he would have to brave the water if he was going to live.

Bart had begun the search of the treasure room at the dragon-sword coat of arms engraved in the wall. It simply seemed like the most logical place for a hidden door to be. The other walls all had chests lined against them so it was unlikely it would be there.

Now a half hour later, he was still examining the coat of arms. Riyan and Chad haven't been idle during this time. They've been going over the other walls and the floors. They even climbed into the boat and looked in there but failed to find anything.

Bart checked the gems embedded in the coat of arms, as well as every possible nook and cranny it held. He came up with nothing.

"You know," commented Riyan. "If you feel that coat of arms there on the wall has to be the way, wouldn't that mean it isn't?"

"What?" asked Bart.

"Look at it from the point of view of the ones who built this place," he explained. Then he smiled, "I guess everything you've told us about thieves and thwarting them is rubbing off or something. Anyway, to have it there would be a bit obvious don't you think?"

Bart thought about it for a second then shrugged, "Maybe. You could be right."

"Doesn't look as if you're going to find anything there anyway," Chad added.

Again Bart paused and grew still. He began thinking about what Chad and Riyan had said. It actually made a lot of sense. Coming back to the here and now, he glanced at the other two. "Alright." Moving to the doorway, he passed into the passage then turned around as he began reenacting the lord's escape. "Here I am, lord of this place, and I am being pursued by enemies seeking my death or capture. What do I do?"

"You get the heck out of here as fast as possible," replied Chad.

"Exactly!" stated Bart. Moving into the room, he said, "There needs to be something here that can be quickly activated on my way to wherever the secret exit lies."

Getting into the spirit of the reenactment, Riyan jumps from the boat. "If as you say the secret exit is behind the coat of arms, then wouldn't the trigger have to be before the coat of

arms? That way it would begin to open before you arrived, thus enabling you to escape that much quicker?"

"Yes," Bart said. Moving further into the room, he turned and headed towards the coat of arms. His path took him to within a foot of the boat resting in the middle of the room. "The boat maybe?" he asked.

"But we already looked it over," said Chad.

"Hmm." Bart turned his attention to the side of the boat facing him. "If our suppositions are accurate, the trigger would have to be here..." he said then turned to face the wall on the other side of him, "Or there." Pointing to the wall, he paused as his eyes quickly searched its surface.

"Maybe it's on the floor?" suggested Riyan.

Bart shook his head. "No. A trigger for a trap maybe, but not a secret exit. The lord couldn't afford to have his enemies stumbling upon it by accident."

Riyan grinned, "You've got a point."

Moving to the side of the boat, Bart began pushing and pulling its various planks and knotholes. After a thorough search, still nothing.

"That just leaves the wall?" asked Chad.

"Looks that way," he replied.

The wall in question looked the same as all the others. Stones placed in staggered formation, a torch sconce where a torch could be burnt to light the room, and an all but faded tapestry.

His eyes went to the torch sconce. "No," he said to himself, shaking his head. "It couldn't be that easy."

"What?" asked Riyan.

Bart pointed to the torch sconce. "That is the oldest trick in the book," he explained. "A movable torch sconce that will open a secret door."

"You going to try it?" asked Chad. "This place is pretty old, maybe this is where they came up with that ploy."

"I don't think I've seen you even try a torch sconce in all the times you've hunted for secret doors," Riyan added. "Not even when we were down in the Crypt."

"That's because it's never used anymore," he explained.

"So try it," Riyan suggested. "What do you have to lose?"

Shrugging, Bart went to the torch sconce and pulled it down. At first it didn't move then Riyan told him to try harder. So he gripped it with both hands and jumped up a little and came down hard. To his utter surprise, it moved downward several inches. Then a grinding noise could be heard as the wall bearing the coat of arms began rising into the ceiling.

"I'll be damned," he said. "Someone who could afford to build a place like this and all he could come up with was a torch sconce." Smiling to himself, he turned to the others and shrugged. "Let's go."

He grabbed his pack and the lantern before hurrying towards the gradually rising wall. On the other side was a short passage similar to the ones they've traveled along since coming down here. It extended forward ten feet before turning to their right. Around the corner was a flight of steps descending down into darkness.

Bart took the lead again as they went down the steps quickly. Riyan counted and there were a total of forty steps before they ended at a massive underground cavern. The cavern began rather narrow as it moved away from the foot of the stair, but quickly grew wider and taller. Light from the lantern reflected off crystals in the walls which created a dazzling display.

“Nice,” commented Riyan.

Chad took out his belt knife and pried a three inch long piece of crystal from the wall. Holding it up, he watched as it refracted the lantern’s light. “This is truly unbelievable.”

“I take it you two have never seen crystal before?” asked Bart.

Riyan shook his head and Chad said, “No.”

They worked their way through the cavern, soon the upper reaches were no longer visible as it rose above the range of the lantern’s light. About this time, the cavern began curving toward the right and they came to a stream. Over time the water had formed a channel over four feet deep and five feet across that it now flowed through.

With a running jump, they were able to clear the channel and make it to the other side. The stream exited through the cavern’s right wall not far from where they crossed the channel. The sound of it cascading down like a waterfall came from the other side of the opening it flowed through.

They continued down the cavern another hundred feet and found where the stream entered the cavern through the wall on the left side. Shortly after leaving the stream behind, the cavern began to narrow once again. At the far end where the sides of the cavern finally converged again, was a large pile of boulders. It looked like at some time in the past the side of the cavern might have caved in.

At first worried that the cave-in might have blocked their way, they were soon to realize that on the far side of the boulders, the exit was still accessible. It was clearly manmade, nothing of nature could make such even lines.

“We’re on the right track,” Riyan said.

“Wonder how much further this goes?” asked Chad.

“As far as it does and no further,” replied Bart.

“What?” Chad asked, confused by the answer.

“Nothing,” Bart said with a grin. “Just something my father use to say to me when I would ask a question like that.”

“Oh,” replied Chad.

Once past the exit, they were again in a passage carved out of the rock. A bit narrower than what they were use to up above, but serviceable. It wound through the rock until it turned sharply to the right. Around the corner they found the top of another set of stairs leading down. These were narrow and the steps crudely formed.

Bart again took the lead as they began descending the stairs. These went down for quite a ways, and they were forced to step extra carefully as the steps were quite slippery. They hadn’t gone down many steps before the sound of flowing water could be heard coming up from the bottom.

“It’s a river,” Bart stated after the sound grew clearer.

“Maybe it’s the same one that I heard when you were hauling me up from the pit trap?” asked Chad.

“Most likely,” agreed Riyan.

At the bottom of the steps they encountered a rickety old pier that had been built over the flowing water a very long time ago. The wooden planks were still together but they were not sure how well they would hold up under their weight.

“End of the trail,” announced Bart.

Riyan looked at the river in dismay. Then he had an idea. “Could we use the boat that was in the treasure room?”

Bart shook his head. “That thing must have weighed five hundred pounds,” he said. “No way would we three be able to carry it down here.”

“Then what can we do?” he asked.

“Swim?” asked Chad. “The river’s not flowing all that fast.”

“You’ve got to be crazy,” Bart exclaimed. “Do you have any idea how cold that water is? Besides, we don’t know what to expect further down. There could be a waterfall for all we know.”

“I don’t think there would be one of those,” countered Riyan. “They never would have built a pier here and made this their escape route if there were.” He glanced at the pier itself and saw how the planks were still fairly connected. “Maybe we could make a raft out of this.”

“Yeah!” agreed Chad. “Float down on top of a few boards.”

Riyan glanced at Bart. “What do you think? Worth a try?”

Bart didn’t look all that enthused about the prospect of trusting his life to the rickety old pier. “I don’t know...” he said.

“Piece of cake,” Riyan said. He pointed to a section that was still fairly intact. “All we have to do is separate that section from the rest and off we go.”

“Just like that?” asked Bart skeptically.

“Just like that,” affirmed Riyan.

“I say we try it,” Chad joined in.

Bart glanced from one to the other and could tell their minds were made up. “Very well,” he said. He set the lantern down on the landing as they began trying to figure out the best way to do this.

The section they wanted to use was literally a third of the old wooden platform. In order to disengage it from the rest of the dock, they would have to either break it away or pry up a number of the planks connecting it to the rest.

Riyan set his pack on the stone landing. “I’ll go out and start separating it,” he told the other two. “Bart, you get your rope ready in case we need it to secure some of the planks together.”

Bart nodded and began readying the rope.

“Be careful,” Chad said to Riyan.

Riyan turned his head towards him and grinned. “Don’t worry. I don’t plan to be anything else.” Turning back, he gauged the planks of the pier before him. They looked sturdy enough to support him. Stepping out, he gingerly placed a foot on the first one.

There were nine planks between where he stood and the far side. Once there, he had to somehow separate the section they wanted from the rest. He lifted his other foot off the stone landing and moved it towards the second plank. When it rested on the second plank, his entire weight was now on the pier. Glancing down, he could see where the water ran beneath the planks beginning with the second one.

“Take it easy,” cautioned Bart.

Riyan glanced behind him and saw Bart and Chad standing together watching his progress. Bart had the rope coiled in his hand, waiting. Turning back to the matter at hand, he lifted his foot off the first plank and brought it forward to the third. As soon as he began putting his weight on the third plank, an audible cracking noise could be heard coming from the wood.

“Riyan!” Chad hollered as he heard the noise too.

Riyan lifted his foot off the third plank and held it in the air. He was beginning to think that this may not have been one of his better ideas. The fourth plank was a bit further than he was willing to stretch. Once he put his foot on it, he would be hard pressed in lifting it back off gently should it be unable to hold his weight too.

“I’m coming back,” he hollered to the other two.

“Good,” Bart said. “I never thought...”

Before he had the chance to finish his sentence, the second board cracked and gave way beneath him. Riyan fell forward into the boards, smashing through planks three through seven. He hit the river and the coldness of the water took his breath away as the current began dragging him from the pier. When his head cleared the surface, he gasped for air and turned to look in the direction of the lantern’s light.

“...the rope!” he heard Bart say as the rope flew through the air towards him. It hit the water several feet upstream from him and he began swimming furiously against the current to reach it. Inch by inch the rope floated towards him until he was able to grab onto it. “He’s got it!” he heard Bart say when his weight pulled the tension of the rope tight.

Crack!

“Get back!” Chad yelled.

Riyan looked towards them and saw the section of the pier they wanted to use began breaking away from the rest of it. Wood splintered and more cracking of planks was heard as the current began pulling it away from the landing. It didn’t take long for Riyan to realize that the current was bringing it straight toward him.

“Riyan!” Chad hollered when he realized his friend’s danger. “Get out of the way!”

But Riyan had other plans. While Bart and Chad were hauling him in, he wound the rope around his left arm as many times as he could. Then, when the pier section came near, he snagged it with his right arm. The current continued dragging it downstream until it was on the other side of him, then came to an abrupt halt. The jolt almost pulled Riyan’s arm from its socket, but he refused to let it go.

Chad and Bart had stopped pulling him in when they saw him grab the section of the pier. “Keep going!” he yelled at them. “I’ve got it.”

“Hang on Riyan,” Chad yelled.

Then he began feeling the rope once again pulling against his arm as they drew him closer to the landing. Every time they hauled in the rope, pain coursed through his arms. Between the river trying to drag the section of the pier away, and them pulling on the rope, he's surprised that his arms were even still attached. A thought came to him that after this, he'll have a better appreciation of how people feel when they're being stretched on the rack.

It seemed an eternity before they managed to pull him back to the landing. When he came within arm's reach, Chad grabbed his arm while Bart snagged the pier section. Riyan was more than glad to let go and leave it to Bart.

Using the rope he had, Bart tied one end around a large brace that ran beneath the planks. Then once the rope was on and secure, he hauled the pier section as close to the landing as he could.

"Thanks," Riyan said as his teeth chattered. "You have no idea how good it feels to be out of that water."

"I think we'll have a good idea when we ride this down the river," said Bart indicating the pier section. "It's riding right on the water and we're going to get soaked."

"Give me a minute to warm up some before we leave," Riyan told them.

"You bet," Chad said.

Bart continued to hold the rope and kept their 'raft' from floating away. He still wasn't too enthused about trusting this raft with their lives, but was willing to give it a try.

Riyan sat there shivering a solid ten minutes before realizing that only a fire would warm him again. He stood up and came to where Bart still held the rope.

"Ready?" Bart asked.

"No time like the present," he replied.

"Alright. Take off your packs and set them down here in front of me," Bart told them.

When they had done that, he said, "I want you two to come here and grab hold of our raft. I'm going to use the rope to tie the packs together so we won't lose them if things go wrong."

As Chad leaned over towards the raft and grabbed hold, he asked, "What about the lantern?"

"We'll have to hold that," he said. "Can't afford to let any water get in with the oil." Once the other two had a good hold of their raft, he untied the rope from it and threaded the end through their pack straps. Then he tied them together tightly.

"Now, we have to get on," he said. "I think Riyan showed us that this wood isn't going to withstand a whole lot of weight. So we need to board it by crawling on our hands and knees to better distribute the weight." He glanced to Chad. "You first. Once you're out there, grab hold of that." He pointed to a thick wooden piling up from the water to which the pier had originally been attached.

Chad began crawling out upon the boards of the raft and when the water hit him for the first time cried out, "It's cold!"

"Didn't I tell you it was cold?" asked Riyan. Once Chad had made it out and was lying spread out upon the planks to better distribute his weight, he reached out and took hold of the piling.

"Okay Riyan, you're next," Bart said as he grabbed the raft to steady it.

Riyan crawled out onto the boards next to Chad. When he was in position, Bart said, “Here.” Turning around, he saw Bart handing him the three packs that were tied together. He took them and placed them near the center of the raft next to him. Then he took the lantern and held it close.

“Chad,” Bart said, “hold it steady. I’m coming on.” When he let go, the raft began drifting away from the landing despite Chad’s best effort.

“Hurry up man,” Chad said as he began losing his grip.

Bart quickly scrambled aboard just as the current yanked the raft and pulled Chad’s hands off the piling.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kevik still sat on the narrow ledge that he’s been sitting on now for over an hour. The rivulet that ran through the opening has soaked him pretty good. Though he was already cold with teeth chattering, he still hadn’t worked up the courage to enter the frigid water of the river.

How much longer could he afford to sit here? Every minute sapped that much more warmth and energy from his body. If he waited much longer, he won’t have the strength to keep his head above the water once he makes his move.

So he sat there cold, miserable, and alone. All the sadness at the loss of his master welled to the surface again. He put his head on his knees as the strong emotions got the best of him, and sobbed.

“Keep it away from the rocks!”

His head jerked up as he looked up the river to where the voice came from. A light could be seen drawing closer.

“Paddle man!” he heard Chad yell. “If it hits the rocks it’ll bust up!”

With hope rekindled, he climbed to his feet just as the source of the light came into view. He saw the glow was from a lantern floating along the far side of the water. Three forms moved upon the water and it took him only a split second to recognize his former comrades. They looked to be riding some kind of raft.

“Riyan!” he yelled and began waving his arms.

The person in the center of the raft, who looked to be Bart, turned and saw him there on his precarious ledge. “Kevik!” Bart yelled. The other two turned to see him and his bobbing orb.

“Riyan!” Chad yelled, “The rocks!”

Kevik watched as Riyan turned onto his back and used his feet to keep the current from bashing the raft onto the rocky wall. His feet kicked out at the wall in an attempt to push the raft back into the river. Then Kevik saw Bart take something and begin twirling it over his head.

“Your goo spell!” Bart yelled as the object he had been twirling suddenly sailed towards him.

Kevik saw three packs that were tied together suddenly flying through the air in his direction. He quickly understood Bart’s plan and when they came close, covered them in the sticky goo.

Splat!

The goo coated packs struck the wall not two feet downstream from him and stuck. Bart hung onto the rope as the current used the packs attached to the wall as a fulcrum. When the rope grew taut in Bart’s hands, their raft was pulled from the far side of the river and began to draw close to the other.

“Riyan, Chad,” Bart hollered. “Get to the other side or we’re going to hit.”

They saw the wall of the channel the river flowed through approaching and moved into position. Just as Riyan had done previously, they moved to the edge approaching the wall and laid on their backs. When the raft was about to hit, they extended their feet to act as shock absorbers. The current swept the raft to the wall but their feet provided enough cushioning to keep it from being smashed apart.

At that point the tension of the rope increased twofold and the rope was almost torn from Bart’s hand. He tried to pull the raft closer to Kevik, but the current was too strong. He saw Kevik standing there, his annoying bobbing sphere dancing around him.

“You’re going to have to come to us!” he hollered. “I can’t hold this much longer.”

Kevik realized that if he was to join them he would have to do it himself. So he put the pack across his back and made ready to enter the water. “Hurry!” he heard Bart grunt. With one hand on the rope attached to the packs, and another holding his master’s staff, he entered the water.

Immediately, the current began pulling him downriver and he lost his balance. He gripped the rope with his one hand while his other tried to retain hold of the staff. At one point his head went under. When he broke the surface again, he heard Bart yelling, “...the staff!”

“What?” he hollered back but then the water sucked him under once more. Still holding onto the rope and the staff he managed to get his head back above water.

“...go of the staff!” he heard when he broke the surface. Then he realized Bart was trying to say, ‘Let go of the staff’. But this was his master’s staff, given to him just before he died. How could he willingly let it go?

Then the water sucked him down a third time and it was all he could do to simply get back to the surface. That was when he realized that if he didn’t let go, he wouldn’t reach the raft. Against the pull of the current, he was going to need both hands on the rope. “Forgive me master,” he said as he let go of the staff and gripped the rope with both hands.

As the staff began floating away, he started working his way down the rope to the raft. He could hear Bart grunting as he worked to keep the current from taking the raft. Moving as fast as he could, he finally reached the raft.

“Get on,” said Bart. “But be careful, this wood isn’t going to hold under your full weight.”

Nodding understanding, Kevik placed both hands on the raft and pulled himself up.

Crack!

His left hand broke one of the boards and the river just about sucked him away when his grip on the raft faltered. Panic set in until both hands were once again holding onto the raft. Then he calmed himself by a sheer force of will and began to climb on board once more.

A little slower this time, he inched his way on top until all but his lower legs were still in the water.

“Cancel the spell!” Bart yelled at him.

Mumbling the words, Kevik dispelled the goo holding the packs to the wall. Then he felt the current begin dragging the raft downriver once more. “Thanks,” he said to them.

“Later,” Bart said as he hauled the packs back onto the raft. “Keep your eyes open for any possible rocks or anything else we may run into.

“Right,” Kevik said. He remained where he was and turned onto his back like the others. He scanned for possible danger spots while Chad and Riyan continued working to keep the raft from striking the wall.

For several minutes the current carried them on until something from the opposite side of the river entered the lantern’s light and caught his attention. It looked like a wooden dock. “Bart!” he yelled then directed Bart’s attention to the dock.

Bart nodded and said, “We need to get to it!” He sat up on the makeshift raft and started twirling the three waterlogged packs over his head.

Crack! Snap!

Beneath him he could feel and hear the planks about to give way. Ignoring the aged wood’s warning, he said to Kevik, “Goo spell.” Then with a final impetus, he launched the packs toward the approaching dock.

When the packs reached halfway there, Kevik cast his spell. The packs hit the wall with a splat a little upstream of the dock. Then just like before, the river used it as a fulcrum and swung the raft towards the dock’s side of the river.

Chad and Riyan scrambled to the other side of the raft and reached it a second before the raft struck the wall. Using their legs, they kept the raft a safe distance away.

“Kevik,” Bart said. “You’re going to have to help me to pull the raft closer.” They were now ten feet downriver of the dock.

Crack!

The wood beneath Bart gave out with another threatening crack as the pressure he was exerting against the raft to prevent the river from taking it was now being focused on the board his feet were braced against. Kevik moved over until he was in position and grabbed the rope. Then between both of them, they slowly brought the raft to the dockside.

“Okay Kevik,” Bart said. “Get on the dock. But be careful, it may not hold.”

Nodding, Kevik began moving across the raft to the edge of the dock.

Crack!

“And hurry!” Bart saw the board he had his feet braced against begin to come apart. “Just hold for a little bit longer,” he said softly to the board. Once Kevik made it onto the dock, he told Riyan to go next.

Riyan grabbed the lantern then worked his way from the raft to the dock. By this time, Kevik had already made it to the stone landing on the other side. Once Riyan was on the dock and began working his way to the landing, it was Chad's turn.

"But it's going to hit against the wall!" Chad hollered to Bart. His feet even now were pressed against the side of the channel as he worked to maintain the foot of space between the raft and the wall.

"I know!" Bart replied. "Just get on the dock."

No sooner did Chad remove his feet and begin moving along the raft to the dockside than the current began banging the side of the raft into the wall. They could hear the wood begin splintering and even before he reached the dock, one of the rear planks broke off and was carried away by the current.

Bart continued holding the rope, the strain on his arms becoming quite bad. Between what he did when Kevik joined them and what he's doing here, his muscles were a knotted mass of pain. Frankly, he's surprised he's been able to hold this for as long as he has.

He watched Chad's progress and when he saw him leave the raft and make the dock, he sighed with relief.

Crack!

A large chunk of the raft behind him splintered off after striking the wall hard. He glanced back and saw that there was only one more plank behind him. The loss of that section of the raft slightly eased the pressure being exerted on his arms.

Then out of the corner of his eye, he saw Riyan moving across the wooden dock towards the rope in an attempt to help him. "Riyan, stop!" he yelled. The last thing he wanted was for the situation to worsen by Riyan breaking through the aged wood and falling into the river.

Riyan paused as he turned to Bart. Then a loud cracking was heard and Riyan's left foot suddenly broke through. Chad was quick to his side and lent him a hand back onto the stone landing. The three of them turned their gaze to where Bart sat upon the raft. His feet were braced against the wood and he was holding the rope for all he was worth.

Bart lifted a foot from where it was braced against the raft and felt the raft subtly shift under him. He moved the foot closer to the end of the raft, then did the same with the other. Only two more planks separated him from the edge of the raft. One by one, he worked his way to the edge.

Crack! Snap!

All of a sudden the raft disintegrated and he was in the water. He held onto the rope as the current dragged him under. His pack across his back didn't help matters but he wasn't about to let that go, it held his lockpicks. Death would take him before he willingly gave them up.

So holding onto the rope with one hand, he used his other to bring him back to the surface. "Grab my hand!" he heard Riyan holler to him when his head broke through. Looking up, he saw Riyan at the edge of the dock, reaching out his hand.

He tried to grab the hand but the current pulled him under once more. When he finally made it back to the surface, Riyan's hand was still outstretched. Again he tried to reach it, and this time Riyan managed to grab his hand and began pulling him to the dock.

Once he had both hands holding onto the dock, he handed the rope to Riyan. "Thanks," he said.

"Don't thank me until you're safely on the landing," Riyan said. He then took hold of the back of Bart's pack and helped him up.

Crack!

The wood beneath them was beginning to give way. "Move!" they heard Chad yell. Realizing they didn't have much time, Riyan and Bart scrambled for the landing.

Snap! Crack!

The dock disintegrated under them. Riyan was the first to make the landing and just as Bart reached it, the dock completely collapsed into the river. Bart cried out as he lost his grip and felt his feet entering the river.

Kevik dove for him and grabbed his arm before the current could drag him away. Then with Chad and Riyan's help, he pulled Bart onto the landing.

He laid there a moment panting, barely having the strength to move. Riyan came and knelt down by his side. "Guess what?" he asked.

"What?" Bart replied. His heart had finally quit racing and his muscles began to quiet their protesting.

Riyan pointed behind him to the far side of the landing and grinned. "Another passage."

"Let me have some rest first," Bart told him.

"No problem there," he said. "We need to dry out anyway before we all catch our death." Getting up, he had Chad help him in tearing apart the remnants of the pier. Little of it remained though, most of it was now on its way down the river. At least there was enough left that they could build a fire.

Kevik came and sat by Bart while the other two worked at collecting the wood. "Thank you for taking the time to rescue me," he said.

"That's alright," Bart replied. "Couldn't very well leave you there all alone." He saw a bit of sadness in Kevik's eyes and said, "Sorry about your staff."

Kevik shrugged. "I'm sure Allar would have understood," he said.

A pile of wood was beginning to grow in the middle of the landing as Riyan and Chad continued tearing chunks and pieces from the remaining sections of planks and the pilings. When they figured they had enough, Riyan stacked the smaller, driest bits in a loose pile. Then he put one of the smaller pieces in the flame of the lantern until it began to burn. Once it had caught and didn't look like it was going to go out, he placed it beneath the stack. It took him three separate attempts before the pile of wood began to burn on its own.

Slowly at first they added more wood to the flames until they had a roaring fire going on the landing. By this time some of Bart's energy had returned and he sat up and scooted closer to get warm. The four comrades sat in the fire's warm glow as they stripped down to their small clothes and began drying their things out.

"Our food's ruined," announced Chad. He pulled a rather nasty looking mess from out of his pack that had once been dried bread and other rations, including half a loaf of stale bread. The only thing that had survived was a few strips of dried beef. He went to the edge of the water and

washed away the moist rations that had adhered to the meat. After that he distributed them evenly among the four of them.

“Anyone else have anything?” Bart asked. Two more strips of beef were discovered in Riyan’s pack. Other than that, nothing was salvageable.

“Once we get out of here food won’t be that much of a problem,” Riyan said as he patted his sling.

“But getting out of here will,” Chad said. Then he pointed over to the mouth of the passage. “What do we do if that passage doesn’t lead anywhere?”

“Get back in the water and swim,” replied Bart matter-of-factly.

None of them relished that possibility. They didn’t even have the pier this time to turn into a makeshift raft, the bulk of it has already disappeared downstream. What was left was barely enough to keep their fire going.

“Anyone look into it yet?” Bart asked indicating the passage.

“Just peeked in through the entrance,” Riyan said. “It continued further than what the lantern’s light revealed.”

Bart nodded. Then he asked Kevik what happened to him after he fell down the shaft. For the next hour they heard his tale and in turn told of what they had gone through and what they found. They showed him the various items they took from the treasure room. He was especially interested in the wand.

“Do you know what it does?” asked Riyan.

“No,” he admitted. “And I’m not about ready to find out either.” He glanced to the others before continuing. “I’m about used up, magically speaking. I’ve done more magic since I’ve met you than I did the month prior to our meeting.”

“Hopefully you won’t be called on to do any more for awhile,” Bart said.

“That would be good,” he replied. “I need a break.”

When half of their wood supply had been consumed, they banked the fire and put their semi dried clothes back on. Then they made ready to explore the passage. “Think the key could be down here?” Riyan asked Bart.

Shrugging, he said, “Maybe.”

Bart took the lead. Swinging his mostly dry pack onto his back, he picked up the lantern and moved to the passage. His muscles still felt the effects of what he had put them through, but at least they no longer constantly complained. They just gave off with a dull ache now and then, along with a feeling of tiredness.

He entered the passage and found that it was constructed similar to the ones above. It extended forward easily forty feet before turning to the right. Then another ten feet before they came to the top of a stairway leading down.

Bart followed the steps down with the others right behind. At the bottom, the steps ended at another passage which extended for a short ways before ending at a plain room. It was twice as wide as it was long. No ornamentation, no engravings, nothing. Simply bare rock. The only thing in the room was a plain, four foot marble pedestal situated in the center of the room. When they

came close to it, they saw that the top of the pedestal bore the insignia that was engraved on all the coins.

“Well isn’t this just lovely,” Riyan commented. “Someone beat us to it.”

“Damn!” exclaimed Chad.

“Looks like they took it with them when they fled here,” observed Bart. “Which would make sense.”

“But where would they have taken it?” Riyan asked him.

Bart shrugged. He glanced around the room another time then began moving around the pedestal.

“You think there could be a secret compartment?” Riyan asked hopefully.

“I doubt it,” he replied. “This has all the look of where it would have rested.” He had almost completed his circuit of the pedestal when the floor opened up beneath him. “Damn!” he cried out as he reached out. His left hand grasped hold of the opening’s edge and the sudden halt of his fall knocked the lantern from out of his other hand. Just as he brought his right hand up to join his left in hanging on, the lantern smashed against the bottom of the shaft.

The others were right there a second later and helped him back up out of the pit. They looked down at the bottom a good thirty feet below where their sole lantern lay busted. The base of the lantern had ruptured when it hit and burning oil covered most of the ground down there.

“Now what?” Chad asked. Then he groaned as Kevik’s bobbing sphere appeared and began bobbing about.

“It’s better than the dark,” Riyan said.

“Not by much,” replied Chad.

Bart stared down at the flames. He sighed and was about to turn away when something caught his eye. At first he wasn’t exactly sure what it was, only that something was other than it should be. Then he finally figured it out. One side of the pit at the bottom near the flames was darker than the others. It could be a passage.

“Well, well, well,” he said with a grin.

“What?” asked Riyan as he and the others came to see what he was talking about.

Bart directed their gaze to the bottom of the shaft. “Look there to the right,” he said. “I think that’s a passage.”

“A passage?” asked Chad. “Isn’t that sort of a dumb place for one?”

Bart shook his head. “Actually I think it’s a pretty ingenious place for one,” he countered. “If the lantern hadn’t dropped, we never would have suspected it was there.” Then he turned to Riyan. “And what would we have done then?”

“Left thinking that the key was gone?” he guessed.

“Precisely!” he exclaimed. “I would bet every bit of treasure we have found so far that the key lies somewhere down that passage.”

“But how are we to get down there?” asked Kevik. “It’s pretty far.”

“Simple,” explained Bart. “If you’re up for one more of your goo spells you could use it to adhere the end of the rope up here while we climb down.” He looked to Kevik until he nodded that he could. “Excellent. How long does it last?”

“Up to an hour,” he said, “if I don’t dispel it first.”

“That should give us enough time,” he said. Then he began preparing his rope. “You three may wish to leave your packs up here,” he told them. “Make it easier for you to shinny down the rope.”

They began taking off their packs and setting them by the base of the pedestal. When Kevik had his off, he turned to find Bart ready with the rope. He had placed its end at the edge of the pit directly over the opening of the passage below. The end of the rope rested a foot from the edge. “Just cast it there,” Bart told him as he pointed to the end of the rope.

Kevik nodded and cast his spell. A green globule appeared atop the rope and quickly adhered it to the stone. By the time the goo finished settling, some of it had oozed over the edge of the pit.

Bart tugged the rope hard but the goo wouldn’t release it. “Good enough,” he said. “I’ll go down first. Once I’m there I’ll holler up and then you follow one at a time.” The others nodded. He then went to the edge of the pit and began lowering himself over the edge. Before he disappeared out of sight, he pointed to where the green goo oozed over the side, “Be careful of that. You get stuck and you may have to stay there until we’re done.” Then he began descending the rope quickly.

The smoke in the shaft was annoying but not overwhelming as the lantern oil burned below. He had to make sure that when he landed at the bottom that he didn’t settle onto a burning patch. Foot by foot he continued his descent. When he neared the bottom, he could feel the heat from the flames.

Glancing down, he saw the opening just below him and the pool of burning oil on the floor before it. He came up with an idea. Moving to the side of the opening, he worked his way down a little further. Then just before he reached the floor, he kicked against the wall with his feet. Angling slightly over towards the opening, he swung outward and then came back into the mouth of the passage. Once past the pool of burning oil, he came to land a good foot from the edge of the flames.

He moved back as far as he could and stuck his head out of the passage. “I’m down,” he hollered back up to the others.

At the top of the shaft, the others looked at each other. “Who’s next?” Chad asked.

When no one else volunteered, Riyan said, “I’ll go. Then you Kevik.” When Kevik nodded, Riyan moved to the edge of the pit and grabbed the rope. Edging ever so gently over the side, he made sure to avoid coming in contact with the green goo. Then he began entering the pit. He had a few heart stopping moments before he reached the passage opening. Once there, Bart grabbed hold of him and helped him in avoiding the flames.

Next came Kevik and then Chad. Once they were all down, Kevik’s bobbing sphere appeared among them. “Stay close,” Bart told him as he took the lead. The passage extended straight away from the pit for over a hundred feet before coming to a room very similar to the one with the pedestal. Only this time there wasn’t a pedestal. Instead there were three doors set in the far wall about three feet apart.

When Riyan saw the doors he asked, "I take it only one door will open to where we want to go?"

"That's the way I would figure it," replied Bart. "The other two I'm sure will be trapped in some way."

"Joy," groaned Chad.

To Riyan and Chad, Bart said, "You two wait out in the passage."

"What about me?" asked Kevik.

"I need your light so you're staying with me," he explained.

Kevik did not like the sound of that. "Very well," he replied with little enthusiasm.

With Kevik's light bouncing about, Bart moved to the doors and began an examination of each. He fervently hoped that they would give him some indication which one would be safe to open. But, after ten minutes of fruitless searching, he came up with nothing.

"Guess we'll just have to open them and hope for the best," he said.

"Do you think that's wise?" asked Kevik.

"Not in the least," Bart replied. "Which one should we open first?"

Kevik looked at him in shock. "You want me to pick?"

"Sure," Bart said with a grin. "I can't tell which one so your guess is as good as any."

He glanced over to Riyan and Chad but they were no help. Turning back to Bart he said, "The one on the left?"

"Left it is," said Bart. He then moved to the left door and grabbed the handle. Turning it ever so slowly, he braced himself to dart backward if things went bad. When nothing happened, he slowly pulled the door open.

As the door opened, they began to hear a grinding noise coming from the other side. He glanced to the others questioningly then pulled the door all the way open. The door opened onto a wall of stone that was beginning to sink into the ground.

"Could be opening the way to the key," suggested Riyan.

Bart didn't think so but kept his opinion to himself. Then all of a sudden, drops of water appeared at the top of the door. Then the drops became drips that steadily increased in volume and speed.

"Oh my god!" Bart yelled as he shut the door quickly. "It's opening up a conduit for the river to enter." He then motioned for Riyan and Chad to come forward. "You two hold this door," he said. "If you don't, we'll all drown."

They came and put their shoulders against it as Bart turned to the other two doors. He didn't think it would be the middle one as it was in close proximity to the water trap. So he tried the door on the right. It was locked. He placed his pack on the ground and quickly removed his picks. That's when he noticed water beginning to pool on the floor. He glanced to the door Riyan and Chad were holding and saw a steady stream of water seeping in through the cracks all around the door.

"Can you hold it?" he asked. Riyan nodded but he could see that he and Chad were under great strain in holding the door closed. Returning to the locked door, he quickly removed his two picks and set to work on the lock. In a matter of seconds he had it opened.

He replaced his picks in the rolled leather and put the rolled leather back in his pack. Then he pulled the door quickly open. On the other side was another long passage extending away.

“Kevik, come with me,” he said. Then to Riyan and Chad he added, “I’ll be back.” Riyan only nodded. With Kevik following along behind, he practically flew down the passage as he knew time was rapidly running out.

The passage went for over a hundred feet before ending abruptly at a sigil inscribed wall. He was quick to recognize it as identical in nature to what they had found at the bottom of The Crypt. The only difference was that in the middle of the sigils were four separate, indented spaces. Each of the indented spaces was curved and sank three inches into the wall with a two inch space separating it from its neighbors. Looking at the spaces together, they appeared to form a circle.

“What is that?” Kevik asked.

Bart turned to look at him. “It’s what we came here for.” He examined the spaces more closely. Upon the stone within the backs of the spaces were engravings. When he had Kevik come closer so his bobbing sphere could illuminate them better, he discovered that the engravings were of the four coats of arms that they had seen at the bottom of the crypt. The dragon-sword, the two headed falcon, the one with the stripe running from the upper left corner diagonally to the bottom right, and the five pointed crown that they believed belonged to the king himself.

In his mind’s eye, he pictured the key that they had in their possession. He had studied it enough while lying in Riyan’s bed recovering from the poison. It looked as if their part of the key would fit snugly into any one of the spaces. But would just one work? His mind raced over the problem, he knew he didn’t have much time.

“Bart...” Kevik began but Bart waved him quiet. He had to concentrate.

There were four spaces which could only mean there were four segments of the key. If that supposition was correct, and one of the segments lay beyond this wall, then why have four spaces here in this wall? Obviously you couldn’t use the key segment lying beyond the wall to open the wall; it had to mean something else.

“Bart...” Kevik said again, this time with a little more urgency.

“Not now!” Bart said sternly back at him.

The segments of the key had to be magical in nature, of that he was positive. What if the sigils inscribed upon the wall were set to recognize the various keys? Maybe by placing one in its correct space upon the wall, that would cause a secret door to open? It was worth a shot. Then he remembered that their segment was sitting way back above the shaft where Riyan and the others had left their packs.

Turning around, he started to tell Kevik to follow when his foot splashed in water. There was over an inch of water on the floor. He glanced up to Kevik who said, “That’s what I was trying to tell you.”

“Come on!” Bart yelled. “We haven’t much time.” Racing down the passage, they splashed through the water until they returned to the room where Riyan and Chad were holding the door against the water.

“Tell me you have it!” Riyan hollered when Bart and Kevik entered the room. Water was flowing steadily through the cracks in the door and it looked like the door was beginning to bow in from the pressure on the other side.

“Almost,” he replied. “I need the key we found.” He and Kevik started to race back down the passage to the shaft when Riyan hollered for him to stop.

“It’s not up there,” Riyan said. “It’s in my belt pouch.”

Bart looked and saw that his belt pouch was bulging pretty good. He had thought it was the many coins they had found. “Thank goodness,” he said and moved to get it.

“What’s going on?” asked Chad.

“I’ll tell you when we get out of here,” he replied. Undoing the string holding the pouch closed, he reached in and pulled forth the key. Light from the bobbing sphere reflected off its shiny surface. He saw Kevik’s eyebrows arch when he saw it. “Back we go,” he told him, then they raced back down the passage to the wall.

When he reached the wall, he started to put the key segment into one of the spaces then stopped. What if he put it in the wrong one? Which one was the right one? Then he glanced to the key segment and saw the sigils. Perhaps they would align with those crisscrossing the wall before him?

Testing that theory, he moved it closer to the wall and placed it before each of the spaces to see which would line up with the sigils best. As it turned out, the space with the five pointed crown was a perfect match. Hoping he was understanding this right, he inserted the key into the wall.

As soon as he inserted the key all the way to the back of the space, the sigils surrounding it flared. Then the wall to his right began rising into the ceiling. “Yes!” he yelled. Once the wall was up far enough, he ducked under and passed through to the other side.

It was a bare and nondescript room, with but a single pedestal rising out of the middle of the floor. His eyes lit up as he saw lying there before him on the pedestal, which was an exact duplicate of the one they found in the room above, another segment of the key. Grinning, he moved forward and picked it up. After what he just did to open this place, it was quite unlikely there would be a trap here.

Once he held the segment in hand, he quickly put it in his pack and left the room. The water covering the floor was several inches deep now and it was time to leave. He went to the four recesses and used his knife to pry out the first segment. Once it was out, the wall began sliding back down to hide the hidden room.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said to Kevik and then broke into a run back to where they had left Riyan and Chad.

Back at the room, they were still holding the door with all their might, but it continued to gradually bow outward. The water flowing from the cracks around the door was no longer a trickle but more like a steady stream.

Bart and Kevik ran back into the room. “Got it!” Bart yelled triumphantly. “Now let’s get out of here.”

Riyan and Chad glanced to each other and simultaneously let go of the door. No sooner had they let it loose than the water on the other side broke through. The water burst through the door with such power, that it knocked the door from its hinges and slammed it into Riyan and Chad.

When the door hit them they went down with a cry as a veritable torrent of water shot through the opening. It was as if the entire river had been diverted to flow through the doorway.

“Riyan!” Bart yelled as he saw them go down. The water pushed him back as it rapidly began filling the room and the passages of this level. “Kevik, help me!”

Riyan broke the surface but there was no sign of Chad.

Bart immediately dove under the water and groped with his hands until he found Chad. He then pulled him upwards and Chad gave out with a groan as he broke through to the surface.

Kevik appeared beside him and together they managed to keep Chad above water. “Are you two okay?” Bart asked.

Riyan nodded but Chad looked like he was in some serious pain.

“We have to make it to the shaft!” Bart yelled over the roar of the water. Already the water level was chest high and rising. “Help Chad.”

Riyan came forward and together with Kevik, began helping Chad into and then down the long passage to the shaft that led up to the pedestal room on the next level. “Keep going!” yelled Bart when Kevik paused to look back to him. He could see Bart had hold of the door that broke off and was pushing it along the surface of the water after them. There was no time to wonder what he was going to do with it as the water was now up to their chins with only another foot of space before reaching the ceiling. Urging Chad onward, they drew ever closer to the shaft.

Bart was finding it increasingly difficult to continue moving the door down the passage. The water was now so high that he didn’t have proper leverage on the floor and was beginning to lag behind. He was afraid that he might not make it in time.

Ahead of him he could see that Riyan had already reached the shaft and that Kevik and Chad were right behind him. With but inches separating the water and the ceiling, it was all he could do to continue moving forward and breathe. Finally he gave up trying to push along the floor and simply began swimming.

He kicked and paddled as he pushed the door along until he felt the door being pulled from the other side. The last few feet to the shaft he was completely submerged under the water as the water had finally completely filled the passage.

When he broke the surface, he found himself in the shaft and the water was shooting them up to the top quickly. He grabbed his rope that was still secured by the goo spell. “Kevik!” he hollered. “Get rid of the goo.” He looked up and saw the opening coming fast. Just before they reached the top, he hollered, “Try to grab your packs. The room up there will fill with water too as it’s beneath the level of the river.”

Then the water shot them out and they were literally thrown into the air before coming to land. Bart couldn’t tell if they managed to get their packs or not as he was concerned with maintaining contact with the door. But in the churning water he lost his hold and couldn’t locate it as the water continued to fountain out of the shaft with incredible pressure.

The water was a churning torrent that threw them one way then another. When he realized they would be lucky to make it out with their lives, he hollered, "Get to the stairs!" Looking around, he saw that Kevik and Chad were already entering the passage leading to the stairwell. Of Riyan there was no sign.

He knew he had to get out of there, the room was already practically filled with water and completely would be in a matter of seconds. Swimming for the passage, he almost made it when he was bumped into by Riyan coming up from beneath the water.

"Where did you go?" he asked.

"Got the packs," Riyan replied with a grin. Then together they swam for the stairs.

The water quickly filled the room and pushed them along the stairwell. It took them almost to the top before the rising water subsided. Kevik and Chad were the first to climb out of the water and onto the stairs with Bart right behind. Riyan brought up the rear, dragging their three packs with him. He saw the rope coiled around Bart's arm.

They made it to the top of the stairs then collapsed.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Riyan was quick to get the fire they left banked on the landing restored to life. The others came from the steps and embraced its warmth. Chad wasn't doing too good, there was pain coming from his back. When the door struck him, it had injured his back in some way, maybe even broken something. He was fortunate that the blow didn't paralyze him.

After Kevik and Bart helped him to the fire, Bart dug one of the potions they had found earlier out of his pack and gave it to him. "Here," he said as he handed it to him.

Chad could barely reach out to take it as the movement of his muscles aggravated his injury and flared the already unbearable pain to such an extent that dots formed before his eyes. Kevik had to help him open the bottle before he could drink it. Then he put it to his lips and drank it down. As soon as the elixir within the bottle passed through his throat, the pain began subsiding.

Bart could see the pain in his eyes beginning to ease, along with the stiffness in the rest of his body.

"Man that feels better," Chad said after a few minutes. In the area of his back where the pain had flared the worst, he began to notice a warming sensation that continued to intensify until just before it became uncomfortable. Not an unpleasant sensation, it was more a reassuring one as Chad knew the injury was being repaired by the potion.

“I was worried about you for awhile there,” admitted Riyan.

Chad gave him a grin, “So was I.”

Then they saw the glitter of gold as Bart removed the two segments of the key and showed them to the others. He went on to tell them what he saw down below, how he had opened the door, and finally the finding of the second segment.

“So does this mean there are two more somewhere?” asked Kevik.

“It looks that way,” he replied. Then he glanced to Riyan. “It may take some time before we can discover where to find the other two segments.”

Riyan nodded. “I figured that as soon as I saw the second segment.”

Bart held the two pieces close together and then turned them so the map on the back was visible. “They go together,” he told the others. Indeed, they could see how the edge of the map of the original one matched the edge of the second. If you were to put them together there would be one continuous map.

“Are there any indications of where the other segments may be?” Chad asked. Since markings on the first one had led them to the Ruins of Algoth where the second segment was located, he hoped there would be something similar on the second segment that would lead them to a third.

Bart brought the second segment closer to the light of the fire and examined it closely but couldn’t make out any such markings. He finally looked up at the others and shook his head. “No, nothing.”

“Too bad,” Chad said.

The fire crackled in the silence as the four comrades sat on the ledge next to the flowing river. Bart was fiddling with the two segments and brought them together so the edges touched, he was wondering if they would fuse together or something. To his disappointment, nothing happened when they touched. Shrugging, he handed the two segments to Chad so he and the others could examine them. Then he stood up and stretched.

Riyan glanced at him and saw Bart begin moving to the passage leading back to the flooded stairwell and tunnels. “Where are you going?” he asked.

Bart paused and said, “I want to see if I can find that door.”

“What do you want that for anyway?” Kevik asked.

Turning to gaze towards him, Bart said, “It would give us something to hold onto when we went down the river.”

Kevik nodded his head in understanding. “Do you need some help?” he asked.

“Maybe your light would be helpful,” he replied.

“Alright,” Kevik said then got to his feet and joined him. His bobbing sphere appeared and they began walking down the passage together.

When they reached the top of the stairs, the light from the sphere revealed that the water flooding the lower area came to within ten feet of the top of the stairs. The door was nowhere in sight.

“I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this,” Bart sighed as he shed his pack. He set it down against the wall and began uncoiling his rope.

“What do you plan to do?” Kevik asked.

With the rope now uncoiled, Bart tied it around his waist as he turned back to Kevik. “I’m going after it,” he explained. “I would appreciate it if you could hold onto the end of the rope for me.”

“Sure,” he said. “I can do that.” He picked up the other end of the rope and stood ready.

“Once I go under, start counting,” Bart told him. “If you get to two hundred before I return, start pulling me back.”

“Are you sure you can hold your breath that long?” Kevik asked.

Bart nodded. “Two hundred and no more understand?”

“I understand.”

Tuning back to the stairs, Bart began moving down them to the water’s edge. When his foot entered the water, it sent a shiver of cold through him. He tried to disregard the coldness as he moved further into the water. Once he reached the place where it was up to his neck, he glanced back to Kevik and saw that he was ready. He then took several deep breaths in succession before diving under the surface.

“One...two...three...,” Kevik began counting.

Bart soon left the glow from Kevik’s bobbing sphere behind as he swam down into the darkness below. He knew that the door would be pressed against the ceiling somewhere, its buoyancy would see to that. So as he swam he periodically ran his hand along the stone ceiling in search of the wood.

He’s pretty sure that the door would still be in the room at the top of the shaft. That’s where he had lost track of it. Somehow he’s got to get it into the passage leading to the stairwell before his air ran out.

Deeper he went into the darkness until he felt the ceiling all of a sudden rise higher telling him he had entered the room. From there he began checking the room’s ceiling. By this time, the effort to keep from breathing was growing increasingly harder. He knew he didn’t have much time left so quickly searched for the door.

After a few moments his hand hit something. It was the door. The water held it pressed tightly to the ceiling. He then moved to the other side and began working it to the opening of the passage leading to the stairwell.

It was hard going but he moved it several feet before he felt a tug on the rope as Kevik began reeling him back in. He let go of the door and quickly swam back along the rope’s path until his head broke through the surface.

The air that had been trapped inside burst out as his lungs began drawing fresh air into them. He started coughing as droplets of water were sucked down with his first inhalation.

“Did you find it?”

He looked up to see Riyan and Chad standing next to Kevik. Nodding, he coughed a couple more times then said, “Yes I did. It’s in the room at the other end of the passage. Give me a minute to catch my breath and I’ll try again.”

Then he glanced to Chad. “How’s your back?”

“Good as new,” he replied then did a few bends and twists to emphasize the point.

“Don’t overdue it,” cautioned Bart.

“I won’t,” Chad assured him. He looked tired, the magic of the potion again having used energy from his body in its healing.

Bart rested a few minutes then returned to the water. It took him another two times before he was able to bring the door out of the room and up the stairwell. When he broke the surface with the door in hand, the other three cheered.

Riyan and Kevik grabbed the door and brought it out to the landing where they set it down next to the fire. When Chad returned with Bart, Riyan asked, “What do you plan to do with it?”

“Quite simple really,” he explained. “We set our packs in the center of the door then wind the rope in and around them to create four loops large enough to hold each of us. One loop will extend over each of the four sides of the door so we won’t be knocked together if things get rough. Then Kevik casts his goo spell so that it will coat all the packs and bind the rope to the door.” He could see that the others were beginning to understand his plan.

“After that it’s fairly straightforward,” he continued. “We put the door with packs and rope already secured by the goo into the water. Then we get into the water, place ourselves within the loops, and ride the river out of here.”

“What if it doesn’t go anywhere?” asked Chad.

Bart turned a grim smile towards him. “Then our adventure comes to an end.” He glanced around at the others and said, “If anyone here has a better plan, now would be the time to mention it.” When the others remained silent, he nodded. “Very well then. Shall we get it ready?”

They took their four packs and placed them in the center of the door just as Bart had said. They weren’t willing to risk the two segments of the key by keeping them in the packs, so Bart and Riyan each put one of the segments in their belt pouches for safekeeping.

Once the packs were in position on the door, Bart took his rope and looped it around so it crisscrossed through the packs several times. When he was done, a loop extended past the edge of the door on all four sides. Then he said to Kevik, “Your turn.”

Nodding, Kevik cast his goo spell. The green globule appeared on top of the packs and quickly oozed its way down to the door beneath. When its movement finally stopped, Bart had each of them grip a different loop. Then with all of them straining hard, they pulled and jerked the loops. Bart grinned to himself when after all they tried to do, not one loop came undone from the goo coating.

“So we have about an hour?” he asked Kevik about the goo.

“Something like that,” he replied. “I’ve never actually timed it before, but that’s what I was told by my master.”

Bart nodded. “Good enough for me. If after an hour we’re still in the water, we’ll try to find someplace to land and redo it.” Taking his loop in hand he and the others lifted the makeshift door-raft and carried it to the water’s edge.

“Let me get in first,” suggested Riyan. “That way I can steady it while the rest of you take your position.” Riyan let go of his loop and quickly slipped over the side of the landing. Once he

was in the water and had a secure hold on the landing's edge, he indicated for them to put the raft in the water.

Moving it to the edge, they slid it into the water. Riyan immediately ducked under the surface and came up within the loop closest to the landing. Then he again gripped the landing's edge. "Alright," he said, "now the rest of you one at a time."

Bart was the first one to enter the water and took his position in another loop. Then he helped Riyan hold the raft against the current while first Kevik, then Chad, entered the water and took their position.

Chad, being the last to enter, had to work his way around the edge of the raft before he came to the last loop. Once he was within the loop, Bart and Riyan let go. The current immediately pulled them away from the landing and swept them downstream quickly.

The underground river turned to the right and the raft drifted to the outside of the curve. Chad happened to be on that side and when the current moved them too close to the wall, he used his feet to kick them back towards the middle.

Above the raft were three bobbing spheres. Riyan had requested Kevik to supply more light so they could better keep an eye on what was coming ahead. They didn't have paddles or oars so would need some warning if they should all of a sudden need to change their position on the river to avoid an obstacle.

As the river finished its curve, it began moving along a straighter channel. Not too far past the curve, Kevik noticed another landing on the inside bank of the river. "Another landing!" he hollered when he saw it.

"It might be the way out!" cried Bart.

They used their arms and legs in an attempt to gain the other side of the river but the current was too strong. Bart suggested they dismantle their raft and use the ropes and packs like they had done before. But they were moving far too quickly away from the landing for them to have it ready in time to use, so they decided against it. All they could do was float in the water, secure in their loops, while the landing disappeared behind them.

Floating along as they were was fairly comfortable actually. If they could ignore the coldness of the water it really wasn't all that bad. They had the rope loops to keep them from sinking, while the door itself gave them something to hold onto.

Several minutes after the landing disappeared behind them, the current of the river felt as if it was picking up. Then from further ahead came the unmistakable sound of rapids. "This could get interesting," commented Riyan.

"No matter what happens," Bart said, "don't let go of your loop."

"Wasn't planning on it," Chad told him.

The surface of the water that had been so placid thus far began rocking them back and forth. They hung on as the river's speed increased and they saw the approach of the rapids. Their little makeshift raft was soon being thrown about as the water crashed over the rocks. They would be plunged down one watery furrow, before a swell would raise them high only to be slammed back down again. Once when the wave slammed them down, they were jarred fiercely when the door landed on a rock that was protruding out of the water.

“We’re stuck,” hollered Kevin fearfully as they teetered there upon the tip of the stone.

“Rock it back and forth!” yelled Bart. Water kept crashing into them but failed to dislodge their raft. They shifted their weight from one side to the next as they attempted to dislodge their raft from the rock. Riyan and Chad were in good position to use their feet against the sides of the rock for leverage. Then suddenly, they were free and again being tossed by the water.

Their raft would turn round about as the water kept thrashing them. First Riyan’s side of the raft would be facing downstream, then it would be Kevik’s turn. Back and forth and roundabout they went as the water continued to crash over the rocks. They each kept a look ahead of them as best they could to avoid dangers.

“A rock!” said Bart.

Just ahead of them a large rock thrust its way out of the water, the river was crashing fiercely upon its side. Riyan was in perfect position to be rammed into it. He pointed to the left and yelled, “That way!” Using their feet and arms they worked the raft so that it only grazed the side of the rock. Riyan kicked out at it to keep his body from being crushed between it and the edge of the door.

“How much more of this is there?” yelled Chad.

From Bart’s position he could see ahead of them for as far as the spheres illuminated. “Still a ways,” he replied. Then he saw where the river was about to go down a series of shallow falls. “Hold on!” he yelled.

Riyan looked over his shoulder and saw what was coming. “Oh my god,” he said then braced himself as the raft went over the first drop. It was only five feet, but when he hit, Riyan felt like he had fallen a hundred. Then the raft slammed painfully into his chest and pushed him even further under the water.

The blow to his chest seemed to stun his lungs for when he broke the surface, he couldn’t get a breath. Then his lungs eased up and after few anxious moments, could start drawing breaths again.

“Here comes another one!” Kevik yelled as they headed for the lip of the next fall.

Riyan panicked at the thought of another blow like the last one. But then he realized the raft had turned and he wouldn’t be directly beneath it when it hit this time. He gripped the loop holding him to the raft tightly as they went over the edge.

This one was a three tiered fall and by the time they reached the bottom, they were all bruised and battered. Kevik thought he may have broken his leg. At this point the river calmed down and began flowing normally once more.

“Everyone alright?” Riyan asked.

“No,” replied Kevik through gritted teeth. “My leg hit a rock during those last rapids. I think it may be broken.”

Riyan turned to Chad and Bart. “We need to get him out of the water and look at it,” he told them. They nodded and began searching for a place where they could make landfall. A few minutes later, an area came into view that looked like it would do. The walls of the channel the water flowed through began to widen and a shelf of sorts appeared on their right. It was at least six inches higher than the surface of the water and wide enough for them to rest upon.

They paddled as best they could towards it. Kevik of course was dead weight due to his injury. When they drew close to the shelf, they found that the river was shallower here and they could touch the bottom. When they were next to the edge, Bart and Riyan helped Kevik out of his loop and up onto the shelf. Chad took charge of the raft and made sure it didn't float away.

Setting Kevik on the shelf, Bart placed his hands on the suspected broken leg. He moved them gently up and down as he sought the break. After several minutes he looked to Kevik and said, "I don't think it's broken."

"You sure?" he asked.

Bart nodded. "The bone feels fine," he explained. "You probably just bruised it."

"That's a relief," he said.

They decided to take a break there on the shelf to give them some time out of the water before continuing. Bart and Riyan helped Chad in pulling the raft up onto the shelf. Once it was out of the water and resting on the ground, Kevik canceled his goo spell so Riyan could give him some of his healing potion. Not all of it, just enough to ease the pain.

Propping themselves against the back wall of the shelf, they rested for a short time. While Riyan was resting he noticed how the shelf ran along the river past where the light from the spheres extended. "Wonder if we could walk the rest of the way?" he asked.

"Rest of the way to where?" asked Kevik.

"I don't know," he admitted. "Maybe this comes out at the lake or something."

Bart nodded, "Could definitely give it a try. If it doesn't, we could always come back here to the raft."

"I just wish we had a regular lantern or torch," said Chad.

Riyan glanced at the bobbing spheres which have begun to grate on everyone's nerves. "Me too," he agreed.

After resting for a little longer to give the potion ample time to work on Kevik, they returned to their feet. They each took their pack and Bart coiled the rope before placing it in his. Then they began making their way along the shelf. The shelf continued to follow the river and at times would grow quite narrow as to be almost nonexistent. Other times it widened sufficiently so all four could walk abreast if they wished.

They had followed the shelf for twenty minutes before it ended at a rock formation that jutted out from the wall. In order to continue they would have to enter the river and work their way around the obstruction to the other side. Which after a quick confab they decided to do.

Riyan went first with Chad following right behind. Bart brought up the rear as they entered the water and edged out to move around the outcrop. Riyan maintained his balance against the current by holding on as best he could to the cracks and crevices in the face of the outcrop.

The worst part was when he began moving around the end of the outcrop. He almost lost his footing as the current was at its strongest there. But he managed to work his way around to the other side.

"The shelf continues on," he hollered back to the others when he could see it.

"Good news," he heard Bart reply.

One by one they made their way around the point of the outcrop. Riyan had remained out at the point to assist the others. It didn't take long before they were once again back on the shelf and continuing on.

The underground channel they were walking through was quiet except for the occasional lapping of water against the sides. None of them felt much like talking, exhaustion resulting from all they've recently gone through had sapped their desire for conversation. And it was in this quiet that the warbling of a bird was suddenly heard.

Riyan came to a stop and asked, "Did you hear that?"

Again the warbling echoed down the channel. "It's a bird!" exclaimed Kevik.

"That means the way out can't be too far away," Bart said. "Can you tell where it's coming from?"

They paused for a moment as each listened to the bird's call. "It's coming from up ahead," Chad finally said.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Kevik said. "I for one am anxious to get out of here."

Bart sighed. "So am I."

With the possibility of escaping this underground world and returning to the outside before them, they hurried forward with renewed energy. Shortly, they began to smell flowers and other vegetation and then they were out. The river left the mouth of an underground cave and then worked its way down among the hills to the small lake off in the distance.

It was still night, the moon overhead shining bright. "Were we down there all day?" asked Chad.

"It would seem so," replied Bart.

"No wonder I'm so tired," yawned Riyan.

"But now is not the time to rest," Bart told the others. "We still need to get out of goblin territory."

"Are we finished in Algoth then?" asked Chad.

"We found what we came for," replied Bart. "Now it's time to go."

They couldn't help but to turn their gaze southeastward towards the mountains that marked the boundary between goblin lands and that of humans. Hidden in the night, their mighty peaks were but a pale shadowy whisper against the backdrop of stars.

Riyan finally broke the quiet by saying, "It's not getting any closer with us just standing here." And with that they headed out.

Lights could be seen on the far side of the small lake where the underground river finally ended, indicating another of the goblin villages. Riyan, Chad, and Kevik began to move off through the hills when Bart suddenly stopped and grew thoughtful. Riyan was quick to notice his friend not following and came to a stop as well.

"What is it?" he asked. Chad and Kevik came to a stop and returned back to the other two.

"I was thinking that if we were to take a boat from yonder village," he explained as he pointed off to the distant lights, "then we could reach the Marketplace all the quicker."

"Seems a bit risky to me," argued Chad.

Bart turned to him and said, "So is hoofing it on foot across goblin infested lands. They know we're here somewhere," Then he sniffed and added, "From the smell of it the fire is still burning and it's between us and the mountains."

The air did still smell of smoke. "They have ponies too," Riyan said in support of Bart's suggestion. "On horses we could outrun them, but not on foot."

"And don't forget," chimed in Kevik, "even when the goblins were on foot the only reason they didn't catch us was that we passed the totem and entered Algoth."

Chad could see they were in support of Bart's plan. "Very well," he agreed.

Bart nodded. "Okay. Let's get down to the water's edge and then Chad and Kevik, you two wait on the shore while Riyan and I go steal us a boat."

"Me?" asked Riyan. He was nervous about entering into a goblin village. Visions of his death rolled through his mind.

"Yes you," Bart said. "I need someone to watch my back and you're the only one not weakened by recent injury."

Riyan swallowed and nodded. "Alright," he said. His voice revealed the nervousness that he was feeling.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Once they reached the lakeshore, Riyan and Bart had removed their packs and left them there with Chad and Kevik to await their return. Bart did put his lockpicks within his shirt. Riyan eyed him questioningly about that.

"My picks go where I go," was the only answer he gave before they headed out.

Now, they stood behind the bole of a large tree at the edge of the goblin village. The buildings were similar in size and design to the ones Bart had seen in the settlement they had come across on their way to Algoth. The whole place looked peaceful with only a small portion of the windows having light.

"Looks like almost everyone is asleep," Riyan whispered.

Bart nodded. Then he pointed further into the village toward the shore of the lake. There they saw a dock to which a dozen or so boats were moored in the moonlight. "Come on," he said, "and be silent."

Riyan followed as Bart moved quickly to the side of the nearest building. Its windows were dark and was situated closest to the water's edge. Then after a brief pause to be sure they

remained undetected, they repeated their dash to the next building. From building to building they repeated their mad dash as they drew ever closer to the dock and the boats secured there.

Suddenly, Bart placed an arm across Riyan's chest and pressed him to the side of the building. A split second later, two goblin men emerged from the side of the building and began making their way toward the dock.

They were talking to themselves in their guttural language. One held a large net and the other two small boxes. From the looks of them Riyan guessed they were fishermen heading out for an early morning catch.

Bart and Riyan remained motionless against the building as the two goblins reached the dock and began removing the mooring lines from one of the boats. Other sounds began coming to them as the village started to stir and they could see where lights appeared in more of the windows. The village was waking up.

"We can't stay here!" Riyan whispered earnestly in fear.

"Quiet!" replied Bart.

The two fishermen had finished releasing the mooring lines and were beginning to head out.

"Come on," Bart said. Moving out quickly, he practically ran in the dark towards the dock. Riyan followed.

All around them they could hear goblins speaking to one another within their homes. Terror at being caught almost immobilized Riyan but he somehow kept going. They hit the dock and Bart immediately went all the way down to the small, four-seater moored at the end of the dock. "Hurry Riyan," he whispered back to him as he reached the boat and started untying the lines.

Riyan quickly raced down the end of the dock and made his way into the boat. He glanced back to the village and could see goblins moving about, fortunately none were heading their way at the moment.

Then the rope that had moored the boat to the dock was tossed inside followed quickly by Bart. Riyan held one of the oars in his hand that had been lying in the bottom and handed the other to Bart. Working together, they began paddling the boat quickly out onto the lake.

Riyan kept glancing back to the village, but so far none of the goblins had yet discovered the theft. He sighed in relief and his fear began subsiding as the distance between them and the dock grew.

To the east, the sky was just beginning to lighten with the coming of dawn. They needed to find Kevik and Chad quickly before it grew light enough for the goblins to see them out upon the lake.

They rowed for another quarter hour as they searched the shoreline for the other two. The fishermen they had seen earlier must have gone to a different location to fish as they didn't encounter them.

Finally, they saw the pair on the shoreline waving to them. They paddled harder and when they reached the shore, ran the prow of the boat up onto the beach. "I started thinking something had happened to you," Chad said as he threw the packs into the boat.

"We need to hurry," Riyan said to them. Gesturing back to the village he added, "They're beginning to awaken."

With the packs now in the bottom of the boat, Kevik hopped in and then Chad pushed them off the shore. As Chad jumped in, Riyan and Bart used the oars to turn the boat around and headed towards the mouth of the river leading to the larger lake by the Marketplace.

The sky continued to lighten as they rowed across the lake. The mountaintops of the range separating the two lands became more distinct and the darkness around the four comrades in the boat began to diminish. Also visible was a dark plume of smoke rising some distance away between them and the mountains. Obviously the fire still continued to rage.

“Look!” said Kevik and they turned to see several other boats now out on the water. Goblins were seen throwing nets out over the water as they gathered in the fish.

“Doesn’t look like they’re searching for the missing boat,” Riyan observed.

“No it doesn’t,” replied Bart. “It may not ever occur to them that it was stolen by humans. After all, how often do humans make it this far?”

“I hope you’re right,” said Chad.

They continued rowing hard until the mouth of the river appeared ahead of them. As the bow of the boat entered the river, Riyan glanced back one last time to see if any pursuit had developed. He was greatly relieved to see that none had.

While the sky continued lightening, they rowed. They kept on the lookout for a place to hole up through the day as they didn’t dare risk being on the river during the daylight hours. When the sky lightened to the extent that they dared not proceed any further, they beached the boat and carried it inland to hide among the trees.

The boat was fairly heavy but they managed to lift it and carry it into the trees so as not to leave a tell-tale drag mark on the shore. They carried it a hundred feet into the forest before setting it back to the ground. Exhausted and hungry, they settled down to wait for the coming of night when they would return to the river and make their way to the large lake before morning dawned once more.

“Riyan,” Bart said. “Why don’t you use your sling and find us something to eat?”

“I really don’t want raw meat,” Riyan said. “I’d rather go hungry another day.”

“With the smoke in the air from the fire downstream, I doubt if anyone is going to notice if we have a fire,” Bart argued.

Riyan knew they were all hungry, with naught but a few strips of meat a day or so ago to sustain them. “Very well,” he said, and took his sling. Picking up a couple stones he soon disappeared into the trees.

By the time he returned with two rabbits, the others had a fire going. They built it close to the side of the boat in order to hide it in the event a goblin passed by. But given the relative wildness of the surrounding trees and bush, it’s unlikely goblins have traveled through this area recently.

The meal of roast rabbit was one of the best meals Riyan had ever had in his life. His mother always said hunger was the best seasoning, and she was right. Once the meal was over, they turned in. Riyan took the first watch as the others began resting. He kept an ever vigilant eye out for possible incursions near their camp by goblins, but what was on his mind mostly was the fire.

Smoke rose high into the sky before the upper air currents began pushing it eastward. What little breeze there was blew towards the fire, so hopefully it would keep it moving away from

them. But, whether it does or not made no difference come morning for they planned to ride the river south, directly into the flames. Riyan wished they didn't have to come near the fire, but being on foot such as they would have to be in order to circumvent it, would take them far too long to reach another pass. And every extra day on this side of the mountains increased their chance of being spotted.

Throughout the day as the others took their turns at watch, they too couldn't help but watch the smoke rising. One shift at watch led to the next until darkness came again and they deemed the time was right to go. Bart went to scout the area by the river and once he made sure it was clear, returned to help bring the boat back to the water.

The mood in the boat was somber as it began floating down the river. Each kept his thoughts to himself as the river brought them ever closer to the forest fire.

It didn't take long before smoke began having more of a presence in the air. The further they went the thicker it became. Then from up ahead they saw the glow of the fire coming up ahead of them.

Sections of the forest were burning off a ways from the river on both sides. Smoldering areas adjacent to the river grew more frequent and in the moonlight they could see the burnt, smoking husks that had at one time been tall, stately trees.

Ash started to rain down on them as it settled back to earth and the heat from the fires began to be felt as well. Then all of a sudden, the boat came to a jarring stop as it ran aground. They were knocked off their seats from the unexpected impact.

"What happened?" asked Riyan as he got himself off the bottom of the boat.

"We ran into something," replied Bart.

As it turned out, they had run aground at the spot where they had forded the river on their way in. They could make out the roads moving from the river on both sides. "Everyone out," Bart said. "We have to pull the boat across the ford to deeper water."

They climbed out and positioned themselves around the boat. Then altogether they pulled it across the ford to the deeper water on the other side. When the boat once again floated freely, they hopped back in and continued on.

Smoke thickened, ash rained down on them constantly, and the temperature was beginning to climb. Some of the pieces of ash coming down were still glowing red, even full blown embers began dropping out of the sky. Riyan wondered about that until a tree next to the river suddenly popped.

Embers flew in all directions and they saw that the interior of the tree was glowing red. Even though the fire had already swept through this area, some of the trees were still smoldering on the inside.

"Kevik." Bart broke the silence as he said, "We need some light."

"But they'll see us!" argued Chad.

"We'll announce our presence," Riyan warned.

"Look, the smoke has all but obscured the moon's light," he explained. "We can't see where we're going. Besides, if there are any goblins in the area they'll either be going to the fire to fight it, or moving away from it in flight."

“Very well,” replied Kevik. Then his bobbing orb appeared and began dancing above the boat.

“Thank you,” said Bart. Kevik just nodded in reply.

Around them they could now better see the destruction left by the fire. Trees broken and smoldering, the ground a charred mess, and the ash raining down looked deceptively like snowflakes. Further along they began seeing small animals, or rather what was left of them, that had sought refuge by the fire. Some lay dead looking for all the world as if they were asleep, these must have died from the smoke. While others had their fur singed off and in some cases were still smoking, there was no doubt that the fire had gotten to those.

“Oh man,” Chad said.

Riyan turned his gaze from the dead animals and glanced to Chad. He saw that he was looking ahead of them in fear. Riyan turned his gaze downriver and saw the fire arcing to the sky. To either side of the river the forest burned. The river looked like it was going to pass through the fires of hell, which wasn’t that far from the truth.

When Bart turned and saw the inferno they were approaching, he immediately grabbed an oar and said, “Riyan, help me bring us to the shore.”

Riyan grabbed the other oar and began paddling. The boat turned and began to angle towards the riverbank. “Are we going the rest of the way on foot?” he asked.

“No,” Bart replied. “I was thinking we could soak our clothes and fill the bottom with water.”

“That won’t do any good,” countered Kevik. “Not with what we’re about to go through.”

“What would you suggest then?” Bart asked. He again glanced to the inferno that began a little over a mile away.

“Turn the boat over,” he said. When the others looked at him, he explained. “Turn the boat over and use it as a cover.” Reaching down, he grabbed the edge of the seat. “We can hold onto the seats to keep our heads out of the water. Then we allow the river to carry us through.”

Chad nodded. “That might work better than just soaking our clothes.”

Bart grinned. “I like it too. Let’s do it.” Paddling hard, he and Riyan soon had the boat grounded on the riverbank.

They stepped out of the boat and put their packs on. Then they all moved to one side of the boat and as one, lifted the edge until it tipped over. Riyan and Bart then each took the oars and carried them as all four of them dragged the boat back into the water.

When they had it out far enough that they could duck under the surface of the water and get inside, Bart and Kevik went first while Riyan and Chad held the boat steady. “I hope we survive this,” commented Chad.

“We will,” Riyan assured him. “This idea of Kevik’s is pretty good.” A knocking came to them from the inside of the boat telling them Bart and Kevik were set. The two friends then ducked under the water and came up under the overturned boat.

“Grab on,” Bart said as they broke the surface. Inside they found the bobbing sphere doing its annoying dance.

Riyan laid the oar he brought with him on top of the upside down seat and then grabbed on. The water wasn't so deep that their feet couldn't touch, so they began walking the boat out to deeper water. It didn't take long before they were floating free and the current was taking them towards the inferno.

"You can get rid of the light now," Chad said. A second later the orb disappeared.

Beneath the boat it was dark as they continued to float blind down the river. Then the water around them began to glow as they drew ever closer to the fire. Soon, the glow coming through the water was bright enough to allow them to see each other vaguely.

"We're within the fire," stated Chad. Indeed, the water was growing warm as the fire consuming the nearby trees heated it. The air within the boat grew warmer by the minute as well. Then falling debris began to patter against the topside like rain on a tin roof.

"We never would have made it through the fire if we were still sitting exposed in the boat out there," Riyan said.

"It doesn't look like it," Kevik said.

Suddenly from the other side of the bottom of the boat, they heard pounding. It wasn't the sound of debris falling, rather it sounded like the rhythmic banging a panicked person would do.

"Someone's out there!" Riyan exclaimed. Fear of goblins again surged within him. Then he saw the light coming through the water near him become occluded as the lower half of a body was seen right next to the boat. It was unmistakably that of a goblin.

"We can't leave it out there to burn," Chad said. From the intensity of the glow coming through the water, it was clear the temperature from the flames had to be pretty hot.

Then it grew quiet as the pounding ceased. Riyan watched the shadow of the body as it began to sag into the river. The need to help someone in danger somehow overcame his fear. He reached under the side of the boat and grabbed hold of it. When he pulled it beneath the boat with them, they discovered it was a young male goblin. One side of its face was scarred pretty badly with burns, and it lay unconscious in Riyan's grasp. The skin of the goblin was tougher than that of a human, to Riyan it felt akin to that of a reptile.

"Keep its head above water," Bart said as he moved over to assist Riyan. Together they managed to hold onto the goblin lad as they continued down the river.

"Is it alive?" asked Kevik.

"Yes," replied Riyan. He gazed at the face of the goblin youth and wondered just how old it was. It couldn't be too young as its size was approximately two thirds that of an adult.

"What are we going to do with it?" asked Kevik.

Bart turned to him and said, "Once we're safely past the fire and near the goblin settlement on the shore of the larger lake, we'll drop it off."

Riyan nodded, "They'll find him and take care of him." He and Bart continued holding on to the goblin youth as they drifted further into the inferno burning on the other side of the boat. The glow in the water by this time had intensified from an off orange to a brighter white. Curious, Riyan touched the top of the boat and drew his hand back quickly.

"Hot?" asked Bart with a grin.

"Very," he replied. "What do we do if the bottom of the boat catches fire?"

“If we’re lucky we’ll never find out,” said Chad.

They continued floating for some time as they worked their way through the burning inferno. The temperature within the boat continued to rise. Already it was approaching an uncomfortable range. The goblin youth, other than a few grunts now and then, remained still and quiet.

Wham!

They were startled as something slammed into the bottom of the boat. It didn’t inhibit their progress any, but it did scare them pretty good. “A falling limb perhaps?” guessed Kevik.

“Would think so,” replied Riyan. “If it had been a tree the boat would have shattered or been pressed to the bottom of the river.”

Still they floated on. From time to time their feet would touch the river bottom. When that happened they would try to move the boat back to the center of the river where the water was deeper. In some cases it was due to the fact that the river widened and thus the water level had dropped. During those times they feared running into another fording area where the depth of the river had diminished. They didn’t relish the idea of having to leave the protection of the boat in order to carry it across. For the water outside the boat still glowed from the light of the fire, though it was no longer the white hot light. The reddish glow gave them hope that they had passed through the worst of it.

Riyan didn’t worry too much about the eventuality of having to carry the boat over a ford. After all, rivers tended to grow in size the further they went, not diminish. It was during one of those times when they couldn’t touch the bottom that he began to notice a red glow coming from the bottom of the boat above his head.

“The boat’s on fire!” he yelled in a panic.

“What do we do?” Chad asked.

Riyan started splashing water on the glow in an attempt to inhibit the burning process. Some of the water hit the face of the goblin youth and it started to stir.

Bart stuck his hand under the side of the boat and moved it to the outside surface. When his hand broke the water, the air felt hot, but not lethally so. “Move us to the side of the river,” he told the others. “We may be able to put it out.”

Kicking hard, they worked their way to one side until they could feel the river bottom under their feet once again. “Hold it here,” he said. “I’m going to go check it out.” Without waiting for the others to reply, Bart ducked under the water and moved out from under the boat.

He stayed underneath the water as he looked up to see how bad the fire around them was. The banks of the river couldn’t be seen, but the glow of fire was all around him. He took but a moment to gauge the best location to break the surface. Once he made his decision, he kicked off the bottom of the riverbed and shot up fast. Waving his arms wildly, he splashed about to create a protective cover of water as he broke the surface. When he opened his eyes, he was amazed at what he saw.

The woods on either side were dark, the forest fire was a good mile behind them. What had been making the water glow and burning the bottom of the boat was a large clump of burning branches that was lying along the upturned bottom of the boat. He moved to the burning branches and removed his pack. Then using the water soaked pack, he began hitting the branches

with it and knocking them off into the water. It took him a minute or so before the last branch was off the boat and floating down with the current.

Bart ducked back under the water and came up inside the boat. "We're past the fire," he told them. Then he explained about the branches and how they had left the forest fire behind them.

Riyan chuckled. "All this time we thought we were still in the fire, and instead were fooled by a bunch of burning branches." The others broke into laughter at that. Not so much at what he said but due to the relief each felt at having survived to reach the far side of the fire.

"Now let's move over to the bank and flip the boat upright again," Bart said. He and the others left the warm, stale air inside the overturned boat and were soon once again in the cool, smoke filled air of the forest.

When Riyan ducked under the water with the goblin youth, it woke completely. Thrashing about, it almost broke free of Riyan's grasp but he managed to keep hold of it until they broke the surface on the other side of the boat.

"Hold him still," Kevik said as he moved behind Riyan and opened his pack. He had seen the burns on the goblin youth's face and wanted to help him.

While Riyan held onto the youth, he removed the last of the healing potions and returned to Riyan's side. The goblin's eyes were opened wide in fear as he saw Kevik move the bottle towards him.

The goblin youth thrashed about intensely as he fought to free himself of Riyan's grip. "Hold him steady," Kevik said.

Bart realized what he was trying to do and moved to help Riyan in holding the youth still. Chad stayed where he was and kept hold of the boat to prevent the current from taking it away.

With Bart's help, the youth was soon being held tightly and Kevik moved the mouth of the bottle to its lips. "Just a bit to help with your burns," he said soothingly to the goblin. When the goblin wasn't being cooperative in opening its mouth, Kevik said to Bart, "See if you can get its lips open.

Bart moved a hand to the goblin's mouth and spread its lips apart. He tilted the goblin's head back as Kevik poured a small portion of the potion onto the goblin's teeth. It may not be perfect but at least some of it will get into its system. After that he moved the bottle to the burn covering the right half of the youth's face. The goblin's eyes widened as the bottle came closer. And then before the first drop left the bottle, the youth relaxed in Riyan's grip.

Believing the youth was no longer going to struggle, Riyan relaxed his grip as well. As soon as the first drop fell onto the burned area of its face, it lashed out with a frantic struggle to free itself. Caught unawares, Riyan couldn't hold him.

"Get him!" yelled Bart as the youth twisted out of his grip. Then it was free and made a dash for the trees. Before anyone could catch it, it was gone.

They stood there but a moment before Chad, who was standing by the boat said, "Let's get out of here before he brings others!"

That broke the spell of the moment and the other three rushed to help him in righting the boat in the water. Once it was again floating right side up, they tossed their packs into the bottom and climbed aboard. Bart and Riyan quickly began using the oars to move down the river.

Riyan glanced back to the trees where the goblin lad had disappeared until they had moved too far away to see it. He couldn't help but be amazed by the fact that he had actually touched and held an actual goblin. Surprised by the fact he hoped it would be okay, he returned his attention to his paddling and sent them quickly down the river.

Behind them, the glow from the fire was still quite visible and they were more than happy to leave it behind them. In no time at all they came to where the river flowed into the larger lake. "The Marketplace shouldn't be too much further," commented Riyan.

"We should be able to make it before dawn," Chad agreed.

Once out onto the lake, they used the silhouettes of the mountains as a guide and paddled for them. It took them an hour to cross the lake before the shore where they needed to disembark appeared before them. Off to their right the lights from the goblin village they saw the first time they passed this way were visible. From this distance it was hard to tell but it did look like there was movement among their buildings. At least the area where they were about to land looked quiet and deserted.

The dirt and rocks of the shore ground beneath the boat's bottom as it ran aground. When they were out of the boat Riyan asked if they should hide it.

"No," replied Chad, "it's a goblin boat in goblin territory. Who's going to care?"

Riyan grinned. "Guess you have a point there." He tossed the oar into the bottom of the boat and then grabbed his pack. Once they were ready, they left the boat behind and entered the trees. Somewhere at the base of the mountains ahead of them lay the Marketplace and the pass leading home.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The forest was quiet as they made their way from the lake. They knew the general direction the Marketplace lay from the last time and headed that way. Bart stayed some distance ahead of the others so he could better determine if there were goblins about. Riyan, Chad, and Kevik followed along behind and made sure they didn't lose him.

They made their way through the trees for over an hour before Bart came to a stop. The others stopped once they realized he had and waited. He stood there motionless for several seconds before ducking down low.

"Get down," whispered Riyan as he scrunched down near the base of a nearby tree. The other two followed suit. It wasn't long before the sound of several goblins making their way through

the underbrush from the direction of the Marketplace came to them. The path the goblins were taking would lead them close to where they crouched in hiding.

Riyan held his breath as they approached. He could hear their guttural language being spoken as they passed by, and even caught a glimpse of their silhouettes in the moonlight. The smoke here wasn't so thick as to obscure them and he could tell there were at least five.

The goblins, completely oblivious to where they were hiding just yards away, continued on by. Not until their voices could no longer be heard did Riyan see Bart return to his feet. Riyan waved to him saying they were okay and for him to continue. Bart waved back and then resumed moving towards the Marketplace.

It took them another three hours before they were able to see the light of a solitary campfire at the Marketplace. At this point Bart waited while the other three joined him, then they moved forward as a group. Bart still took the lead but the others stayed close behind him.

Every few minutes Bart would pause to listen for any sound out of the ordinary, then would continue. Time and again he would pause, listen, and then continue on. When the buildings of the Marketplace could be seen through the trees, he started to edge around them to where the mountain began its rise.

During a brief pause, Bart explained what he intended for them to do. "If we move around the Marketplace and come at the pass on the far side," he explained quietly, "we'll attract less attention."

"Wonder if the soldiers stationed here would come to our aid if the goblins were to attack us?" asked Riyan.

"Only if we were on the other side of the totems," replied Bart. "This side is goblin territory. We need to get past the totems to be safe."

"Then let's do it," urged Riyan.

Bart nodded and they resumed their progress. As they made their way around the edge of the Marketplace, they began to notice that the place had a deserted look to it. The area where many caravans had been camped before was now empty. It looked like there were no merchants here to trade with the goblins.

"Could be due to the encroaching fire," suggested Kevik. "They may wait until the threat is passed before returning."

"Sounds plausible," agreed Chad. "Should make it easier for us to get through."

Fifteen minutes later, they reached where they had to begin angling to the pass. Riyan felt extreme relief when they passed through the line of totems. They were safely on the human side again. But then Bart brought them to a halt as he pointed to the mouth of the pass.

Even though the Marketplace was deserted, there was still a contingent of soldiers stationed there. Half a dozen were standing around the solitary campfire they had initially seen a short time go. The soldiers were no more than a few dozen yards from the mouth of the pass. Any attempt to enter the pass would surely be discovered.

"What does it matter if they see us or not?" asked Kevik.

"We have no business being here," replied Bart. "If it became known that we had spent time in goblin territory, there would arise certain questions which we would be reluctant to answer."

Kevik turned to him. "You mean about the key and what you three are trying to do?"

"That's right," he said. "The less others know about what we do, the less someone else can beat us to it."

"But they can't do anything without the keys we carry," he argued.

"True. But if it became common knowledge that we carried them," Bart explained, "our lives wouldn't be worth spit. Everyone would be after them."

In the darkness, they worked to come up with a plan to draw the soldiers away from the pass. Most of the ideas, including Chad's which was to set the forest on fire, weren't very practical. Then Bart came up with an idea that might just work. The others offered their opinions and together, they worked it out.

Half an hour later they had it all set. They returned to their place among the trees near the pass, everyone that was but Riyan. He was in position at one of two small trees that were bent over and held in place with ropes. In Riyan's hand was the knife he had found in the treasure room, the one with the dragon-sword coat of arms depicted on the crossguard.

When he had allowed enough time to pass and figured the others to be in position, he cut the rope of the first tree. The tree snapped up and threw a score of hand sized rocks toward the far side of the Marketplace. The rocks struck the side of the canyon less than a hundred feet from the six soldiers at the campsite. Bart had aimed it perfectly.

By the time Riyan had rejoined the others, three of the soldiers had gone to investigate the noise. As soon as Bart saw Riyan return, and that the three soldiers investigating the noise were in the proper position, he said, "Now Kevik."

Kevik nodded and dispelled the green goo that had been holding the other rope of the second tree. When the goo disappeared, the tree straightened up rapidly and launched about forty small pebbles outward that were nestled in a piece of bark wedged between two of its branches. The pebbles rained down on the three soldiers who were investigating the first volley of rocks.

Cries of alarm rang out as they were struck by the missiles. The remaining three at the campsite immediately rushed to their aid. "Now!" whispered Bart and they ran for the entrance to the pass.

Not until they were some distance past the campfire did they finally slow down. They looked back to see if the soldiers were showing any indication that they had seen their passing, but the mouth of the pass remained empty.

"We made it!" whispered Chad excitedly.

"Yes we did," replied Riyan with a grin.

Bart glanced back at the jubilant pair and said, "Best if we don't celebrate just yet. Once we're past Crag Keep, then we can relax."

That sobered them up quickly. They had forgotten about the checkpoint at the other end where their forged passes had been examined on the way in. Somehow they would have to get past them too.

Moving quickly, they continued through the pass. Several hours later it began to lighten with the coming of the dawn. An hour after that, a solitary rider was heard approaching from the Crag Keep side of the pass. With nowhere to hide, they simply continued on.

The rider turned out to be a soldier, possibly one from Crag Keep. He was quick to notice them there in the pass and slowed as he approached. "What are you boys doing here?" he asked.

"Came here to see goblins," Bart explained to him. "But the soldiers at the other end wouldn't let us through. Told us to leave."

The soldier got that look people get when they hear something dumb. "Why in the world would you boys want to see a goblin?" he asked. "Mean and vicious they are."

Bart shrugged. "Just did. Still want to."

"The Marketplace isn't a safe place for those with no business there," the soldier told them. "They were right to send you away." He then looked at each in turn and said, "You continue on to Crag Keep, and once there, keep going."

"Yes, sir," replied a humbled Bart.

The soldier gave them another stern gaze then continued on his way. They could hear him talking about the idiots of the world as he left them behind.

"That was smart thinking," Kevik said.

"A good lie is worth its weight in gold," he said. "Been thinking about what to tell someone in just such a circumstance ever since we entered the pass."

Kevik nodded. "How much further to this Crag Keep?"

"On foot? Probably reach it sometime tomorrow," he replied.

They continued towards the Keep at a quick walk. They were worried about the soldier they had encountered. When he reached the soldiers at the Marketplace, they may put two and two together and come up with the four of them.

By the time it grew dark, no one had appeared from the Marketplace's side of the pass. Despite the exhaustion they were all feeling, Bart pushed them onward. "It will be easier to make it by Crag Keep in the dark than it will in broad daylight," he argued. So onward they went.

Most of the night went by before they saw the campfire of those watching the Crag Keep end of the pass. Bart had the others remain back as he moved forward to take a look around. He kept to the shadows as he approached. Once he could see the men around the campfire he came to a stop.

There were three of them standing near the fire, one had a horn slung at his side. They were talking among themselves, completely oblivious to the fact that there was someone in the darkness watching them.

Bart gauged the situation, then quietly took off his pack and set it on the ground. He knelt down and removed his darts from his pack.

"What's he doing?" whispered Riyan as they watched Bart. They couldn't tell what he was doing, just that he was doing something with his pack.

"I don't know," replied Chad.

Bart glanced back to them. He heard them whispering to one another and hoped they would have the good sense to keep it down. Once he had the tips of three of his darts coated from liquid contained within one of his vials, he took them in hand and stood up.

He then moved a little closer to the three men. When he was in position, he took a dart and threw it. Before it struck the first soldier, the second was already on its way. The first dart struck

one of the guards in the shoulder causing him to cry out. Before the other two realized what was happening, they too were struck.

Riyan saw Bart throw the darts and immediately raced to him. He kept an eye on the soldiers while he rushed to Bart's side and saw the one with the horn raise it to his lips. But the note never came as the man swooned and collapsed to the ground. The other two soldiers fell shortly afterward. "You killed them!" he yelled accusingly to Bart.

"Shhh!" Bart said. "Keep it down." He began moving towards the three fallen soldiers. "They're not dead, just unconscious and will wake in a couple hours."

"Are you sure?" Riyan asked.

"Yes. Now let me retrieve my darts then we can get out of here." He moved to the guards and when he noticed the other three were planning on joining him, he said, "Stay out of the light." Riyan nodded as he, Chad, and Kevik came to a stop.

Bart went among the three soldiers and quickly pulled his darts out from where they struck. True, each of the soldiers would have a tell-tale wound, but it couldn't be helped. Once he had recovered his darts, he returned to his pack and replaced them in with the others. He glanced to the walls of Crag Keep and was relieved to find no indication that the men there had noticed anything.

Finished, he stood up and said, "Let's make time." Then he moved out and they practically ran as they made their way past the walls of Crag Keep. They kept far enough away so as not to be observed by the guards walking atop the walls and didn't stop until the sun was cresting the horizon. At that time they found an out of the way place to make camp.

They didn't keep a watch that night. Everyone was so exhausted from the almost two whole days without sleep, plus that final run from Crag Keep, that they practically passed out immediately when their blankets were rolled out and they laid down. They slept the day through and didn't awaken again until almost nightfall.

Two days later found them in the small town of Averin where the river that flowed out of the pass past Crag Keep intersected the north-south highway running on the eastern side of the mountains. They were eating a meal in their room as they required privacy for what they were discussing: Where to find the remaining two segments of the key.

Riyan was explaining to the others his idea. "This idea started to develop as we were riding the river that last time in your makeshift door-raft," he said to Bart. "When we were each in our loops. The four, separate loops."

"I got to thinking about how it was similar to that wall you found with the four spaces," he explained. "You know, where you put the first segment of the key in to open the door of the room hiding the second?"

Bart nodded. "Yes, I remember."

"It wasn't until we were past Crag Keep that it came back to me," he said. "You said that each of the recesses bore one of the coats of arms we found in The Crypt." Again, Bart nodded. "So I began thinking that there may be something significant about the four coats of arms. Four coats of arms, four segments."

“You mean like each segment is associated with a different coat of arms?” asked Bart.

“Something like that,” replied Riyan. “Didn’t you put the first one in the space with the king’s coat of arm?”

“Yes I did,” affirmed Bart. “The sigils on the key segment aligned perfectly to the sigils that were on the wall.”

“And the second key segment was found in Algoth, whose lord’s coat of arms was the dragon-sword.”

“So let me get this straight,” Kevik said. “Are you thinking that each of the other two segments are to be found in places associated with the other two coats of arms? Kind of like each of them had a hand in hiding one of the segments?”

“Yes,” Riyan said. “We need to find out all we can about them. Where they were seen, who they were associated with, those sorts of things.”

“But how are we to find those things out?” Bart asked. “Without arousing suspicion that is?”

“We have to find somewhere that holds records of coats of arms,” Riyan replied.

“Only the Warriors Guild has a complete record of past and current coats of arms,” explained Kevik. “My master once mentioned he had to gain permission from the Guildmaster in Gilbeth to research their archives for one. I doubt if they would allow us access.”

Riyan glanced calculatingly at Chad for a moment then said, “They might to guild members.”

“Probably,” replied Chad. “But who do we know that...” Then he saw Riyan grin. “You don’t mean...?”

Riyan nodded. “You and I could join the Warriors Guild.”

“How?” he asked.

“As I understand such things,” Bart interjected, “there’s usually two ways in which you can join one of the guilds. Either have a member advance your petition, usually due to the fact that you are a son, or some kind of relative in such case. Or buy your way in, though the buying option could get pretty pricey.”

Riyan reached into his pack sitting on the floor nearby and pulled out a handful of gems. “I think we’ve got that covered.” Then he turned to Chad. “What do you say? Would beat the heck out of being a miller?”

Chad nodded. “You’re on. I say we do it.”

Bart looked to Kevik. “What do you say? Are you in too?”

Riyan and Chad turned their attention to Kevik. “We’d like to have you.” Chad nodded agreement.

Kevik nodded. “I’m in.”

“Fantastic,” said Riyan. “I propose that we each swear an oath, that we keep secret all things concerning our search for the King’s Horde. That from this point on, we are brothers bound in common purpose.” He glanced to the others. Then as one the four comrades spoke: “I so swear.”

The quest continues in:

Hunter of the Horde

Book Two of *The Broken Key Trilogy*

The following is the first three chapters of
Hunter of the Horde

Prologue

Sitting in an inn now for nigh on a week has worn on his nerves. The man whom he contacted shortly after arriving in town should have brought word by this time, but hasn't. He dared not leave the inn due to the slight fact that his life was wanted by a certain element in town. Only by meeting with the elusive head of the Thieves Guild could he rectify the situation.

Bart again went to the window and looked out for the thousandth time since entering the room six days ago. Over in the corner sat his pack that he hoped held enough gems and coins to enable him to buy the death mark and become reinstated in the Thieves Guild.

Thinking back on how his life had changed since he sided with Gerrick in his attempt to become the master of the underworld here in Wardean, he would do it again despite how it turned out. When the attempt failed, Gerrick had disappeared. All who supported him were systematically hunted down and killed. Those who had the good fortune to escape the initial slaughter had a bounty placed on their head, a death mark. Bart had narrowly escaped one such attempt a month ago in the small town of Quillim.

There were only two ways in which a death mark could be removed. Either you buy the mark back, which was usually at least ten times the amount of the reward being offered for you, or you die. On rare occasions other ways could be contrived, but at present, Bart was in no position to take advantage of something like that. His only option was to buy it back.

Shortly after he and the others had returned from the other side of the mountains, they had divided up what gold and coins they had brought back with them. The others had given him most of their shares in order for him to rid himself of the death mark. They kept only what was needed

for their immediate futures. To be honest he was surprised by their generosity, none of those he had grown up with on the streets of Wardean would have been so generous.

The man whom he had contacted to investigate the possibility of buying back the death mark was an old time acquaintance of his who had sided with the current Master of Thieves in the power struggle. He and Bart had been friends all their lives and had saved each other from getting caught after pulling jobs on numerous occasions. He was someone Bart was certain would not do him wrong and he was betting his life on that belief.

What his friend Terk had to do was to approach someone close to the Master of Thieves and try to find out how much it would take to buy the death mark. For should Bart simply show up with a sack full of gems and coins expecting to make the offer, he would be killed before an agreement could even begin to take place.

And that is what he's been waiting for these long days, Terk's return. He hadn't expected his friend to return to him that first day, but six days? That didn't feel right.

Again he went to the window and looked out. He almost shouted in joy when he saw Terk crossing the street toward the inn. He could barely stand the wait while his friend entered the inn and climbed the steps.

Knock! Knock!

He opened the door and Terk hurried inside. Bart took a second to scan the hallway outside his door for anyone who may have followed him, then he closed the door and turned around.

"I was getting worried," Bart said.

"Yeah, sorry about that," Terk said. Then he came to him and shook his hand with a grin. "When word began to spread that I was seeing about you coming in to buy your death mark, I started being shadowed. It took me days before I finally shook them all."

Bart nodded. That was one of the things he was worried about. Until he talked to the Master, he was still under the death mark. Thieves would be lining up to take him down and collect the reward, not to mention taking the coins he would invariably be carrying with which to buy the mark.

"Did you find out how much?" he asked.

"Yes I did," Terk replied. "Fifteen thousand golds."

"Fifteen thousand!" exclaimed Bart. He glanced over to his pack and wondered if what he had brought was equal to that amount.

"I got that from the Master's own lips," Terk said. "He also told me to tell you that if you show up with one copper less he'll, and I quote, 'Carve out your liver and feed it to his dogs.' He was most implicit that I give you that message."

Bart grinned. He understood the underlying message he was being given. "So, what would be the best way to approach him?"

"Do you have that much?" asked Terk.

"I think so," he replied. "I doubt if I'll be getting any more."

"That's a big chance to take if you're not sure," his friend warned. He could see that Bart well knew the risks. "The meeting's to take place at the Spider's Nest."

Routes to the Spider's Nest began running through his mind. "When?"

"Tonight," Terk replied.

"Tonight?" Bart asked incredulously. "You cut it kind of close didn't you?"

Terk shrugged. "Oh, you may wish to know that the Master has let it be known the meeting is to take place." He saw Bart's face draw into a grimace. "Every thief in Wardean knows you are in town, that you have the sack of coins to buy back the death mark, and where you are going."

"They'll be lying in wait at every entrance and in every tunnel," Bart said.

"I know." Terk laid his hand on Bart's shoulder. "But you still have friends on the streets."

Bart looked up at him.

"Can you get to Tinkerdyth's?" he asked.

"That's not too far from here," Bart said. "Should be able to."

"Good. After I leave here, I'll let it slip that I'm meeting you on the other side of town from Tinkerdyth's, that from there I'll escort you to the Spider's Nest. Since everyone should already be aware that I approached the Master about you buying the mark, they'll flock to me like flies to a rotting three day carcass." He saw Bart nod approval of his plan.

"The Master said that he will only be there for a short time and that this is the only meeting he'll arrange on this matter," Terk explained. "If you fail to make it, you better move far away."

"I'll make it," Bart asserted.

"I better go and get things moving," he said as he headed for the door.

Bart stopped him. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this," he told his friend.

Terk grinned. "It's the least I could do for the man who saved my life on two separate occasions."

Bart took his hand and gave it a shake. "Once I've bought the mark, you'll have to let me buy a round."

"Deal, if you have anything left," said Terk. He then crossed to the door and quickly left the room.

Not long afterwards, Bart looked through the window and saw his friend moving along the street towards the other side of town. He continued watching Terk until he disappeared in an alley further down then glanced at the sun in the sky. Three hours until dark.

Once the sun set, he would have two hours to get to the Spider's Nest. For that was the meaning of the message the Master had sent him. 'Carve out your liver and feed it to his dogs' Not many knew this, but the Master liked for his dogs to maintain a taste for fresh killed meat. So once a week he would feed them as much raw liver as they could stand, and always at two hours after dark. He felt that doing such would make them more likely to maul, rip, and tear anyone the Master ordered them to. At least no one but he and the Master will know the exact time of the meeting, which hopefully will give him some sort of an edge.

He went over to his pack and removed the rolled leather containing his darts. For the next hour he doctored them with the liquid he kept in his vials. If he could survive until the meeting, then his troubles were over. Removing one of the darts, he dipped it in the liquid...

Staring out the window from his darkened room, Bart looked over the street outside. The lanterns were lit and the early evening traffic on the streets was the usual fare. He gazed off into

the distance towards where Tinkerdyth's lies. It was an abandoned wine seller's shop that had been previously owned by a man named Tinkerdyth. Bart couldn't remember when the shop had ever been open, the thieves used it as one of their entrances into the sewers.

Despite the ruse Terk was going to employ, Bart was certain that Tinkerdyth's would be watched. There were other entrances he could use, many that were much more accessible than Tinkerdyth's. But those would be even more likely to be watched, and by more thieves.

He knew the Spider's Nest would be covered too. Some of the Brethren would assuredly have it staked out on the off chance he showed up before the Master did. Until the Master arrived, he would be fair game.

The only weapons he had with him were two daggers, one of which he had found beneath the Ruins of Algoth. He still has yet to determine what the second enchantment it held did. Back when he first discovered it, the magic user Kevik had used his magic to identify it. Unfortunately Kevik was just an apprentice and all he learned was part of its history, the fact that it was enchanted to hold its edge and resist succumbing to the elements, and that there was another enchantment his spell wouldn't reveal.

He also had a dozen darts which were now coated with a poison that would first paralyze, then kill. Four of the darts he held in his left hand, another he had in his right, the rest remained in the rolled leather tucked within his shirt for easy access.

Deciding it was time, he moved away from the window. Crossing the room to the door, he opened it slowly and peered out into the hallway. A single wall mounted lantern burned at the end of the hallway near the head of the stairs. It gave out just enough light to illuminate the stairwell and about a third of the hallway, the rest remained in shadow.

He opened the door further when he didn't see anyone out there and passed through into the hallway. With his pack slung across his shoulders, full of gems and coins, he moved to the stairwell and peered down. From below he could hear the bard playing as he worked to entertain those taking their ease in the common room.

From down the hallway one of the doors suddenly opened. He turned to look back and saw a man and woman, a merchant and his wife by the way they were dressed, leave their room and head toward the stair.

Bart immediately stepped upon the first step and hurried down to the bottom. He held the darts in his hand as unobtrusively as he could, but he didn't dare put them away. His life could well be saved by how quickly he could throw them in a pinch.

Once out of the stairwell, he crossed over to the door leading out to the rear courtyard and passed through to the darkness outside. He took three steps from the door until he was out of the light coming from inside the inn, then moved to the side quickly and became motionless in the shadows. His eyes scanned the courtyard for any tell-tale movements, but it remained still and quiet. Assured that the courtyard wasn't being watched, he continued across and headed for the gate leading into the alley.

The alley was clear so he left the courtyard behind and began making his way to Tinkerdyth's. He moved out to the main street then walked for seven blocks until he came to the side street down which Tinkerdyth's lies.

He kept to the sides of the street, taking advantage of what shadows were available. Placed along the streets of Wardean were poles upon which lanterns hung to give light once the sun goes down. All the streets upon which the better businesses and homes were located had them, and unfortunately this street was one of them.

Each time he would come to an area illuminated by a lantern, he would either move around its fringe if he was able, or cross it quickly if he couldn't. Eight blocks from when he had turned into this street, he came to a stop. A block ahead of him he could see the darkened structure that was the boarded up shop of Tinkerdyth's.

He remained there in the shadows for several minutes as he watched the area. It didn't take him long to make out at least two individuals who looked to be keeping an eye on the place. One was across the street from the building on Bart's side of the street. The other was sitting in the shadows against the wall near the entrance to Tinkerdyth's. How many more there may be he couldn't be sure.

The entrance was in plain sight of both men. If he wished to enter through it, he would have to neutralize the threat posed by the two men first. Bart was never one to back down from a challenge and he hadn't risen to the place he had once held in the Guild by being squeamish.

These men would kill him if they saw him, of that there was no doubt. All they wanted was the reward offered by the Guild. He quickly came up with a course of action then backed down the street to where it grew darker once more, then quickly crossed to the other side. Now he was on the same side of the street as Tinkerdyth's.

From here, he begun moving towards Tinkerdyth's, all the while keeping to the shadows. He was also attempting to avoid the notice of the people moving on the street. Though this side street held less traffic than the main ones, it was still far from being deserted.

He slowly made his way forward and finally came to a stop when he reached the building adjacent to Tinkerdyth's. The two buildings shared the same wall between them. One of the reasons thieves liked using this entrance to the sewers was that it was situated in the darkness between two of the hanging lanterns, thus was able to mask their comings and goings.

Neither of the two men had yet noticed his approach. The man across the street was leaning against the storefront near the doorway while the other crouched in the shadows on the far side of Tinkerdyth's.

Still holding the single dart in his right hand, he aimed for the man crouching by Tinkerdyth's. He threw it and saw the man react when the dart stuck him in the chest, he only made a quiet grunt before the poison took effect. It worked very fast especially when it entered the system through a man's chest.

Bart then turned his attention to the man across the street. He was now away from the storefront and appeared to be trying to penetrate the darkness where the other man was with his gaze. From the way he held himself, Bart figured he must have seen or heard his attack on the first man.

Melding back into the shadows again, Bart transferred one of the darts he held in his left hand to his right. He bided his time for half a minute. Then when the crowds on the street opened up sufficiently, he threw the dart at the second man.

The dart flew true and struck him in the center of the chest. Bart saw him reach up and quickly pulled the dart out, but it was too late. The poison had already entered his system and every beat of his heart spread it further. The man staggered a step before falling back against the storefront. Then he sagged down and when he settled to the ground, looked as if he was sleeping.

A quick glance to the crowd revealed that they hadn't caught on to the events transpiring around them. Bart held still in the shadows for another minute to see if anyone would materialize to investigate what happened to the two men. When no one did, Bart moved to the entrance of Tinkerdyth's and put his ear to it. All he could hear was silence.

The entrance was not the doorway as that was boarded up. Rather it was the window beside it. Anyone who gave the window a casual glance would see simply a boarded up window. But those who used it knew that if you moved two of the boards up to a certain position, you could swing the boarded window out and climb through. Bart did just that.

A quick glance showed no one was in the immediate vicinity so he swung open the window and climbed through to the other side. Once within, he swung the window quickly shut to maintain the illusion of it being a simple boarded up window.

The interior of the abandoned wine seller's shop was dark once the window had been closed. Bart quickly moved to one side and then grew still as he allowed his eyes to grow accustomed to the dark. He also took this time to remove another two darts to replace the ones left in the bodies of the two men outside. When he again had four darts in his left hand and one in his right, he started working his way through the shop to the back.

He moved silently as a cat, his feet barely making any sound as he left the front room and entered the short hallway leading to the back. There were three other rooms off the hallway between the outer shop and the room at the opposite end where the entrance to the sewer lay.

When he came to the entrance of the hallway, he paused and listened. Not a sound disturbed the night. The doorway to the first room was on the right, just within the hallway. Then there was another on the left two feet after that. The final two were opposite each other at the end, the one on the left was the one he wanted. There he'll find a trapdoor, beneath which was a rickety wooden stairway that led down to the basement. It's there that the entrance to the sewer could be found.

He moved forward into the hallway, his senses alert for anything out of the ordinary. At the entrance to the first room, he paused and gave the room a once over. Inside was dark and nothing could be seen or heard. Moving on, he went down to the second room.

Again, he paused at the opening and looked within. A boarded up window gave this room a little illumination as the moonlight made its way in through the cracks between the boards. Like the one before it, the room looked deserted. Moving on, he came to the end of the hallway where the last two rooms faced each other.

Just before he reached the doorways, he came to a sudden stop when he heard a floorboard creak in the room to the right. He remained motionless as he listened for another few seconds before hearing the creaking of another floorboard within the room. Someone was definitely in there.

"Welcome back Bart," a voice said behind him.

He turned just in time to see a knife flying towards him. Dodging to the side, he narrowly avoided being hit by the knife. Crashing into the wall, he twisted and threw the dart in his right hand at the same time. Then he heard footsteps coming towards him quickly from the other two rooms as men boiled out.

His dart struck home in the man behind him as he begun firing the four remaining darts in his left hand in quick succession. Each one struck home but there were more men than he had darts readied. Drawing the knife from the Ruins, he backed up in the hallway and faced them. He quickly back stepped until the body of the man whom he hit with the dart was lying between him and his attackers.

“Give it up Bart,” one of the four remaining men said as his sword was drawn from his scabbard. The man paused for a second as he assessed Bart there in the hallway.

When Bart realized the man was pausing, he crept his left hand toward where the rolled leather containing his darts sat within his shirt. He almost had his hand in the rolled leather when the man suddenly charged forward and tripped over the dead body lying in the middle of the floor.

Seeing his chance, Bart moved quickly backwards and pulled two darts out. He tucked the blade of his knife under his left arm then took a dart in his now empty right hand and threw. The dart struck one of the men behind the man who had fallen just as he took the second dart and threw it at yet another.

By this time the first man had returned to his feet and was moving forward. “You can’t take us all Bart,” he said. “Your time has come.”

“I don’t think so,” replied Bart. The sword came at him and he deflected it with his knife that was once again in his hand. In the confines of the hallway, the knife definitely held the advantage. The length of the sword would hamper its wielder due to the hallway’s narrowness.

He backed up yet further and reached into his pack to remove yet another dart. As the sword came at him again, he parried with his knife. He caught the sword’s blade on the crook between his knife’s blade and the hilt, deflected it to the left and brought his other hand bearing the dart forward. The point of the dart pierced his attackers left arm and elicited a cry of pain.

“Damn you!” the man cried out. He brought his sword back for another strike but stumbled as the poison from the dart began coursing through his system.

Bart stepped back and immediately threw the dart he had just stuck his attacker with at the last man. After seeing his comrades fall so quickly, the man had turned and was in the process of fleeing. The dart took him in the back. Bart didn’t trust that there would be enough poison left on the needle of the dart after already having struck the first man, so with knife in hand, he rushed forward.

He caught the fleeing man just as he turned into the last room on the left. He was obviously heading for the entrance to the sewers. Bart struck out with his knife and sank the blade to the hilt into the man’s back. Withdrawing it quickly, he stabbed him one more time.

With a gurgling cry, his would-be attacker fell to the ground and writhed upon the floor several seconds before growing still. Bart quickly wiped his knife off on the man’s clothes then replaced it in the scabbard.

He looked around and couldn't believe his luck. Nine men and he had vanquished them all. Most people thought darts were a useless weapon. But in the hands of a master such as Bart, they were a deadly threat indeed. Bart moved from one man to another as he retrieved his darts.

Once they were all accounted for, he cleaned them off and treated them once again with the liquid poison he kept in his dart pack. Then he stepped over the dead bodies and made his way to the last room on the left and the entrance to the basement wherein the sewer entrance lay.

The room was rather small and the trapdoor was situated in the middle of the floor. He crossed over to it and lifted it up a crack. After checking to make sure the area below was quiet, he opened it further and began climbing down the stairway.

Boxes and crates, as well as empty wine casks, littered the basement's floor. The place was deserted. He took his time as he descended the rickety stair, at one point one of the steps was missing and he had to stretch to reach the next one. All the while he was descending the stair, his senses searched for any sign that someone else was down there. But by the time he reached the bottom of the stair, he had concluded the basement was empty. He then walked around two boxes that were stacked atop one another and came to the trapdoor that was the entrance to the sewer.

Once through the trapdoor and in the sewer, he would have to follow the tunnel for several hundred feet before coming to the Spider's Nest. It passed through a junction of converging tunnels before reaching the Spider's Nest. He fully expected the junction to be watched, as will all such junctions along every tunnel leading to the Spider's Nest.

Cautiously, he lifted the trapdoor and peered through into the darkness on the other side. The absolute darkness failed to disclose any of its secrets. If someone was down there waiting, he wouldn't know until it was too late. But, seeing as how there was nothing he could do and time was quickly running out, he opened the trapdoor a little wider.

He held it open with one hand while moving his lower body towards the opening. His left foot entered first and hunted for the top rung of the ladder. Once it found the rung and was securely upon it, his right foot went down to the next. Then he started climbing down, closing the trapdoor after him.

What little light had been coming in from the room above was cut off when he quietly closed the trapdoor. He held still on the rungs as he listened in the dark for anyone who may be down here. The only sound he heard was the dripping of water.

Praying that the immediate vicinity of the tunnel beneath the ladder was clear of hostiles, he made his way down to the bottom. He paused yet again when he was standing on the tunnel floor to listen but didn't hear anything.

He stepped carefully and silently as he began making his way along the tunnel to the Spider's Nest. He kept his right hand in contact with the side of the tunnel so he could be sure of where he was. Thirty or so feet ahead was the first junction of sewer tunnels. He counted each step he took to himself, and when he figured he was almost upon it, came to a stop.

The junction couldn't be more than a foot or two at most in front of him. He stood still for a full minute to listen for any sign that would indicate someone was there, but all he heard was dripping water. Either there was no one there or they were absolutely quiet.

Ever so quietly, he reached into his belt pouch and pulled forth one of the copper coins he had placed there for just such an eventuality. He then tossed the coin towards where he felt the far wall of the junction lay.

Plop!

He heard the sound of the coin landing in the filth that was pooled in there.

“Quiet you!” he heard a voice say. Then he heard the sound of feet shuffling in two other distinct places. There were at least three men there, maybe more.

He was trying to determine his best course of action when from one of the other tunnels converging onto the junction, he heard the footsteps of someone approaching. The sound wasn’t coming from the tunnel leading to the Spider’s Nest. Whoever was approaching was doing so in the dark.

The men waiting in the junction heard the footsteps too. So quietly as to be almost inaudible, the voice who spoke before said, “Be quick. Don’t let him use his darts.”

Bart smiled at that. He recognized the voice as that of Einter, a right nasty piece of work who specialized in shaking down businesses. He and his gang usually didn’t work this side of town. Einter and Bart have been at odds for a very long time.

Standing there in the dark, he listened as the footsteps approached. Then he heard Einter and his boys rush forward toward the one who was approaching. As soon as he heard the man they attacked cry out, Bart hurried across the junction to the tunnel that led towards the Spider’s Nest.

Once past and into the tunnel, he moved quickly away. He hadn’t gone very far before a light blossomed behind him. Too far away to hear what Einter and his boys were saying, he knew it wouldn’t have been pleasant. Especially once they discovered they had killed the wrong man.

Bart continued on his way and the light behind him winked out. He was sure Einter and his boys had returned to lying in wait for him. He almost gave out with a chuckle at that but restrained himself. Hope they wait there all night!

This new tunnel he was following made a gradual turn to the right. Once it straightened out again, Bart knew he would be less than a hundred feet from the Spider’s Nest. He started counting his steps again when all of a sudden, his foot hit a bucket that sat directly in his path.

Out of sheer reflex he jumped backwards. A second later sparks flew as either a knife or a sword struck the wall where his head had just been. The bucket had been used to signal whoever was lying in wait as to his presence. He would have appreciated the ingenuity of the whole thing if whoever it was wasn’t trying to kill him.

He back stepped three paces then grew still. In the dark, he had to use his ears to determine where his opponent stood. While he was listening for any movement of the other, he threw the dart that was held in readiness towards where he thought his opponent may be. A moment later he heard it clatter on the stone floor of the sewer tunnel.

Still keeping the three darts in his left hand, he pulled forth his knife from its scabbard and waited. From just before him, he heard the whish of a sword cutting through air as his attacker tried to find him. With great speed, he leaped forward and knocked the man to the ground. Before his opponent had a chance to retaliate, Bart thrust his knife into the man’s chest. He used

his left arm to immobilize the man's sword arm while he thrashed about in his death throes. Once the man grew still, Bart wiped clean his knife then stood back up.

He held still for a second to see if Einter and his bunch had heard the scuffle. When it didn't sound as if they were coming to investigate, Bart continued on his way. It wasn't long before he could make out light coming from up ahead where the tunnel curved to the right.

It wasn't far past that curve to where the Spider's Nest lay. The fact there was light coming from that direction gave him hope that the Master had already arrived. He quickened his step as he hurried forward and reached the area where the tunnel finished its curve. From there he again slowed his pace as it was entirely possible someone could be lying in wait for him just before the entrance to the Spider's Nest. Until he had the Master's word of safe conduct, he was still fair game. Knowing the Master as he did, he wouldn't receive that until he set foot within the Spider's Nest.

He pressed himself against the right side of the tunnel and crept forward. As he followed the tunnel around the curve, the light grew stronger. Before he had made it all the way around the curve, he saw a man standing ten feet this side of the entrance to the Spider's Nest.

The man was currently talking with two others who were standing there next to him and had yet to take notice of Bart. He moved forward ever so slightly until he could see past the three men into the Spider's Nest. The Master wasn't in his line of sight, but he did make out one of the two swordsmen that always accompanied him for protection. If he was here, so must the Master.

He stood there gauging his chances of breaking through the three men when from behind him, he heard the sound of many running feet splashing through the sewer muck towards him. Looking back, he saw Einter and his bunch coming his way. They said not a word so as to not alert anyone else to Bart's presence.

Bart no longer had a choice. He turned and bolted towards the Spider's Nest, it was all or nothing now. The three men between him and safety were quick to see him coming and stood ready. Each bore a shield, most likely in anticipation of his darts. In their hands they held longswords. Beyond them, he saw those within the Spider's Nest turn to look in his direction. One of them was the Master.

"Stop, Bart," one of the men barring his way commanded. "You'll never get through."

"Ha!" replied Bart as he threw his first dart at the one who spoke.

The man raised his shield to block the dart but then cried out. When he had raised the shield to block the first dart, Bart had thrown a second one lower and took him in the leg. The other two men charged forward.

"He's mine!" yelled Einter when he saw the other two men coming for Bart. "Touch him and you die!" At that Einter's men screamed and raised their weapons threateningly as they rushed forward.

Bart ignored him. He threw another dart at the man on the right before him but it was deflected by his shield. Then to Bart's surprise, both men went down. When they hit the floor he saw that each had a knife sticking out of their backs.

"Come on Bart!" yelled Terk.

He looked up to see Terk and three others whom he knew well standing at the entrance to the Spider's Nest.

"Terk!" Einter cried out, "I'll kill you!"

Bart raced forward and entered the Spider's Nest. "I ask for Parley!" he shouted to the Master.

Every eye in the Spider's Nest turned to the Master. Until he agreed to the Parley, Bart was still fair game. Then he nodded. "Parley."

Just then, Einter and his men entered the Spider's Nest. "Give me that pack Bart!" Einter ordered.

"No," he replied as he turned to face Einter and his bunch. "I am under the protection of Parley!"

Einter apparently didn't care anything about Parley. He moved forward with sword drawn and bloodlust in his eyes.

"Stay where you are!" the Master's voice boomed forth.

Einter came to a halt and stared at the Master. "What do I care about a stupid custom like Parley?" he asked with derision. "I'm taking that pack!" His eyes returned to the pack Bart was carrying as he moved forward.

The Master nodded to one of his two swordsmen who then moved to stand between Einter and Bart. "Kill him if he comes another step closer."

All eyes turned to Einter. He had come to a stop and licked his lips. Behind him, his men had begun backing off. None of them dared to brave the wrath of the Master, to do so typically meant your death.

Greed overcame Einter's fear of death and he said to the now nonexistent men behind him, "Get him boys." He moved forward one step and the swordsman whipped his sword from out of its scabbard and sheared off Einter's head in one fluid motion. Once the body fell, the swordsmen wiped off his blade on Einter's clothes then returned to the side of the Master.

"Now," the Master announced to all those present, "I believe Bart and I have some business to transact."

Now that Bart was safely under the protection of the Master and the excitement was over, the gathered thieves began dispersing until only a little over a dozen were left. Terk and his three men came to stand near Bart.

Bart gave them a nod of thanks for what they did for him then removed his pack. He held it in his hand as he met the Master's gaze. "I am here to have the death mark that was placed upon me removed."

"The price is fifteen thousand gold sovereigns," the Master said.

Bart tossed the pack and it landed a foot from the Master's feet. "You'll find it all there," he said.

The Master glanced to the pack then motioned for one of the older men standing off to the side to come forward. "Check it," the Master said.

The older thief nodded then began going through the contents of the pack. It was full of gems and gold coins. Bart fervently hoped there would be enough in there. No one spoke a word while

the man tallied the contents. When at last he was through, he turned to the Master and nodded. "The contents of the pack are sufficient to meet the price."

Bart sighed in relief after the man announced that it was enough.

The Master turned his gaze back to Bart. "Bartholomew Agreani," he said. "The death mark is lifted. We will no longer seek your death so long as you do nothing from this point on to warrant it."

"I won't," Bart said.

"What is done is past," the Master said to all those who remained. "Let the word go forth that Bartholomew Agreani is no longer a marked man."

"Thank you," Bart told him.

The Master gave him a crooked smile and nodded. "I'm glad you made it."

Bart returned the smile and replied. "So am I, father."

Chapter One

Dear Mother,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am sorry that I have taken so long in writing you, you must be frantic by now. Chad and I are well. In fact, we have both been accepted into the Warriors Guild here in Gilbeth. Our training is hard, harder than I could have ever imagined. I'm sure that by the time I return to Quillim, you'll hardly recognize me.

Chad asked if you could send his regards to his family and let them know he's alright. We're not sure how much longer our training here will take. You see, they won't allow us to leave until we are and I quote, 'A credit to the Guild and won't get ourselves killed the moment we walk out the door'. They tell us that we're progressing well, but who knows what that really means.

I have not forgotten about Freya and still plan to somehow change her father's mind about her engagement with Rupert. How, I'm not yet sure. But I'm still working on it. Don't let her change the date!

Riyan looked up from the letter as Chad stuck his head into the room. The room held eight beds, of which two were assigned to Chad and Riyan. Six other 'Recruits' lived in here with them. Each bed had a chest at the end where they could store their belongings. Riyan was currently sitting at one of the two tables in the room.

“You better hurry,” warned Chad. “You don’t want to be late again.”

Riyan nodded. “I’ll be just a moment.”

“See you there,” Chad said as his head disappeared and he hurried down the hallway.

Riyan returned his attention back to the letter...

I must go now or face the unpleasant consequences of being late to drills. I’m sending some coins, I hope they will help. These will be the last I will be able to send for some time. I love you and miss you mother.

*Your son,
Riyan*

He quickly folded the letter and placed it in the small box with the coins he was sending to his mother. Getting up from the table, he moved to the chest at the foot of his bed and placed the box inside. Later that night he would meet the merchant in the Guild’s foyer who said he would deliver it to her for two coppers seeing as he had some business up that way.

Bart shut the lid of the chest and raced out of the room. He practically flew down the corridor as he hurried to beat the Drillmaster to the courtyard. When he passed through the door and entered the courtyard, he could see the twenty three other Recruits already in position. A quick glance showed him the Drillmaster had yet to make an appearance.

Chad mouthed ‘hurry up’. Riyan nodded and went to the rack where the swords they used for drills were stored. He pulled the last one from the rack and quickly crossed over to his place next to Chad. The instant after he took his position, the Drillmaster entered the courtyard from the opposite side.

He glared at Riyan but didn’t say anything. Once the Drillmaster took his place, they began. “Swords at the ready!” he shouted.

Riyan raised his sword. His arm had to be parallel to the ground from shoulder to elbow. The elbow was to be slightly bent and the sword held at a forty five degree angle. Getting the sword into position was second nature by this time, continuing to hold it there took some effort.

You see, the sword weighed almost three times what a normal sword would. It was dull but balanced well. They were fat, unsightly pieces of iron that the Recruits used during certain of their drills.

They always began the drill with holding their swords at the ready while reciting back the Code of the Warrior when called upon. And woe to the Recruit who failed to recite the requested code back perfectly.

“Barin!” their Drillmaster shouted. “Third Code of the Warrior.”

Barin, a lad of about sixteen summers whom Chad and Riyan had come to know well, shouted back, “The Third Code of the Warrior states, ‘Fleeing the battle while your comrades remain is the worst form of cowardice.’”

“And what is the punishment for breaking the Third Code?” the Drillmaster asked.

“Loss of the right thumb!” Barin shouted back.

“Very good,” he said. Then he began pacing in front of the recruits. “Chadric! First Code!”

“The First Code of the Warrior states, ‘Honor above life. To break an oath, whether spoken or otherwise, destroys the warrior.’”

The Drillmaster paused in his pacing as he turned his gaze to Chad. “And the punishment?”

“There can be only one punishment for the breaking of the First Code,” he replied.

“And that is?” asked the Drillmaster.

“Death.”

“Always remember that,” said the Drillmaster. “A warrior without honor is nothing. A warrior who hurts the helpless is nothing. A warrior who breaks his oath is lower than the belly of a snake. Such must be sought out and destroyed!” The punishments for breaking the various codes were supposed to be carried out by other Guild members whenever they discovered the infraction. Though Riyan doubted if they were enforced all that stringently, rather being a measure through which they could gauge themselves.

The Drillmaster was a very intimidating looking man. Standing six foot three, his bald head overshadowed all of the Recruits. His body showed dozens of scars received from battles he’s fought and survived.

They continued holding their swords at the ready for another ten minutes, all the while shouting out various Codes the Drillmaster requested. By this time, the Recruits have the first twenty Codes of the Warrior memorized. That was all that is required of them at this stage.

After their ten minutes was over, they were broken into various groups that begun working at different drills. They rotated through them at half hour intervals for the rest of the day. While they were working at drills such as striking logs or hitting mock opponents, they used their ugly, fat swords. During the times when they were faced off against an opponent, they used wooden swords that only left bruises.

Other men came during their drills and assisted the Drillmaster in showing them various techniques used when wielding a sword. One of the first things they were taught was the proper way to grip the sword. Riyan remembered that day well.

They had lined up in their rows as they do every day when beginning drills. The Drillmaster came and had them get their fat-uglies, which was what they grew to call the ugly swords they trained with.

It was the first day and Riyan had gone to get his and returned with it to his spot. He had it in hand and was waving it around like he was some fighter. Big mistake. The Drillmaster had seen him and walked straight towards him. When Riyan realized that he was heading in his direction he ceased what he was doing and grew still.

“Hold your sword like you plan to use it,” the Drillmaster told him.

Riyan held the sword outward with the point pointed slightly up.

“Are you ready?” asked the Drillmaster.

By this time every Recruit had grown quiet and watched the events unfold. Riyan licked his lips and nodded. Before he could even react, the Drillmaster’s sword struck the sword from his hand.

Around him, Riyan heard other Recruits gasp at the speed with which the attack came. Pain flared in his hand and his thumb was slightly cocked to the side. He thought it was broken.

“The first thing you will learn,” the Drillmaster said loud enough for all to hear, “is how to hold your sword.” He came forward and took Riyan’s injured hand. After a quick inspection, he gripped the hand firmly in one hand and with the other, twisted the thumb back in place quickly.

Riyan cried out from the pain the maneuver inflicted, but it went away quickly. He flexed his thumb, amazed that it worked.

The Drillmaster backed up a step and indicated with a flick of his head for Riyan to retrieve his sword. As he went to do that, the Drillmaster said, “Holding your sword improperly in battle will cause it to be knocked out of your hand.” Then with a glance to Riyan he added, “And possibly dislocate or break your thumb in the process.” After that day, they all knew the proper technique for holding a sword.

Riyan and Chad often sparred together while one of the swordsmen watched and gave them pointers. Other times, the swordsman would instruct them one on one. Times such as those tended to leave a patchwork of bruises on them.

Their day was divided between practical instruction in the sword, building up their strength and endurance, and also in what it means to be a member of the Warrior’s Guild. It started an hour after sunup and lasted until late afternoon. They learned in part the history of the Guild, some of its more notable members, and of course the Codes. Those were beat into them so many times that for awhile Riyan was actually reciting them in his sleep.

Lord help them if at some time during their drills they gave less than their all. If the Drillmaster, or any of the other swordsmen that helped thought that they hadn’t, they were privileged to remain behind after the other Recruits had left for an extended, serious workout. Such a workout was anything but fun and once you experienced it, you never again gave less than your all.

After the drills were through for the day, their time was their own. They weren’t allowed out of the Guild’s grounds save for one day in ten. At that time they were made to tie the crossguard of their swords with white cloth to tell anyone they came across that they were Recruits and not to be molested. That in effect they were under the protection of the Guild. Anyone violating the White Scabbard would be visited by more experienced guild members to ‘discuss’ the situation as it were.

This day, when the drills were over, Riyan’s muscles ached all over as they usually did. He hadn’t been kidding when he wrote his mother that she wouldn’t recognize him. His body had grown quite muscular over the months since coming here.

He put his fat-ugly away and then went with Chad back to the barracks they lived in. “Have to find Raestin,” he told his friend. “He said he was going to leave on the morrow.” Once back at the chest at the foot of his bed, he retrieved the box containing the letter and half a dozen silver coins he was sending his mother.

“Want me to come with you?” asked Chad.

Riyan tossed the box onto his bunk and shook his head. “No,” he replied. Then as he buckled on the plain sword he had acquired shortly after coming to Gilbeth, he added, “This won’t take long.” The sword already had the white cloth tied around it.

One of the rules they had to follow was that they must wear a sword at all times when not coming or going to drills. Supposedly it was to get them better used to having it on. They also weren’t allowed to break the white cloth and draw their swords except in a life and death situation. And they better have an eye witness verifying that it was if they did.

“Alright,” replied Chad. “I’ll meet you in the mess in an hour.”

“You got it,” agreed Riyan. He picked up the box and left Chad in the barrack. He glanced out a window as he passed by and gauged that the sun still had an hour before it set. Now that fall was here, the days had begun to grow shorter. Raestin had said that he would meet Riyan in the foyer of the Guild.

The foyer was a large area where members could come and take their ease. It was also where many of the local Recruits could meet family and friends without leaving the grounds. Riyan always liked going to the foyer to see the battle worn fighters that frequented the place.

When he entered the foyer, he scanned those at the tables and others sitting in the lone chairs spaced about the room. A grin came to him as his eyes settled on Raestin. He was over to one side talking with a man wearing the livery of one of the local nobles. Almost all the hired swords, whether it be private or by the city, were members of the Guild. A few didn’t have the social connections or the gold to get accepted into it. Suffice it to say, if you were a fighter and didn’t belong to the Guild, you were looked down on. Also, if someone were in need of hiring a fighter for, say a guard’s position, they were more likely to choose a member over a nonmember.

Raestin noticed his approach and gave him a grin. “Why if it isn’t young Riyan,” he said. Then to the man he was talking to he added, “I’m acting as currier for him.”

“Ah,” the man nodded.

When Riyan came to stand before them with the package in hand, Raestin said, “I’d like you to meet Swordmaster Allyn. He’s Captain of Lord Dourin’s guards.”

Riyan gave the Swordmaster the bow for one of his rank. Every fighter in the world is named for the rank they have attained. Being a Recruit, Riyan sat on the lowest rung of the Guild’s hierarchy. Swordmasters were four ranks above him.

Each rank has specific qualifications someone of the rank below must have before they can be ‘promoted’. The further up you go, the more it’s going to take to make the next level. For Riyan, the next level in the Guild’s hierarchy is that of Armsman. All he need do to be promoted to Armsman is to have memorized the first twenty Codes of the Warrior and have his Drillmaster attest that he was sufficiently skilled so as not to bring dishonor or shame onto the Guild. Then he could begin calling himself Armsman Riyan. His full name would be ‘Armsman Riyan of the Gilbeth Warriors Guild’, but for practical purposes, it was shortened to simply Armsman Riyan.

“Nice to meet you Riyan,” the Swordsman replied. To use ‘Recruit’ as part of the name wasn’t normally done.

“It’s my pleasure Swordmaster,” Riyan said. Now that the proscribed pleasantries between guild members were out of the way, he turned to Raestin. He held out the package to be delivered to his mother. “This is the package.”

Raestin took it. “I’ll be there in two days,” he told Riyan. “She will get it then.”

Riyan also handed over the coppers he was paying Raestin for the service. “Thank you,” he said.

“Glad to do it,” said Raestin.

Then Riyan again bowed to Swordmaster Allyn and turned to leave. He made his way from the foyer, glad that the package with the letter was finally on its way. Now at least his mother won’t be worrying about what had happened to him. He encountered Chad as he was on his way to the mess and joined him.

“Tomorrow’s our ten-day,” said Chad as they waited in line for their food. Ten-day is what they called the one day in ten when they were free of drills and could leave the Guild. Of course if while they were out on their ten-day they were to get into trouble, the privilege of leaving the Guild would be revoked. Not to mention the other penalties that would go along with it.

“I was thinking we should go see Kevik and find out how he’s making out,” suggested Riyan.

Chad nodded. “Sounds like a plan,” he agreed. “Maybe after that we could find a tavern somewhere with a good bard.”

Riyan thought that was a great idea. As soon as they received their allotment of food, which was almost more than either of them could finish, they took it to one of the many tables in the mess and joined a couple of the other Recruits who were already there.

Most of the others gave Chad and Riyan a hard time as it was common knowledge they had bought their way into the Guild. All the other Recruits were legacies, meaning that someone in their family was a member so by default they could join.

But not all were that way. The three Recruits whom they joined at the table were decent enough fellows. There was Chyfe, the ‘ch’ being pronounced as a ‘k’, who was the third son of a local lord. Five foot six, he was a bit on the short side as far as warriors went. But he was fast with his blade and could easily hold his own against the other Recruits.

The other two at the table were Seth and Soth, identical twins. Their father was one of the guards in the service of a local lord. They were darker skinned than the average citizen of Gilbeth but not by much. Six foot one, they made an imposing pair. Seth was the more congenial of the two while Soth tended to be more reserved.

“Riyan, Chad,” Chyfe said as they sat down.

“How is it today?” asked Chad.

Seth held up his knife with a slice of beef skewered to it. “A bit tough,” he said with a grimace. “I wonder if they give us Recruits the low end of the cow?”

Soth chuckled at that and nodded.

“Wouldn’t be surprised,” replied Riyan. He took up his knife and cut off a slice of the beef on his plate. From the effort it took to saw through the meat, he knew he was going to have fun chewing it.

When he put it in his mouth, he found out just how tough it was. "I think someone cooked up a mess of old boots," he commented which elicited a round of laughter from the others.

As he worked the meat over in his mouth, he looked up at the banners hanging from the ceiling. They hung against the wall and circled the entire hall. Each of the banners depicted a coat of arms of the Guild's more famous members. On the first day he ate in the hall, he had hoped the coats of arms that he was searching for would be among them, but they weren't.

A week into his training, he had asked one of the swordsmen helping out the Drillmaster about coats of arms and when he would be getting one of his own. The man had laughed at him.

"You don't," he replied.

"I thought every fighter had one," Riyan said.

The swordsman shook his head. "You only get one of those if you're knighted by the king," he explained. "Or if your house already has one then you are allowed to bear it on your armor and shield."

"They really interest me," Riyan had told him. "Is there a way for me to research them?"

The swordsman shrugged. "Maybe," he replied. "You'll have to ask old Stryntner, he keeps the Guild's archives."

"Thanks," Riyan had said. "I'll try that."

And later that day after the drills he did attempt to gain access to the Guild's archives, but was summarily turned away by Stryntner. He was an aged fighter who had lost an eye and two fingers on his left hand. When Riyan had gone to see him after the drills were over for the day, he had been told to go away.

While at the door making his pitch to enter, he had seen shelves lined with books covering the walls he could see. There were even a few free standing bookshelves placed in the middle of the floor that were stacked with old manuscripts and tomes. This was definitely the place he had to get to in order to find out about the two coats of arms from The Crypt that he and the others believed would lead them to the rest of the key. How, though, remained the question.

Riyan and Chad made small talk with their fellow Recruits. Mainly about their training, instructors, and their fellow Recruits. Seth and Soth were the first ones to finish their dinner and quickly excused themselves.

The buzz in the mess hall was mainly about the conflict to the south with the Lands of the Moryn Tribes. The Lands of the Moryn Tribes bordered the southern boundary of the Kingdom of Byrdlon. The dukedoms of Duke Yoric and Duke Knor shared the border with their less than hospitable neighbor.

There were a dozen tribes of wild men who had banded together long ago. Through the years there had been attempts made to annex their lands to that of Byrdlon, but all had failed. All the effort had done was breed animosity among those living within Moryn towards the Kingdom of Byrdlon.

Now it seemed trouble was again brewing down there. Excursions had been made by various tribes into the dukedoms of both Duke Yoric and Duke Knor. The king had sent men and supplies to aid the two Dukes but the raids continued.

Chyfe was all set to go down there and make a name for himself in what rumors were saying would be a major war in a few years. “It’s the only way we’re ever going to rise in the Guild,” he’d told them more than once. “Also, if you ever hope to be knighted, you’re not going to be able to do so by sitting around here.”

Riyan and Chad humored his zeal to get to the fighting. They on the other hand were on the trail of something else and weren’t too interested at this time to gain fame. When at last they finished eating, Chyfe accompanied them back to the barracks they shared where they spent the rest of the evening quizzing each other on the Codes and doing a little fencing. Each of the barracks contained a rack with the wooden practice swords and the Recruits were expected to practice the various techniques they had learned earlier in the day.

Chapter Two

The following morning after breakfast, Riyan and Chad left the Warriors Guild and headed through town toward Kevik’s place. He had taken possession of his master’s old estate. Since the magic user Allar had no known surviving kin, Kevik turned out to be the closest thing left, being his apprentice as he was. He just had to pay a thirty gold piece fee and the estate was his.

There were three areas within the estate that he had yet been able to gain access, two in the manor house and one in the tower located nearby. They were guarded by magical wards that were beyond his ability to dispel. In another room down in the basement, one secured with a locked door which Bart was able to open, they found an empty chest. Within the chest they placed all the items they had brought with them from the Ruins of Algoth, the magical items such as the rings and powders which they had yet to figure out their use. Until they knew exactly what they did they didn’t want to take the chance of encountering malignant magical energies.

Kevik had hesitated in trying his identification on any of them as he told them certain items could hold traps that would be sprung should he cast his spell upon them. He wanted to wait until he had a bit more experience before attempting it. The others dearly wanted to know what magic imbued the items, but seeing as how they didn’t know anything about such things, left it to his judgment.

Within that chest was also placed all the King’s coins brought back with them. The non-magical gems and jewelry they took from Algoth had provided them with enough coins to cover their immediate needs and they felt it would be better to keep the ones bearing the King’s mark out of circulation for as long as possible. Riyan had also placed the sword and knife bearing the dragon-sword coat of arms within as well to avoid the possibility of arousing unwanted curiosity.

What gold they did have available to them after the Guild's admission fees for Riyan and Chad, Bart's payoff to rid himself of the death mark, and the thirty golds Kevik had to pay, didn't amount to a whole lot after they split it four ways.

Kevik was still considered an apprentice. As in the Warriors Guild, the Order of the Magi held their own rules for the advancement of their members. In order for Kevik to leave behind the designation of Apprentice, he would have to create his staff. Once he had done that, and could show them that he was capable of casting at least five different spells, he would be promoted and gain the title, 'Practitioner'. Unlike the Warriors Guild where fame and notoriety played a part in gaining the higher levels, in the Order of the Magi, it was based purely on skill.

The last time they had visited Kevik was two weeks ago and at that time he had still been a long ways from creating his staff. Most of his time was spent pouring over the books in Allar's library on the second floor of the tower in search of the spells needed to infuse the staff with magic.

The first decision he had to make was out of what wood to make the staff. As he had explained to them, it wasn't just a point of finding a stick of wood and enchanting it with a spell. Rather, a magic user's staff had to be an extension of himself.

There were many variables that went into the creation of a staff of power, as was the task set before him. The first choice he had to make was the type of wood. You see different types of wood held different properties that would enable the magic user to better perform specific types of spells. Oak and ironwood was helpful for those magic users who wanted to pursue battle magics, while birch was good for magics which affected people.

Of course if your bent was towards necromancy, or magic dealing with the spirit world, the type of wood didn't matter. Rather, it mattered where you harvested it. A staff that would benefit a necromancer worked best if it was taken from a dead tree that had grown out of a cemetery, or some other place associated with the dead.

All this Kevik had to keep in mind as he worked to create his staff.

The estate was set a mile or so out of town to allow for privacy. It wasn't by any means a large estate. There was the main estate house where Kevik lived. It was two stories tall and had plenty of space for many people to live. Behind the estate was a small stable area, barely large enough to accommodate ten horses.

Off a short ways from the estate was a tower Kevik said Allar had built shortly after he acquired the property. It was four levels high and within was where Allar had practiced and performed his magic. To Riyan the whole place looked creepy. The grounds weren't kept up, the grass and bushes growing wild.

The estate also held defensive magics which Allar had put into place. Fortunately he had entrusted Kevik with its secrets before he died. He in turn had explained to Riyan and Chad the safest way in reaching the door to either the estate or the tower without setting anything off.

When they arrived, they made their way to the tower door in the precise path that Kevik had shown them. Once they reached the door, they used the large, round iron knocker to announce their presence.

“Once you are at the door, stay there,” he had told them. “Under no circumstances move from that spot until I arrive.”

“What will happen if we do?” Riyan asked him.

“Something unpleasant,” he had replied.

So standing before the door to the tower, they knocked three times and waited. A minute later when it seemed as if Kevik may not have heard them, they knocked again. “Kevik!” hollered Riyan. “It’s us!”

Then from above them the shutters of a window on the third floor swung open and Kevik stuck his head out. “Be right down!” he hollered to them before ducking his head back inside.

“There has to be a better way than this,” stated Riyan.

“I know,” agreed Chad. “What if he had gone to the market or something? Or even left town?”

“I guess we would find out what ‘something unpleasant’ meant,” Riyan replied.

From within the tower they heard the unlocking of the door and then it swung open. Kevik stood there with a big grin on his face. “Glad to see you both,” he greeted. Stepping aside, he gave them room to enter.

The ground floor of the tower was used as a storeroom. Boxes, crates and other items were strewn about in a haphazard fashion. From past visits they knew that the second floor was one of the two libraries Allar had collected in his time. Above that was the room where Kevik did his magical experiments and studies. The fourth floor Kevik had yet to enter as the way was sealed with powerful magics that at his current stage of proficiency was unable to breach.

“How goes the staff?” Chad asked.

“Progressing,” he replied. He motioned them to follow as he made his way up the stairs, past the second floor and into the third. This level was broken into three rooms, the one in which the stairs entered was the larger of the three. One of the others was a storeroom with shelves bearing components and other material that would be needed for the practice of magic. The third room held a cot and three shelves with a few old tomes stacked on them. Allar, and now Kevik, used this room to rest in while in the midst of experiments. Riyan had the feeling that Kevik never went into the manor house at all. Instead he just lived here.

Every time Riyan came here he couldn’t help but look to where the stairs continued on up and entered a shimmering, hazy area where it passed from the third floor to the fourth. Kevik was quite anxious to find what was beyond the barrier but admitted to Riyan and Chad that it could be years before he’ll be able to break the seal. Who knows what marvelous magical items the barrier protected?

On a table sitting in the middle of the room laid a staff. It was roughly six feet long and just thick enough for a person’s hand to grip it comfortably. “What kind of wood did you finally settle on?” Riyan asked.

“Yew,” he replied. “It’s one of the all purpose woods that any magic user can use effectively no matter which type of magic he works.” He went over to the staff and picked it up. “It isn’t going to be nearly as good as Wyzkoth had been, but as long as it allows me to move up from apprenticeship, I’ll be happy.” Wyzkoth was the name of the staff that Allar had given him

shortly before his death. Unfortunately, he had been forced to abandon it during their escape from the Ruins of Algoth. He had been faced with the choice of the staff or his life. To this day he still wonders if he made the wisest choice in letting it go.

"I should have it finished by the end of the month," he said. After laying the staff back on the table, he directed their attention to a book sitting open on a nearby table. "In the library downstairs I was fortunate to find a tome detailing the making of a Staff of Power. It's taking me some time to decipher it, but I believe I'll be able to figure out the spells before too much longer."

"That's great," Chad said.

"Any word from Bart?" Kevik asked.

Riyan shook his head. "No," he replied. It's been over a month now since he had gone to buy back the death mark. Both Riyan and Chad were beginning to grow worried that he may not have been successful. If they don't hear anything from him by the time they were through with training and have become Armsmen, then they'll proceed with the search for the last two segments of the key on their own.

"He should have been back by now," Chad said.

"That's too bad," Kevik said. Then a grin came to him and he said, "Watch this." Riyan and Chad turned toward him and saw a small sphere of light appear in his hand. "I found a spell for a better light." Grinning in triumph, he looked to the others for their reaction.

"That's pretty good," commented Riyan.

"Definitely much better than that annoying bobbing sphere you tortured us with in Algoth," Chad said good naturedly.

"I have another spell I've been working on learning too when I give the staff a break," he told them.

"What does it do?" asked Riyan.

"It's a farseeing spell," he explained. "It will allow me to see things miles away as if I was standing close by."

"That sounds pretty useful," Chad said.

"Haven't perfected it yet," he admitted, "but I'm working on it."

"Kevik," begun Riyan, "Chad and I are going out tonight to find a good bard at one of the taverns. Thought you might like to come along."

He glanced to Riyan and took but a moment to think about it. "I'd like that," he said. "I still have some work to do on the staff until then. Can I meet you at your Guild a little before sunset?"

"That would be fine," Riyan said.

"Yeah," agreed Chad. "We'll see you then."

Kevik then escorted them down to the ground floor and waved goodbye as they made their way back to town.

The rest of the day Riyan and Chad wandered the streets of Gilbeth, simply glad to be out of the Guild and not having to do drills. When the appointed time came to meet Kevik they returned to the Guild and found him waiting in the foyer. He was sitting in a chair near a window, reading

a small book. When he saw them coming, he placed the book within the pack on the floor by his feet. Then he stood and slung the pack across his back.

“Where to?” he asked.

“Found a place not too far from here that one of the members said had good food and usually a bard,” replied Riyan.

“Sounds good,” said Kevik, “I’m starved.”

With Kevik in tow, they left the Guild house and walked down the street to the Inn of the Silver Sword. From the looks of it, the place catered to primarily fighters though there were a few others of different professions scattered about the common room.

They found an empty table and crossed the room to take their seats. The serving girl came and took their order. When she returned a few minutes later, she bore a tray with a pitcher of ale and three mugs. “I’ll bring the food out in a couple more minutes,” she told them as she placed the pitcher and mugs on the table before them.

“Take your time, we’re not in any hurry,” Riyan told her with a smile.

She returned his smile and then went to wait on a man at another table.

“I think she likes you,” Chad said.

“Do you really think so?” asked Riyan.

“Absolutely,” replied Kevik. “You might have a chance with her.”

Riyan turned slightly in his chair to get a better look at her as she helped the other man. “I think she’s that way with everyone. Besides, I don’t want anyone but Freya.” He turned back to them and grew somber. “Wonder how she’s doing?”

Chad gave his friend a sour look and said, “Stop that. We’re here to have fun and relax. I don’t want you to grow all melancholy again like you did the last time. No one will think badly about you if you dally here and there. It’s healthy for a man.”

Riyan shrugged, “Maybe you’re right. But it’s just not my way.”

Chad rolled his eyes heavenward and sighed. “Fortunately I’m not constrained by your sense of morality.” In truth, Chad has dallied with several different girls since their coming to Gilbeth. Ever since they’ve sported the White Scabbard they were forced to wear, girls have given them more notice.

Kevik laughed. It was good to be out of the tower for awhile. Being cooped up all day going over old tomes will give him a hump if he’s not careful.

“Ever found Allar’s stash of gold?” Riyan asked him.

Kevik shook his head. “No. I think it has to be beyond one of those barriers,” he explained. “I did find one small chest with about five gold’s worth of coins. That should keep me solvent for awhile.”

Chad then lowered his voice and asked, “How about those magic items?” Back when they had first come to Gilbeth after leaving the Ruins of Algoth, and arrived at what was now Kevik’s estate, they had spread out all the jewelry and other items on a table. Then he had cast a spell to detect magic and the ones that glowed, were put in a chest. The others items were either sold or kept so Bart could use them to pay off his death mark.

Kevik felt sort of bad as he said, "I haven't had much time to spend on them. Creating my staff has taken most of my time I'm afraid." After the items had been placed in the chest, Kevik had said he would work to discover their magical properties but hadn't been able to put much time into it due to his staff. In fact, he hasn't been able to put in any.

"Well, I guess it's not like we're going to need them right away," Riyan said. "Still, try to get to them as quick as you can."

Bart had been reluctant to allow Kevik, a relative newcomer to their group, to keep all the magical items at his estate. But where else was there that was safe enough? Surely not at the Guild. Riyan and Chad had periodic inspections by those in charge to make sure they were keeping their sword and equipment properly maintained.

And Bart of course, as he was going to get the death mark removed, couldn't very well have been carrying all that stuff with him. Other than Kevik's estate, there simply was no other place feasible. So like it or not, Bart had acquiesced.

They finished the pitcher of ale and had another one on the table when the bard made his appearance and began to perform. All of the songs, sagas, and ballads that he played were ones that Riyan and Chad had heard time and again. Most were primarily geared for fighters, which wasn't too surprising seeing as how ninety percent of the clientele were that.

"Wonder if he knows any about the King's Horde?" asked Riyan.

"Think we may learn something?" asked Chad.

"Couldn't hurt to ask," replied Riyan.

They waited until the bard's next break before Riyan got up and went over to him. When Riyan made his request, the bard said he knew one and would sing it next. Riyan thanked him and returned to his seat. "He said he would do one next," he told the others.

Several minutes passed by before the bard returned to the stage and took up his instrument. He turned to the crowd and announced, "A request has been made to hear a song about the King's Horde." At that loud cheering went up and a smattering of table banging accompanied it.

He strummed his instrument for a few bars until the crowd quieted down, then began:

*In times long gone, when the world was young,
A King walked under the blazing sun,
All lands were his, the people were strong.
What manner of man was he?
What manner of man was he?*

*Coins. Coins in the earth.
Buried and cherished they bided their time.
Coins. Coins in the earth.
Though they're buried again they will shine.*

*Cities there were with buildings of stone,
They rose up to heights of majesty unknown,*

*Dazzled the eyes their brilliance shone.
What manner of cities were these?
What manner of cities were these?*

*Coins. Coins in the earth.
Buried and cherished they bided their time.
Coins. Coins in the earth.
Though they're buried again they will shine.*

*A people's love, a King of hope,
Prosperity reigned the people did thrive,
His kingdom was one of colossal scope.
What manner of kingdom was his?
What manner of kingdom was his?*

*Coins. Coins in the earth.
Buried and cherished they bided their time.
Coins. Coins in the earth.
Though they're buried again they will shine.*

*One fell day their beloved king did die,
Deep in the earth they piled it high,
Riches and treasure to dazzle the eye.
What manner of treasure was this?
What manner of treasure was this?*

*Coins. Coins in the earth.
Buried and cherished they bided their time.
Coins. Coins in the earth.
Though they're buried again they will shine.*

*In a tomb of earth, deep, deep below,
Treasure untold his people did sow,
For what purpose but his spirit to show.
The magnitude of their love to him.
The magnitude of their love to him.*

With the last strum of the last chord, the audience which had been spell bound throughout the ballad erupted in a thunderous applause.

Riyan clapped and shouted with the rest and when the applause finally settled down, he turned to Chad and Kevik. "Didn't learn much, but it was a good song."

“I especially liked the chorus, ‘Coins. Coins in the earth’,” he said. They spent the rest of the evening listening to the bard, drinking ale, and having a good time.

Sometime around midnight was when the trouble started. It had absolutely nothing to do with them. They were simply minding their own business when two men at the table next to them started arguing over some woman. Before they even knew what was happening, the two men had come to their feet shouting. One struck the other across the face and knocked him onto the table before Riyan.

Riyan scooted backwards quickly to avoid becoming entangled with the man. Unfortunately, when he scooted backwards, the contents of his mug went flying and soaked the man behind him. One thing led to another and before he knew what was happening, the whole place erupted into a free-for-all.

Fists were flying and he would no sooner get away from one man only to be pummeled by another. He tried to give as good as he received, and managed to land a few good blows before the town watch arrived and broke up the fight.

They waded into the combatants with their clubs and knocked senseless anyone who wouldn’t stop fighting. They rounded everyone up and marched them off to the city jail. Chad and Riyan were among them, where Kevik was they didn’t know. He sure wasn’t with them marching off to jail.

“Wonder what’s going to happen to us now?” asked Chad. He had an eye practically swollen shut and a lower lip that was almost half again its normal size.

Riyan shrugged and turned eyes full of worry to him. “I don’t know.” Then he saw how Chad’s face looked and added, “You don’t look too good.”

Chad grinned but then grimaced when his swollen lip flared with pain. “You don’t either.”

Riyan had an eye beginning to swell as well. Also, the side of his jaw felt like it was going to fall off. He was afraid to look in a mirror.

Down at the jail, the sergeant of the watch took one look at the white cloths tied to the hilts of their swords and immediately sent one of his men down to the Guild for someone to come take them. When they realized that someone at the Guild was going to be woken up in the middle of the night to come drag their sorry butts out of jail because they had taken part in a brawl, they groaned.

Here follows the complete version of

Jaikus and Reneeke Join the Guild
Book One of *The Adventurer’s Guild*

Prologue

A Little Bit of History...

Rumor had it that the great city of Reakla had its beginnings nearly a millennium ago. Back then, it didn't even have a name. In fact, the only thing that could be said for what would one day become the preeminent city of the realm, was that very few people knew of, or cared about, the place.

A solid league from the road now called the Adventurer's Way ran the main trade route linking the production centers of the east with the populations of the west. This collection of huts housed less than a score who barely scraped out a living. Situated as this gathering of the destitute, poor, and unwanted was at the northern fringe of Keot's Swamp, a swamp whose reputation for being infested with creatures of great evil and ferocity, they saw very few strangers willing to join their ranks.

The world ignored them, didn't care about them, and those that did find their way there more often than not continued on without so much as a how-do-you-do; which for the most part, the residents of this backwater cesspool in the middle of nowhere preferred. That was, until the day when the great warrior Reakla decided to retire.

His deeds were legendary. Why, even to this day, bards still regale their audiences with his exploits. One of his most famous adventures, the one people had requested for centuries, was how he slew the Frost Drake Theriocola and rescued the Lady Eay from the Sorcerer Vultun. A tale of great daring-do and romance that made men thump the table in applause, and women weep at the tragic ending. And this was but one of a dozen such tales that survived from his day.

In the winter of his years, when Reakla realized his strength was beginning to wane, reflexes grew slower, and gray started to sprout, he knew it was time to hang up his double-headed battleaxe and retire. For only a fool continued to adventure when youth had fled.

There had been many theories as to why a warrior of great renown would settle in such a place. One suggested it was because he wanted the quiet solace he never had in his youth. Another put forth that he had fallen in love with a woman who lived there. But whatever the reason, this great warrior came to live among the residents at the edge of Keot's Swamp.

As time went on, word spread of his whereabouts and fellow adventurers whom he had known and adventured with would come to share a pint of ale, and a tale or two of past exploits. Eventually, Reakla's shack was enlarged and grew into a tavern, then an inn.

A few of Reakla's cronies retired there as well, desiring to continue being in the company of the great warrior. A few brought their families, others slaves, and this collection of ramshackled dwellings grew into a bona fide village. The place began to be called Reakla's Place, Reakla's Inn, and other names that have since been lost to the past. It was a century or more after Reakla's death that the elders gathered and stated that forevermore, their village would be called Reakla. They were proud their home would bear the name of the great warrior.

Year after year, more and more adventurers gravitated to Reakla. The camaraderie of fellow warriors and the sharing of mutual histories drew men and women alike from throughout the realm. It seemed that whenever an adventurer grew too old, or too infirm to continue, they would stake a claim, build a house, and hang out at Reakla's Inn.

The earliest records indicated that the first real construction on what was now known as the Adventurer's Guild hadn't begun until the third century after Reakla's death. By this time, his original inn had undergone many additions to accommodate the influx of people. Rooms had been added, a courtyard built, and areas sprouted that were separated for the main classes of the day; fighters, thieves, and magic users.

Magic users didn't start coming until the great magic user Meyk built his tower not far from Reakla's Inn. Meyk was brother to a fighter by the name of Breyki, whom you may recall from such sagas as "*Breyki and the Troll's Head*" or "*Breyki Atop the Goblin's Mound*," Meyk settled in Reakla when his brother lost a leg to an overzealous Giant of the Clan Dirtclout. Ordinarily, a simple healing spell would have taken care of his leg, but the loss had occurred far from such aid, and by the time he reached civilization, the stump had healed to such an extent that the healers were unable to affect a restorative cure.

After Meyk built his tower, he began accumulating a great collection of books that to this day can be found at the Great Library within the Adventurer's Guild. Scholars, and up-and-coming magic users, came from all over to research spells. For one who walked the Arcane Path, Meyk was unusually friendly and helpful.

Now, the catalyst for the initial construction of the Adventurer's Guild that we know today didn't come from a desire to create such a complex, but rather due to a massive migration of Trolls from out of the Swamp. Overrunning the town in a spree of killing and destruction that resulted in more than a third of the buildings being either outright destroyed, or burnt to the ground, it took every able-bodied man and a few women to throw the horde back. Unfortunately, Reakla's Inn which had stood for five hundred years, fell during the onslaught. Little more than charred beams and shattered stone remained, some of which can be viewed in the Gallery of Fallen Heroes, a room within the Guild dedicated to those members who personified courage, resourcefulness, and success.

Plans were drawn up in the months following the end of what came to be called *The Troll Invasion*. At first, the new building was going to follow the same lines as the previous one, only on a slightly larger scale. But the idea was proposed, by whom the histories failed to mention, to

make the new construction into a centralized place where adventurers could come and find more than just a room, a good meal, and stories of past exploits.

It became a place where heroes past their prime could still find value in their lives by teaching the younger, newer crop of adventurers. Other crafts came as well; fletchers and master crafters of bows, blacksmiths, and others whose services were in demand. Very soon this new place was dubbed *The Adventurer's Guild* and the name has remained to this very day.

Magic Users were always part of the Guild, ever since the time of Meyk. The joining of brain and brawn on adventures grew quite common. Thieves didn't come along until later. It has been rumored that thieves had always enjoyed a presence there, hiding in the shadows, but it wasn't until about a century ago that they were officially incorporated as part of the Guild. The reasoning behind such a move depended on whom you asked. On the one hand, thieves played an important part in any adventure; disarming traps, picking locks, etc, so it only made sense to have them as part of the Guild. The other side of the coin claimed that the Thieves connived their way into the Guild in order to be in on the "*know*" about the Guild members' activities so they could beat them to the prize.

By and large, the three classes coexisted together fairly harmoniously. Each class was almost always represented in Guild Parties, a Party being a group of adventurers that had banded together to hire out collectively. A few Parties were formed entirely of fighters or thieves, rarely had magic users banded together as they tended to prefer having muscle-bound toughs taking the hard knocks while they fired off spells from a respectably safe distance.

In the centuries since the village of Reakla first took the name of the renowned hero, it has grown by leaps and bounds. The league of open space between the original collection of huts situated at the northern edge of Keot's Swamp and the road now called Adventurer's Way, has been completely filled in by a town to rival any in the realm. Two other trade routes now wound their way to Reakla. One was the North Road which leads to the Lands of the Kittikin, a place most civilized people would just as soon keep as far away as possible. Brigand's Way was the other, so named due to the frequent raids on caravans and travelers foolish enough to attempt to pass without sufficient escort.

Adventurer wannabes came from all over in the hopes of joining the Guild, the prestige and glory which went with membership was something every lad desired. Unfortunately, only a very few ever succeeded in gaining the honor of being added to the Adventurer's Roll of Heroes. An auspicious sounding title, the Roll was merely a list of currently active members, and some who were past their prime yet still called the Guild their home away from home.

Before anyone was allowed to join, they must be able to lay claim to the successful completion of an Adventure. Of course, such an Adventure cannot be any old adventure, but one which satisfied three specific qualifications.

The first qualification was that there must have been some element of risk to life and limb. Finding a lost cat that strayed too far from home would hardly count toward Guild Membership. Unless, of course, the cat in question weighed five hundred pounds, had a mean disposition, and liked nothing better than to chew a man's head off. Then perhaps it would qualify as a bona fide Adventure.

The second qualification was for the Adventure to be successfully concluded. If the whole point of the quest was to retrieve a specific item, then that item had better be in hand when all was said and done.

Lastly, and perhaps most important of all, a reward of some kind had to have been given. After all, what good was an Adventure if you didn't get paid for your troubles? A man has got to eat.

Very few wannabes were able to satisfy the requirements since most had no experience or training for such a life. The bones of many a lad could be found in out of the way places where their misguided hopes to complete an Adventure had led to an untimely end.

There were those having friends or relatives in the Guild and could merely tag along on an Adventure with a seasoned Party to satisfy the requirements. For others without such connections within the Guild, membership could be as elusive as a five-legged dog. Their recourses were few indeed, and all held a high rate of mortality.

But for those who made it, the rewards were great: fame, gold, and the chance to become a power in the realm. All are waiting for the one strong enough, smart enough, and especially lucky enough to survive.

Chapter 1

It was a day like any other in the great city of Reakla. The hustle and bustle of everyday life continuing as it had for many a year, though in this city, what constituted everyday life could at times seem extraordinary if it were to be encountered anywhere else. But in Reakla, the sight of three trolls being led through the streets by a party of adventurers was hardly worthy of a second look.

Ye's Band of Thugs, a party of five that had adventured together for the better part of a decade, herded six of the great beasts toward the Adventurer's Guild. Trolls were in demand at the Guild, being as they were very hardy and regenerated well. They gave the up and coming newbies something to practice on. Each of the three Classes calling the Guild their home had a courtyard in which they could hone and fine-tune their skills between adventures. Within those courtyards, fighters fought, mages worked on spells, and thieves, well, they did what thieves always did and were not about to explain themselves to anyone. If you were a thief, you knew what went on. If not, it was best not to pry.

Below the Guild laid a network of pens which housed beasts that for a price, were made available to its members. There were the usual sorts of animals one would expect, such as cows, dogs, cats, rats, etc. Then there were the more exotic beasts such as the trolls, and if rumors

could be believed, even a green dragon was held in a cavern far below the surface, but such was most likely nothing more than rumor.

Ye's Band of Thugs tended to receive the commissions to acquire trolls for the Guild as they have had much success at it and almost always returned with good specimens that had little in the way of damage. Of course, the regenerative nature of trolls could in no small measure account for that as well.

For the lads of Reakla, those too young or not predisposed for adventuring, the sight of Trolls being marched to the Guild pens was the closest they could get to the excitement, and glory that was Adventuring.

That day there were two onlookers standing in awestruck amazement of the seasoned adventurers herding the trolls. They were relatively new to Reakla, having only arrived the night before and gaped at the massive beasts passing by.

"Would you look at the size of them!" Jaikus remarked.

Reneeke was much too enthralled by the sight to respond.

"Only three this time?" one onlooker shouted.

The man at the head of the procession glanced toward the shout. "That's all they wanted," the seasoned fighter responded. He bore a longsword and shield, his helm was silver with an erect bright blue plume sticking straight up six inches. His chainmail, though it looked well-worn, shone in the afternoon sun.

As the men and trolls moved on, Jaikus slapped his friend Reneeke on the back. "Just think. One of these days, that's going to be us."

Reneeke turned his gaze from the departing trolls to his friend. "Yup."

"Tomorrow we'll go down and join."

"If they'll have us," his friend countered. "We don't exactly look the adventuring type."

Which was true. Jaikus stood but five feet seven, slight of build, and not exactly muscular. Reneeke on the other hand rose a hair over six feet, had worked on a farm all his life and thus had built up a sizeable set of muscles. Chopping wood would do that to a lad. But despite his build, dressed as he was in hand-me-down homespun, he looked anything but someone ready to face the evil in the world.

"Of course they'll have us," Jaikus asserted. "Do you think every adventurer started out with a set of armor, swords, and all that stuff? No, of course not. They were like us. Full of energy and raring to go."

"If you say so."

To be honest, Reneeke preferred life on the farm to that of adventuring. It was good work, you knew what each day would bring, and perhaps best of all, you weren't risking your life on a daily basis. Jaikus had talked him into coming to Reakla to join the Guild with him. If they turned them away without so much as a how-do-you-do, that would suit him just fine. He definitely felt out of place among such company.

"Come on," Jaikus urged as he grabbed his friend's arm. "Let's follow them to the Guild."

"Okay."

They had gone to the Guild upon first arriving in town, but hadn't worked up the nerve to approach the front door. Several rather intimidating individuals had loitered before the entrance and the two lads thought that perhaps coming the following morning might be better.

But such had not been the case. They again lost their nerve when they went down earlier that day, Jaikus being the one to balk at approaching. For all his enthusiasm to join the Guild, he was afraid they would turn him away. And he dreaded such a fate.

They and others, mainly kids, tagged along behind the procession of men and trolls until the Guild came into sight. It was an impressive structure at three stories with a box tower rising on the eastern edge that extended for another four levels. The tower, they knew, was the province of the magic users. At times, strange noises could be heard coming from the windows of the upper levels, as well as mysterious flashes of light. Arcane powers beyond the ken of the average man were manipulated within.

Ever since he was a lad sitting on the wooden floor of the inn listening to the bards spin tales of daring-do, Jaikus had his heart set on being a fighter. Back home, he and Reneeke used to practice with wooden swords they had crafted from the remains of an old oak tree. It had been split in two by lightning and they imagined special properties imbuing the wood when they sparred. Jaikus could usually whomp Reneeke and felt pretty good about his prowess with a blade. Reneeke didn't really care what he would be, he was only there so Jaikus wouldn't have to go it alone.

There was a hunger in Jaikus' eyes, a longing to be a part of such a close-knit society. To be an Adventurer! What greater thing could there be? "Let's do it."

"What?" Reneeke asked. Glancing down to his friend, he saw that look in his eyes, one he had seen before. It said his friend had found his spine. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Then, as the men and trolls disappeared around the corner of the Guild, Jaikus stalked toward the Guild's entrance with Reneeke close behind.

A rather large individual stood near the entrance, Jaikus judged him to be a fighter by his armament, and one who had seen better days; the man's left arm was missing. His eyes tracked the two lads on their approach, and as they stepped upon the bottom of three steps leading to the entrance, moved to block their entry.

"Only Guild members are allowed in, boys," the man said in a raspy, though not entirely unfriendly, voice.

"Boys?" Jaikus declared. Coming to a stop, he stood all of his five feet seven with hands on hips. "We are not boys, but men."

A grin spread across the man's face. "Be that as it may, you can't come in. Unless...you were invited?"

Jaikus' bravado began oozing away now that he stood toe to toe with a real Adventurer. A serious case of self-consciousness and doubt came over him. "No," he replied. Being in the situation, he had no other recourse but to see it through to its end. About to continue, he was forestalled by Reneeke.

"We are here to join the Guild."

Looking the pair up and down, the man replied, "Go home, boys. You have more the farm than fame about you. It would be a shame for your mothers to lose you so early in life." Scoring upon Jaikus with the jab about the farm, the man saw the wannabe Adventurer's face turn red.

"We will have you know that we are not the bumpkins you make us out to be. Reneeke and I are no strangers to the sword, and..." But he was again forestalled by laughter.

"Boys, boys, boys. Thank you. I haven't had a good laugh like that in many a moon. *No strangers to the sword*. Why, you two don't even *have* swords. Go home."

"Are you turning us away?"

"It looks like it, *boy*. You can't just walk up to the Guild, announce your desire to become an Adventurer, and be one." He then gestured to the open entryway behind him. "You have to earn the right to walk through this door."

Reneeke laid a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Let's go home. You tried."

Jaikus knocked the hand from him. He would not give up so easily. "How can we earn the right?"

"Go on an Adventure, boy. Do something brave, something worthy of the Guild. Then we'll see."

"What kind of an Adventure?"

The man shrugged. "How about slay a dragon? Or capture one? The Guild's always looking for exotic beasts for its members. Find something unique and bring it back."

"How?" Reneeke asked.

Rolling his eyes heavenward, the man replied, "If you have to be told, then there isn't much point in trying to join the Guild, is there?"

"But Adventurers go on adventures all the time," Jaikus argued. "How is it they know what is going on in the world?"

"What are you, stupid? Don't you know anything about the Guild? People come to the Guild, or send word, of tasks that need doing. They hire out a party to resolve whatever problem or task needing to be addressed."

Before Jaikus could reply, Reneeke asked, "Are there any that we could do?"

"Sorry, kid. But those are for members only."

Jaikus could see he was going to get nowhere with this fellow. "We'll be back."

"I'll be here," the man assured them.

Jaikus stalked off in a huff.

"Let's go home," Reneeke stated yet again.

Jaikus shook his head. "Rene, I simply cannot resign myself to the life of my father. Work all day long and well into the night in an attempt to scratch a living off the land. Watch my youth and dreams fade as year after year passes with no change in sight. No Rene, that I cannot, will not do."

"But you heard what the man at the Guild said. We have to do something worthy of the Guild. And to be honest, we don't exactly have any skills that would be useful in such an endeavor."

“Nevertheless, I shall not give up.”

Reneeke sighed. Relaxing in the common room of the *Inn of the Silver Spoon*, he downed his mug of ale and signaled the barmaid for another. His friend could be headstrong at times, and to his chagrin, this was one of them.

He liked Jaikus. Being raised in the same backwater farming community of Running Brook had produced a bond between them that he could not simply ignore. But there were times when his friend was exasperating. Like the time when he thought a gnome had set up shop in Tilly’s bakery. Two weeks of sneaking about and spying were spent in watching the place only to discover the gnome to be Tilly’s baby nephew who had come to visit. Thank goodness they kept their suspicions to themselves or they would have been the laughingstocks of the village.

“He did have a point, however,” Reneeke announced.

“What was that?”

“We might want to think about getting a couple swords. Those at the Guild might take us more seriously if we were armed.”

Jaikus nodded. “Good thought.” Pulling out his coin purse, he dumped two silvers and five coppers onto the table. The seven coins represented everything he had in the world.

Without bothering to check his, Reneeke said, “I’ve another silver, two coppers.”

Meeting his friend’s eye, Jaikus asked, “Think this will be enough?”

Reneeke shrugged. “Don’t know. Never priced a sword before.”

“Well, I guess we can at least make inquiries at the local weapons dealer.”

Bright and early the following morning, the two wannabe adventurers found their way to *The Keen Blade*, a weapon shop reputed to be the best in town. Within they gazed upon its variety of weapons: battleaxes, longswords, pikes, maces, flails, and other death-dealing instruments.

Jaikus’ eyes gleamed when they fell upon a longsword sporting silver filigree delicately interwoven across the face of the guard. About to reach out and touch it, he was interrupted by the emergence of a man from the back.

“Can I help you lads?”

Five-foot four and thin as a rail, the man was one of the few Jaikus had ever encountered shorter than himself. He had fiery red hair that was neatly trimmed, and was dressed in a plain jerkin. He looked nothing like a smith should.

“We’re looking for a couple swords,” Reneeke piped up.

The man’s eyes narrowed. “Looking to join the Guild are you?”

“How did you know?” Jaikus asked.

“Every other week or so, I get one or two young folks such as yourselves who think the adventuring life is for them. Let me tell you, it isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. After long stretches of boring monotony, there’s a short duration in which your lives are hanging by a thread, then back to boring monotony. You’re better off returning to the farm.”

“No farm, thank you,” Jaikus replied. “I’ll try my luck with the Guild.”

Shrugging, the man said, “It’s your life.”

“You bet.”

Taking in the two lads before him, the man didn't seem to think too much of them. "How much are you looking to spend?"

"Three silvers," Reneeke answered.

"*Three silvers?*" the man asked with a laugh. "Three silvers won't even get you a scabbard, and a used one at that."

"How about a spear?" Reneeke asked. Turning to his friend, he said, "We're pretty good with those."

"Son, there is nothing in this shop that can be had for three silvers. Not for both of you at any rate."

"But we need a weapon if we're to join the Guild," Jaikus complained.

"True." Growing thoughtful for a moment, the man said, "You might try Keeler's. He has a smithy located on the eastern edge of town. Adventurers often dump their unwanted and extra items off on him."

"Thank you," said Jaikus. He took another longing look at the longsword he desperately wanted before leaving the shop. One day, he vowed to himself, he was going to have a sword like that.

Keeler's was easy to find. A quick question of a local and they were soon hearing the ringing hammer of a smith at work. Unlike the man back at *The Keen Blade*, the man doing the hammering had the thick arms and broad back of a smith.

When the smith noted their approach, he plunged the piece of metal he worked on into a bucket of water. Steam rose as he held it there for a second before removing it. Then he gave the metal bar a brief inspection before setting it on a worktable close to hand.

"Need a weapon?" the smith asked before the two lads had come to a stop.

"What makes you ask that?" Jaikus questioned.

Giving them a grin, the man replied, "Okay then, what can I do for you?"

"We need a weapon," Reneeke stated.

Laughing, the smith shook his head and Jaikus grew a bit red about the ears. "Pay me no mind boys, just a jest at your expense."

"We were told you might have weapons on the cheap," Jaikus stated, overcoming his irritation.

"That I do. What sort are you interested in?"

"Swords."

"Of course, how silly of me. You all want swords. Don't even think about a mace or a halberd, or any other type of weapon. Everyone wants a sword."

"Aren't swords the best?" Reneeke asked.

"Not for everyone, son. It all depends on what you want to do. A good mace can pulp an opponent's internal organs quite readily. A spear or halberd gives you reach which allows you to strike your opponent before they can come close."

"I still want a sword," Jaikus asserted. "And so does my friend."

“As you wish,” shrugged the smith. Extending his hand, the man said, “Name’s Keeler. I have half a dozen or so out back that a party disposed of just yesterday.” After shaking hands and hearing their names, Keeler indicated for them to follow. He then turned about and headed for a side door, beyond which laid a room with many different weapons, swords included, displayed upon the walls and lying atop tables. One longsword within a scabbard bearing a dragon design caught Jaikus’ eye.

“How much for this one?”

“*Too* much I’m sure,” replied the smith. “The equipment you two can afford I keep out back.”

Bristling under the smith’s comment, Jaikus remained silent and followed him from the room. His mood didn’t improve when he saw the selection of weapons that, according to the smith, was within their means.

These weapons were hardly what one would call worthy of a member of the Guild. Perhaps that was why they had found their way to Keeler’s back room. Lying in uneven stacks upon the floor, jammed into barrels, leaning against the wall, these weapons were in a sad state of upkeep.

Many were either chipped or broken, a couple had complete holes scored through that when Reneeke asked, Keeler explained the party had run into an acid trap. “It took out two of their members and ruined most of their equipment.” Gesturing to the hodgepodge of adventuring cast-offs, he added, “What you see here are weapons no longer deemed serviceable. A few aren’t too bad.” Moving over to a barrel with a score of sword hilts sticking out the top, he inspected them for a moment before pulling out one with minimal disfigurement.

“This one is still serviceable,” he explained, bringing it to the pair. “Not great, but it’ll only cost you a silver.”

Jaikus looked at the sword with undisguised disgust. It didn’t have a shine to it, rust covered much of its surface, and there were two nicks near the end. “Isn’t there anything better?”

“Son, fresh from the farm as you two are, I’m assuming you don’t have a great deal of coins. Am I right?”

Miserably, Jaikus had to nod affirmative.

Turning the sword over, the smith then waved it back and forth. “Though it doesn’t look first-rate, it has a good balance and can still hold an edge. It’ll take a bit of work to make it serviceable. But once sharpened and cleaned, it will do the job.”

“I’ll take it,” Reneeke offered. “If you will also throw in a whetstone and some oil?”

Keeler nodded. “Done.”

“But I still need something,” Jaikus stated. These were hardly the weapons of heroes.

“So you do,” Keeler agreed. He returned to the barrel and pulled forth a second blade, equally as disreputable as the first. “This one is in fair condition and will serve.”

The last thing Jaikus wanted to do was to be seen sporting such a sword. Glancing around, he saw one that looked in much better condition lying on a nearby table. The blade had a shine and the few nicks marring its surface were hardly noticeable. Not only that, but there was an archaic design engraved in the crossbar that gave it a mysterious quality. “How about this one?” Crossing over to it, he gripped the hilt and held it up.

“Nice,” Reneeke said, approvingly.

“You don’t want that one son.”

Turning to Keeler, Jaikus replied, “Why not?”

“It’s not that good.”

“*Not that good?* Why, this sword is much better than that pig-sticker you’re holding.” Taking out a silver, he flipped it to the smith. “I’ll take it.”

Keeler snatched the coin out of the air and slipped it into his pocket. “As you wish.”

Satisfied with his sword, Jaikus turned to go when Keeler stopped him by saying, “Just one more thing.”

“What?”

Striking out with the sword Jaikus had called a “pig-sticker,” the smith struck his newly purchased blade, and the metal shattered.

Reneeke stood amazed. The blade didn’t just break in two, it shattered into over a dozen pieces. “Wow.”

“Don’t you *ever* ignore wisdom from one who knows better, son,” the smith said sternly. “It may just cost you your life.”

With but three inches of blade still attached to the hilt, Jaikus stared at what was left of his new sword in disbelief. “You broke my sword.”

“Yep. It sure looks that way.”

“I want my silver back.” Tossing down the stub of a blade, Jaikus stood with hand outstretched to receive his coin.

“No.”

“*No?*” Growing irate, Jaikus was about to shout a few choice words at the smith when the smith laughed.

“I just saved your life, boy. Days from now, maybe a week or two if you were lucky, you would have been in dire straits where your life was on the line. When that sword shattered during your very first fight, you’d be dead. Let this be a lesson. When advice is given on something as important as a sword, especially when it comes from a smith such as myself, listen. Or die. In the line of work you seek to embark upon, life is tenuous at best.”

“Good advice,” Reneeke agreed.

Jaikus seethed, but could understand the wisdom in what Keeler had said.

Holding out the “pig-sticker” to Jaikus, the smith asked, “Do you want this?”

He glanced at Reneeke, who nodded for him to take it. Turning his gaze back upon the “pig-sticker,” Jaikus shuddered and said, “Yes.” Taking out his last silver, he handed it to the smith and took the sword.

At no extra charge, Keeler supplied each with a scabbard as worn as the blades, then gave Reneeke the whetstone and the oil, which Reneeke promised he would share with Jaikus. “Now all we need to do is find a way to join the Guild,” Reneeke told his friend.

“Yeah.”

“You’re not even part of the Guild yet?” Keeler shook his head. “How do you plan to join? You two know someone?”

Jaikus shook his head. "I wish we did, but no."

Reneeke asked, "You wouldn't know where we could get an exotic animal for the Guild?"

"Who told you that you needed one?"

"The man out front of the Guild we met yesterday."

The smith eyed the two before him. Raising his hand to just above his head, he said, "About this height with only one arm?"

Reneeke nodded. "That's him."

"And I suppose he failed to mention the Scrolls?" Two blank looks were all the answer he needed. "Damn, Jeral. Ever since he lost his arm two years ago due to a Springer's carelessness, he's had it in for anyone looking to join the Guild. Though that's probably why they stationed him outside, sort of like a first line of defense to keep away those who truly don't have the grit to be part of the Guild."

"What are the Scrolls?" Jaikus asked.

"Well, in case you hadn't noticed, not more than ten feet to the right of where you met Jeral, are the Scrolls. They list Adventures that remain unresolved."

"Unresolved? Why would they not be completed?" Reneeke wondered.

"Several reasons. First and foremost is the reward not being worth the risk or time invested. Most Adventurers are mercenaries at heart, and unless there is some serious gain to be had, they will pass it over. Another reason would be it is too dangerous. Once an Adventure has claimed a party or two, few are willing to sign on."

"So, if we take on one of these Adventures and resolve it, we're in?" asked Jaikus.

"Not being part of the Guild, I wouldn't know for sure. But it's your best bet. I've heard that some current Guild members went that route."

Eyes agleam with possibilities, Jaikus said, "Thank you, master smith." Then to Reneeke, he said, "Let's return to the Guild and take a look at those Scrolls." Assuredly, there must be some task considered beneath the average Guild member that they could accomplish without too much threat to life and limb. Then, they would be in!

Chapter 2

"Remove a Specter..."

"Ice Giant stealing cattle..."

"Recover family heirloom from cursed crypt..."

Reneeke turned to Jaikus. "I'm not sure about these."

Seven scrolls, each detailing over a score of tasks needing completion were nailed to the side of the Guild. They had gone through six thus far and hadn't found anything their meager talents could handle.

"Here's one that doesn't look overly dangerous. A Mr. Phats requests leaves of the Atalas plant." Glancing from the scroll to his friend, Jaikus asked, "Maybe we could find some in an apothecary?"

Reneeke shook his head. "If they could be had so readily, I doubt if Mr. Phats would have sought the services of the Guild."

"You have a point, Rene." Further reading revealed that the nearest location of the leaves was some leagues within the Keota Swamp. "Maybe not." To travel such a distance into the Swamp would almost ensure encountering trolls. A prospect neither relished.

Flipping to the last scroll, Jaikus' eyes were drawn to a scrawl written across the bottom.

Lost ring. See Matron Grantha-Reakla. 5 GP

"A lost ring. What do you think?"

Reneeke nodded. "Sure. She's in Reakla too." Most of the tasks listed on the Scrolls ranged all over the realm, and even to places neither of them were in the least bit familiar. It was fortuitous that this one happened to be near.

"Five gold pieces would come in handy," Jaikus added. "We spent all but our last few coppers at Keeler's."

"Then let's find this Matron Grantha and see what we can do to help her."

Setting out from the Guild with but a name to go on, they asked passersby as to this lady's whereabouts. It wasn't until the sky was growing dark and they had wandered up near Adventurer's Way that someone knew who they were seeking.

"Matron Grantha?" questioned a lad of about seven. "Sure I know her. She lives by herself in the house next to Chondy's Outfitters. You can't miss it."

"Thanks." After finding out the general direction in which her home lay, they quickly came across Chondy's Outfitters and the two-storied home that shared its south wall. To the right of the outfitters was a small open plaza, so the house on the left had to belong to Matron Grantha.

The door of the home bore ornate scrolling with faded varnish. Jaikus rapped on the door with the round brass knocker, paused, then rapped again. There was no response. He was about to rap a third time when they heard a bolt being thrown and the door swung inward a few inches before halting.

An elderly woman squinted through the crack at the two on her doorstep. "Yes?"

"Good afternoon," Jaikus began. "Are you Matron Grantha?"

Squinting harder, the woman asked, "Is that you, Booba?"

Jaikus glanced to Reneeke who only shrugged. Turning back to the lady, he replied, "Uh, no ma'am. My name is Jaikus and this is my friend Reneeke. We saw that you were in need of someone to locate a...ring?"

“Oh my, yes,” she replied. “My husband gave me that ring during our seventeenth year together.” Face pursing, she cursed, “He was a drunken lout, but I did dearly love that ring.” Opening the door wider, she gestured for them to enter. “Won’t you come in?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Passing through the door, they entered a nice, if not lavish, outer room one would expect to find in the home of an elderly lady. Frilly lace abounded. The door closed behind them and Matron Grantha indicated for them to have a seat upon the divan. She sat in a plush chair directly across from them.

“Could you tell us about the ring, ma’am? When did you last see it and most importantly, what does it look like?”

“Well, I do seem to recall wearing it last month when I went to Clara’s for dinner. Clara of course is the wife of my first son. He’s been gone these many years and we find comfort in each other’s company. She runs the bakery now with the help of my two granddaughters, Mara and Chari. Lovely girls, both. Soon it will be time to pick out a husband for Mara, she’s the oldest.”

She eyed the two seated before her. “I don’t think either of you are right for her. Perhaps you should go and I’ll try to find someone who is more well-off.” She squinted at them for a moment. “From the looks of you two, coins don’t find their way into your pockets very often.”

“Ma’am, we’re not here about your granddaughters,” Reneeke explained. “We’re here to help you find your ring.”

“My ring? Oh, yes, that’s right. It went missing. Did you find it? You know you don’t get the reward until you do.”

“Yes, ma’am, we understand that. But we have only just arrived and you haven’t told us what it looked like or where you may have lost it.”

“Didn’t I? I was pretty sure I had. Well, it is a gold ring with a large diamond set in the middle with two red sapphires, one to either side. Those are supposed to represent my granddaughters Mara and Chari. Mara is set to be betrothed to a miller’s son, but he seems a bit shiftless to me. I cautioned her mother as to his ways but she doesn’t seem to care.”

“I thought you said a husband had yet to be picked out for Mara?” asked Reneeke.

She then launched into an exhaustive explanation of why-tos and wherefores, and Jaikus turned an annoyed glance to Reneeke. “Let’s try to keep her on the ring, shall we?” he whispered.

“Sorry.”

When a break finally came in her convoluted rendition of Mara’s betrothal prospects, final disposition, and so forth, Jaikus interrupted her with, “Now, about your ring. Could you...” A nudge from Reneeke caused him to leave the sentence unfinished. His friend was pointing across the room toward where a vase decorated with pictures of violets sat on a small table against the wall.

“On the table behind it,” whispered his friend.

It was the ring. From where they sat, they could readily make out the diamond and two sapphires placed to either side of the ring just as she had described.

Reneeke turned his attention back to Matron Grantha. “Ma’am, your ring...*oof!*”

A quick jab in the ribs silenced his friend. "...will be in your hands by morning," finished Jaikus.

"Thank you, young man," she said with a smile. "It means so much to me. Not because of my late, layabout husband you understand, but because it represents my darling granddaughters."

Jaikus came to his feet. "Have nothing to fear. Jaikus and Reneeke are on the job."

"Wonderful."

As she turned to see them to the door, Jaikus moved toward the vase and the ring partially hidden behind it. Then when her back was turned while opening the door, he snagged the ring and slipped it into his pocket.

Reneeke frowned and shook his head. *That's stealing*, he mouthed to his friend.

Heading to the door, Jaikus ignored Reneeke and slipped through to the street beyond.

"You boys have a good time finding my ring," she said.

"We will, ma'am."

Once Reneeke had joined him out on the street and Matron Grantha closed the door, Jaikus turned to his friend. "Tomorrow, bright and early, we'll return with the ring and collect our reward."

"But this is not right," argued Reneeke.

"What do you mean? She didn't know where it was, we found it and are going to return it to her."

"Jaik, she didn't lose it, merely misplaced it."

"Look, we need to complete an Adventure before we get into the Guild, right?"

Reneeke nodded.

"We do this, and we get in."

"I still don't think this is the right way to go about it," Reneeke asserted. "We are taking advantage of an old lady whose mind and eyesight are going." A pause, then, "What if it was your grandmother in there?"

"Which one?" Waving off the answer, Jaikus continued, "Besides, we need the coins. We are not stealing, merely satisfying a need that she has requested we fill. Namely, returning her precious ring to her. We're down to coppers, Rene!"

Reneeke did not look convinced.

"Trust me. This will all work out."

Bright and early the next morning, Jaikus and Reneeke were once again knocking upon Matron Grantha's door. When the elderly woman answered, she squinted at the two of them. "Booba?"

"No, ma'am," Jaikus replied. "We are not Booba. My friend and I were here yesterday and said that we would help you find your ring."

"My ring? Did I lose that ring again?"

"Apparently. You posted a notice at the Guild and we came in answer."

"Oh, yes. That's right, my ring is missing again. When you find it, let me know."

She started to close the door and Jaikus quickly stepped forward. He laid a strong hand upon it to prevent the door from closing, then said, "We have already found your ring."

"You did? You boys are quick."

Jaikus pulled the ring from his pocket and held it out to her. "Here you go, ma'am."

Taking it, she said, "Thank you, young gentlemen."

When she again began to close the door, Jaikus said, "I believe there was a reward?"

"Oh that's right. I almost forgot. Wait here a moment." She closed the door until there was only a crack left through which Jaikus and Reneeke could peer.

"We shouldn't take any reward," Reneeke stated. "We didn't do anything."

"Look Rene, we need the gold. Without it, we'll be without resources all too soon. Besides, did you see the look on her face? We brought her happiness."

"By taking a ring from her home and returning it the next day. It isn't right."

Jaikus rolled his eyes and sighed. Reneeke would never understand.

Seconds ticked by and the woman failed to return. Peering through the crack, Jaikus tried to discover where she had gone, but couldn't see her. He nudged the door open a little bit so he could get a better view of the interior. From the back of the house came soft, melodic singing.

Frowning, he hollered, "Hello?" When nothing happened, he hollered once more, this time louder. "Matron Grantha?"

The old woman appeared from the back. "Is that you Booba?"

"No, ma'am. We are the ones who returned your ring." Slightly exasperated, there was an edge to Jaikus' voice.

"My ring?" she asked. Holding her hand up, she showed them where the ring rode on her finger. "But my ring is here. I'm afraid you must have me confused with someone else."

"Look, we are from the Guild. You posted a request for someone to recover your ring. We came here yesterday and took on the task. Not more than ten minutes ago we returned the ring to you."

"Did you?" she asked. "Why, that was awfully nice of you young man."

"Yes. And now we would like the reward of five gold pieces you offered."

"I don't know anything about that. You'll have to take it up with Booba."

"Who is this Booba, and where can we find him?"

Growing thoughtful, Matron Grantha acquired a faraway look. Then she said, "Now I remember. He's usually in front of the Guild. Lost his arm a while back, poor boy. He comes around here every now and then to check on me. Seems he feels I should move in with him and my youngest daughter Belle, but I simply can't bring myself to leave my home."

Reneeke gave her a warm grin. "We understand. We shall take this up with Booba."

"If you do speak with him, please tell him I am well."

"It would be our pleasure." Then to Jaikus, Reneeke said, "Let's go."

As Matron Grantha closed the door, Jaikus turned to Reneeke. "We'll never get our money out of *Booba*! You heard what Keeler said, that man has it in for those of us who want to join the Guild."

"Relax, Jaik. You get too anxious about things."

“Rene, we have little in the way of coins remaining. What are we to do?”

Reneeke shrugged. “Something will come up.”

Jaikus didn’t share his friend’s optimism.

Two locals shared their table that night. One was a rather stocky man, a candle maker by the name of Jenki. The other was Jenki’s oldest son, Jenkimar. The common room being rather packed as it was that evening, a rare occurrence if what Jenki alleged was any indication, he and his son had asked the two would-be adventurers if they could share their table. Of course, Reneeke acquiesced before Jaikus could formulate a reasonable excuse why they couldn’t. But, the father and son turned out to be a jovial pair and Jaikus was quickly put at ease.

“We saw the trolls being marched to the Guild yesterday,” Reneeke told the pair. “I had never seen such beasts in all my life.”

Jenkimar nodded with a grin. “Then you must not be from around here?”

“No. We hail from Running Brook, a small farming community many days to the east.”

“Such sights are quite common,” the son explained. “Why, just last week, *Treglae’s Fearsome Four* actually brought in a Fire Drake. Seeing that beast paraded through the streets was something let me tell you.”

“Isn’t bringing such dangerous animals into the city, well, dangerous?” asked Reneeke.

“For the most part, no,” Jenki replied. “Of course, there are those instances when less skilled adventurers try to bag a beast that’s more than they can handle.” Turning to his son, he asked, “Remember when *Teeth of Hell* brought in those devil bears?” When his son nodded, he turned his attention back to the two friends. “They hadn’t made it halfway to the Guild before the bears broke the holding spells and started running amok. Ten died that day and another score will never walk again.”

“People tend to be wary whenever a new band is marching their prize through the streets,” added the son.

“They didn’t seem concerned when those trolls were passing through,” stated Reneeke.

“That’s because it was *Ye’s Band of Thugs*. Everyone knows Ye and his crew know how to handle the beasts.”

“Quite the colorful names these parties have,” Jaikus commented.

Jenki nodded. “They tend to. If you boys are thinking about joining the Guild, you’ll probably want to join one of the existing parties, at least until you get some experience under your belt.”

“Why?” Reneeke asked. “Jaik and I thought we could, you know, go it alone?”

“I suppose you could, but you’ll survive much better if you have a few extra swords with you, not to mention a spell caster or two.”

Reneeke turned to his friend, “What do you think, Jaik?”

“I doubt if anyone would have us,” his friend replied.

“They might. We won’t know until we ask.”

The prospect of going hat in hand from party to party in the hopes someone would deign to allow them to tag along just didn’t sit well with him.

Downing his ale, the father stood and motioned for his son to do likewise. "This will have to be goodnight, gentlemen," he announced. "We've an early morning ahead of us."

"Have an order for the Guild to complete before noon," the son explained. "Thank you for allowing us to share your table."

"You are welcomed," Reneeke assured him.

"Good night," Jenki said then led his son across the common room to the door.

Once the pair had left the inn, Reneeke signaled their server for another round of ale. "They were nice."

Jaikus nodded.

They didn't have long to wait until two frothy mugs sat before them. Reneeke picked up his and knocked back half of it.

"Excuse me," said a voice from a neighboring table.

Turning toward the hail, Jaikus saw that it was a dark haired lad slightly younger than himself and Reneeke. He sat with five others of similar age. "Yes?"

"We couldn't help but overhear what you and those other fellows were talking about."

"Kind of rude, isn't it? Listening in on other people's conversations?" Jaikus didn't care for such behavior.

The kid shrugged. "Probably. But thought you might like to know of a Guild party leaving on the morrow that may be interested in taking along a couple Springers."

"Springers?" asked Jaikus. "What do you mean by, '*Springer*'?"

"Didn't Keeler mention something about Springers?" Reneeke queried.

The lad glanced to his buddies and gave them a grin. "A Springer is what they call a new adventurer. You know, because in the spring, the world reawakens and becomes new again. A beginning as it were."

"What party?" Jaikus asked.

"*Charka's Troupe*. I heard they were going to be escorting Hymal the Apothecary into the Swamp to collect rare reagents. They usually have a Springer or two on these trips, or so I heard."

"Why would they want someone along who would be next to useless?" Reneeke asked. Jaikus flashed his friend an annoyed look at being referred to as useless.

"Charka's pretty nice about such things," the lad explained. "Always one to help out the new guy."

Reneeke turned to Jaikus. "What do you think?"

"We don't know anything about this Charka, or his Troupe. How can we know he'll do right by us?"

"Hey, I wouldn't steer you wrong," the lad assured him. "I just thought I'd let you know. Take it or leave it as you will. If you're interested, Charka can usually be found at *The Dented Helm*, a hangout for fighter types located near the Guild."

"I suppose it can't hurt to look into it," Jaikus stated. Then to the lad he said, "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Turning back to his friends, they began speaking in hushed tones.

Jaikus rose to his feet and told Reneeke, "Let's head over to *The Dented Helm*."

Two men stood conversing near the entrance. Both were obviously Guild fighters. One had twin blades strapped to his back while the other had a mace hanging from his belt. Both gave the two wannabe adventures a cursory glance. Bobbing their heads in greeting, Jaikus and Reneeke walked past without a word and entered *The Dented Helm*.

It turned out to be a rather large tavern with two floors of rooms above the drinking area. Raucous laughter could be heard coming from within. Hanging on a rusty old chain attached to a beam near the entrance was an old war helm; its left side completely caved in.

It was a busy night and there wasn't an empty table to be had in the common room. A bard was setting up on the small stage in the far corner and no less than three barmaids worked their way through the tables delivering mugs of ale and platters of food.

Jaikus scanned the sea of faces. "Which one is Charka?"

"I don't know," Reneeke replied. Flagging down one of the barmaids, a comely lass with long flowing auburn hair and a well-rounded figure, he waited until she drew near then said, "My friend and I would like to buy a drink for Charka. You wouldn't know what he favors would you?"

"He usually drinks the Black Syderkult."

"Black Syderkult?"

"It's brewed locally from a plant grown on the edge of the Swamp. I've never tried it but have heard it could knock a troll back a step or two."

"Very well then." Pulling two coppers from his pouch, he handed them to the barmaid. "Will this do?"

She shook her head. "No. Two more."

Producing another two, he gave them to her.

"I'll get it to him right away."

"Thank you."

As she walked away Jaikus asked, "What did you do that for? We don't have many coins left."

"Just wait." He kept an eye on the door through which the barmaid had disappeared. Then when she reappeared with a tall flagon on her tray, he directed Jaikus' gaze toward her. "Look there." They watched as she crossed the common room and set the flagon before a large bear of a man. Clad in skins with a beard as full as a tree in spring, the man looked questioning to the girl. Then, when she pointed over to where Jaikus and Reneeke waited, Reneeke said, "We have found Charka."

The big man waved for them to come over and join him. When they reached his table, he said, "Many thanks, lads. I do appreciate a flagon of the 'kult."

"Our pleasure."

Charka's two comrades, one a woman as thin as a rail and dressed in a green gown; the other a fighter dressed in leathers with a simple looking sword hanging at his hip, nodded greetings as well.

"Please, sit," Charka offered.

“Thank you, the common room seems a bit full this evening.” Taking a seat, Jaikus gave the big man a grin. Reneeke took the seat next to his.

“Now, what do you want?” Charka eyed the two newcomers from behind the flagon as he took another drink.

“We understand you may be in need of a couple Springers,” Jaikus explained.

The big man looked surprised. “And you are volunteering your services in that capacity?”

“Absolutely,” Jaikus replied.

“We wish to join the Guild, and it appears this may be the only way.”

“Well, it’s true we do prefer to have a Springer or two, though the last one didn’t work out so well.”

“Oh?”

The woman sitting beside Charka nodded. “He didn’t make it.”

“Well, let me put your minds at ease. My friend and I are no strangers to the sword and we would be a great asset to have along.”

“Do you have supplies and equipment to last a fortnight in the Swamp?” When he saw how their faces turned crestfallen, he knew they hadn’t. “You’ll need to get some.”

Jaikus was about to reply, but was forestalled by Reneeke, who said, “We spent all but a few coppers to just get here and in purchasing our swords.” Jaikus flashed him an annoyed look.

“Not a problem. Do you know where *The Dirt Road* is?” asked the man dressed in leathers.

“Aren’t all the roads in Reakla dirt?” Jaikus asked.

“No, it’s a Chandler’s shop called *The Dirt Road*. Bella sells travel supplies and equipment. His place is near the Swamp Wall just off Keota Plaza. If in the morning you are still serious about accompanying us as Springers, seek him out and tell him Charka sent you and that you need the ‘regular’ supplies. You tell him that, and he’ll set you up with everything you need.”

“But, we won’t be able to afford it,” stated Reneeke.

“Don’t worry, it’ll come out of your share of the commission.”

“What is our share?” Jaikus asked, very interested now that the possibility of receiving gold or treasure was mentioned.

“Five percent, and a like share of any treasure we may come across and bring back. That’s standard for Springers.”

“If we do this, would we be allowed to join the Guild?” Jaikus asked.

Charka nodded. “I shall put your names forward upon our return, provided you acquit yourselves honorably and abide by the contract.”

Jaikus nodded.

“Very well then. We leave at noon tomorrow. Meet us in front of the Guild an hour before. Make sure you stop by Bella’s first and have your equipment with you.”

“Yes, sir,” Jaikus responded. “We will do that.” Coming to his feet, he motioned for Reneeke to do the same.

Reneeke bobbed his head and mumbled, “Thank you.”

“See you tomorrow,” the woman said. The man in leathers merely eyed them and remained silent.

“That you will,” Jaikus affirmed.

Then turning from the table, he and Reneeke headed for the door. Once outside, Jaikus was practically jumping in his excitement. “An Adventure, Rene! We’re going on an Adventure!” Meeting his friend’s gaze, he added, “And after we return, we’ll be in the Guild. Isn’t that great?”

“Yeah, sure,” replied Reneeke as he followed his friend back to their room at *Inn of the Silver Spoon*. Though if the truth be told, he *had* been kind of hoping their bid to get into the Guild would have fallen through. For some reason, he thought life on the farm may be much preferable than what they were about to embark upon.

Chapter 3

The following morning before the sun was barely above the horizon, Jaikus and Reneeke were on their way to find *The Dirt Road* and acquire the equipment needed for the impending journey.

Jaikus had hardly been able to sleep through the night, so excited had he been at the prospect of embarking upon an Adventure with real adventurers. Reneeke, on the other hand, had slept the night away.

It was easy enough to find Keota Plaza, it comprised the open area before the gate leading to the Swamp. The wall had been built some time after *The Troll Invasion*; mostly to keep the trolls and other creatures of the Swamp from wandering into town and creating a ruckus, but also in part to stem the settling of the Swamp.

Newcomers to Reakla who staked a claim within the Swamp often came up missing a short time afterward. There were more than trolls inhabiting the Swamp, though trolls were by and large the most common creatures encountered. So the wall had been built.

It stood over fifteen feet high with a platform running along the inner lip where members of the City Guard patrolled to keep watch for any creatures that might wander too close. When one was spotted, they notified the Guild who then dispatched members to either kill, or more preferably, capture the creature and bring it back to the Guild’s pens beneath its grounds.

Though the plaza was bordered by many shops, it was a simple matter to find *The Dirt Road*. Within, they discovered Bella who had to be one of the tallest people either of them had ever met. Standing easily a head and a half taller than Reneeke, the man practically towered over them. Either he was a tall human or a small giant, which, was hard to tell. He looked every bit the human, though around the eyes he had a slightly different build. Later they would discover he

was half-ice giant and half-human. How such a thing came to be was something Bella would never fully explain to anyone.

“Ah, welcome sirs,” boomed a voice as deep as the deepest cave.

“We are...that is, Charka said to tell you we need the *‘regular’* supplies. Do you know what he meant?” Jaikus stammered. Being in the presence of such a tall person made him feel small, and slightly unnerved him.

“Ah, yes. If you will but wait for a moment, I shall gather your items.”

“Thank you,” Reneeke said.

They watched as Bella accumulated a pile of goods upon the counter. Ropes, blankets, bedrolls, two sacks bulging with dried beef and hardtack, as well as a dozen other items useful for camping in the open. He also added two bundles of six torches each. When the tall man placed two large, finely woven mesh nets upon the stack, Reneeke asked him about them.

“They keep the bugs off of you at night,” Bella explained. “The Swamp is full of little nasties that come out once the sun goes down.”

Once the items had been accumulated, he glanced at Charka’s newest companions. “I take it you will also need packs sufficiently large to carry all this?”

Jaikus nodded. “If you please.”

Bella shrugged and produced two large backpacks, laying them atop the pile. “There you go.”

“Don’t we need to sign something?” Reneeke asked.

“No. Charka will take care of it next time he comes in.”

They came to the counter and each took a backpack and began filling it. Not completely familiar with that particular style of backpack, Bella had to instruct them in the proper placing of items so as to get it all to fit. Some were intended to attach to the outside such as the bedroll and blanket, once they were rolled to the proper size.

“You tell Charka that if he comes across any Pyra Stones, that I have a buyer and will give him two golds each.”

“We’ll do that,” Jaikus agreed. With pack fully loaded, he slung it on his back. Reneeke did the same.

“You boys take care of yourselves,” the Chandler cautioned as the two left his shop.

“This is heavy,” Jaikus groaned.

“It’s not that bad. I’m sure you will get used to it.”

Making their way through the streets, they reached the Guild a couple hours before the appointed time when they were to meet Charka. They moved down from the entrance a ways so as not to be in the way while they waited.

After removing their packs and leaning them against the side of the Guild, they sat on the ground beside them. “Wonder what a Pyra Stone is?” Reneeke asked after they were settled.

“I don’t know,” Jaikus replied. “Who cares?”

“Do you think maybe they have something to do with magic?”

“Quite likely, Renee.”

An hour went by and Jaikus was growing impatient for the arrival of Charka and the Adventure to begin. Unable to simply sit and wait any longer, he started pacing back and forth.

"Relax," his friend said. "They will be here when they do."

"I know, Rene. I just hate having to wait. I want to get going!"

Reneeke shook his head and sighed. For as long as he had known Jaikus, his friend had always been impatient. When he wanted something, he wanted it right then.

During his pacing, Jaikus' attention continued roving up and down the street passing before the Guild for any sign of Charka. So engrossed was he in scanning the people passing on the street, that when a voice, seeming to come out of the very air before him boomed, "Watch where you are going, you lout!" he jumped back in startlement.

Glancing around, he sought the source of the deep, thunderous voice.

"Down here," rumbled a voice as deep as the mountains.

His initial shock quickly gave way to humor when he discovered the owner of the voice to be no more than half a foot in height.

Looking for all the world like a miniature human male dressed in armor with a mace that couldn't have been more than two inches in length that hung from its tiny belt, the little guy stood glaring up at Jaikus with hands on hips.

"What the heck are you?" Jaikus chuckled.

Not bothering to reply, the little guy instead demanded, "Step aside."

"Hey, Rene," Jaikus said, ignoring the miniature human, "get a look at this."

As Rene got to his feet and began to walk over, Jaikus turned back to the little guy with an amused grin and saw that all six inches of the miniature man was now at eye level. Seeming to hover in the air, face red with anger, the little guy pulled back his arm and struck Jaikus right between the eyes.

The blow hit him like a ton of bricks and Jaikus was knocked backward off his feet. Sailing through the air, he came to land flat on his back in a cloud of dust several feet away.

Reneeke drew his sword to come to his friend's aid.

"I wouldn't do that, lad." Charka and his two companions from the night before were approaching from down the street. The man with Charka led three mules loaded with supplies and equipment.

"But he attacked Jaikus!"

As the little man stalked off toward the entrance to the Adventurer's Guild, Charka shook his head. "If Lord Teritus had seriously meant to attack your friend, he'd be dead. As it was, he was only annoyed."

The little guy turned his gaze upon Charka who nodded his head respectfully. "Milord."

"Who is he?" asked Reneeke.

"Someone you don't want to mess with," Charka's lady companion replied. The other man with them merely nodded agreement.

Glancing to where Jaikus was slowly regaining consciousness, Charka said, "So, you two were serious about signing on as Springers?"

"Yes, sir," said Reneeke.

“We have already been to *The Dirt Road* and have our supplies.”

“Excellent.”

Lending his friend a hand, Reneeke helped Jaikus to his feet.

Taking in the man who wore the same leathers as the night before only today had a longsword and shield, and the woman now in a dark blue gown, Jaikus asked, “Is this your *Troupe*?”

“You bet,” Charka affirmed. Gesturing to the lady, he said, “Lady Kate, a magic user of fearsome power.”

The woman gave them a small smile and bowed her head slightly.

Reneeke grinned back. “Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“And the sour looking individual next to her is Seward, fighter of modest accomplishments.”

“Modest? Humph!” The man scowled at Charka who only grinned.

“So what’s the mission?” Jaikus asked.

“We’ll tell you that once we’re in the Swamp,” Charka replied. “After we take care of some business here, we’ll meet our patron near the gate.”

Jaikus looked at the *Troupe* leader with skepticism. “What business?”

“Before we begin, you and your friend must sign contracts stating that you are coming along as Springers. It’s standard practice. That way when we return, I can put you forward for Guild membership.”

Reneeke looked to Jaikus. “What do we have to lose?”

“Exactly. Where do we sign?”

Going to one of his mules, Charka pulled out a piece of parchment covered with writing. At the bottom were five lines. “Just sign your names on one of those and I’ll do the same. Then Seward will take it in to the Guild Clerk and we can be on our way.” Producing a quill and small vial of ink, he offered them to Jaikus.

After only giving the parchment a very cursory examination, Jaikus readily signed his name. Then giving the quill to Reneeke, he waited while his friend gave the contract a more thorough onceover.

...duties of a Springer as set forth in Guild Bylaw Twelve...

...mutual pact of defense and rescue...

...proper burial if body can be recovered...

“Proper burial?” he asked, glancing up from the contract.

“It simply means that we won’t leave you to rot in the Swamp if we can help it.”

“Why would you not be able to help it?” Jaikus asked.

“Situations where you are eaten, or dragged to the bottom of the Swamp. Such occurrences make it difficult to recover the body for burial.”

“Just sign it,” Jaikus urged.

Not seeing anything indicating lifelong servitude or extended indebtedness, he signed.

Charka took the parchment, signed, and then handed it to Seward. “We’ll meet you at the gate.” Seward merely nodded. Then as he headed for the Guild’s entrance, Charka had them grab their packs and follow him to Keota Plaza.

A man waited for them there, the reins of his packhorse held in hand. Rather nondescript, and one who would easily blend into a crowd, Charka introduced him as Hymal the Apothecary. Hymal took in the two newcomers with a raised eyebrow.

“More Springers?” he asked. “After the last time I thought you had given up on them.”

Charka shrugged. “I had, but they volunteered.”

“To be Springers?” Hymal shook his head.

Jaikus frowned as he followed their discourse. *What was wrong with being Springers?*

“Good to see you again, Lady Kate.”

“A pleasure, Master Hymal.”

“I don’t see Seward...”

“He’s at the Guild taking care of their Springer contract,” explained Charka. “He should be along shortly.”

They waited another ten minutes for Seward to arrive, during which Jaikus and Reneeke exchanged questioning glances, wondering just what they may have gotten themselves into. When Seward finally arrived, he and Hymal exchanged silent nods, then Charka announced it was time to go.

The gate through which one gained access to the Swamp was merely ten feet wide, barely sufficient to allow a wagon to pass though such an occurrence rarely happened any more. Once in a while, a local might forage the fringe of the Swamp under the watchful eyes of the guards atop the wall for firewood, herbs, and other things the Swamp provided. But by and large, the only ones to pass through the gate were adventuring parties such as *Charka’s Troupe*.

At their approach, guards entered the gatehouse and threw the lever unlocking the gate. Then another pair pushed the gate open to allow the party to pass. What met them on the other side was not what Jaikus had been expecting. Thinking to find marshland, dead trees, and bogs, he instead discovered a lush growth of vibrant vegetation that started two hundred feet or so from the wall. Trees soared high, bushes were full, all being very much what one would find anywhere.

“Good luck, Charka,” one guard hailed. “See you in a couple weeks.”

The *Troupe* leader waved in reply as he led the others forward.

Directly before the gate, in the midst of the foliage, was the beginning of a trail that wound its way deeper into the Swamp. Upon reaching the trailhead, Charka paused and turned back to his two Springers. “From this point on, our lives are dependant on each other. Keep silent, do what we tell you, and you’ll live to again see Reakla.”

“Give us trouble and we will dump your bodies in the nearest bog,” Seward mumbled beneath his breath. Charka gave him a silencing glare.

“You can count on us, sir,” Jaikus assured him. Reneeke nodded.

“Good. Now, stay close. Master Hymal, you’re behind me, then Kate. Seward, take the rear.” The man merely nodded and moved to place himself and the mules behind Reneeke.

Entering the Swamp was kind of anti-climactic for Jaikus. The night before he imagined having to battle their way through hordes of trolls, ghouls, and other nightmarish creatures with

which his overactive imagination had filled the Swamp. But, now that the moment was upon him, he had to admit this was much preferable.

Once they were upon the trail and the wall was no longer visible through the Swamp's undergrowth and trees, Lady Kate moved to walk next to Jaikus.

"Don't let Seward's mood bother you. He's always a bit sour after a night of hard drinking. Charka doesn't allow more than a single pint to be consumed a day, and the night before any Adventure, Seward goes a little overboard."

"We won't, ma'am," Jaikus assured her.

"Please, call me Kate. Such formalities have no place in the Swamp. There will be more important things to worry about than titles."

From behind, they heard Seward snort. "Not for a day or two there won't. Haven't encountered a troll or bog-beast this close to the wall in over two years."

"Still, we must be wary."

"Lady...uh...I mean, Kate, how long will it take to get to wherever it is we are going?" Reneeke questioned.

"It takes about four days to reach our destination. Then we will take a full day to poke around before starting the return trip."

"What is our purpose?"

"Your purpose is to act as Springers of course. The *Troupe*'s purpose is to see Master Hymal safely to his destination and back. We've made this trip many times with him. For the most part, it's pretty boring. We don't venture too deeply into the Swamp, and the worst of its denizens don't wander the fringe area."

"Master Hymal is going to a place older than Reakla where some of the most precious and hard to come by reagents for spells and potion making can be found. We humans were not the first race to inhabit this region. You can find ruins of an ancient people scattered throughout the Swamp area, even to points beyond."

"Who were they?" Jaikus asked.

She shrugged. "We don't know, and if Hymal does, he isn't telling. He calls the place where we are going, Sythal. It's an ancient city of the long-ago race. Most of it has been swallowed by the swamp, but there are some buildings readily accessible from the surface."

"You mean we get to scrounge around for treasure?" Jaikus grew excited at the prospect.

Lady Kate nodded. "That's part of the bargain. We escort him to Sythal, and in return we get a full day to root around on our own and see what we can find."

"I bet there is lots of treasure simply waiting to be discovered."

"True, but we don't always find it. Some trips are quite profitable while others are a bust."

Charka glanced over his shoulder. "Quiet! The way you are carrying on, we'll have every troll in the vicinity coming this way to see what fools were nice enough to place themselves on the menu."

"There aren't any in this part of the Swamp," Seward stated.

"Are you willing to bet *my* life on that?" Staring his man down, Charka dared him to continue. Seward had the good sense to remain silent. "Okay, then."

“We’ll talk later,” Lady Kate whispered.

Charka shot her a warning-filled look. She merely gave him a grin.

“Man, we’re going to be rich!” he quietly exclaimed to Reneeke who shrugged.

“We don’t have it yet,” his friend asserted.

“No, but we will.”

The rest of the first day in the Swamp continued to be routine as the trail they had originally followed gradually disappeared until vanishing altogether. Evening found them beginning to see changes in the Swamp as it turned from lush verdant land to the quagmire/bog-infested place one would expect of a swamp.

Master Hymal and Charka often conferred as the best way to proceed. For the most part, the apothecary was content to allow Charka to determine their route. That seemed strange to Jaikus, since Lady Kate had earlier told them how Hymal was the only one who knew the location. Curious, but not enough to ask, Jaikus was satisfied to follow wherever they led. He was on an Adventure and there was going to be treasure. Visions of shimmering swords and piles of gold occupied his mind until they reached their first campsite.

The campsite was atop a knoll of dry ground rising above the bog. Insects buzzed and drove them crazy until wood was collected and a fire built in a ring of stones that had seen use as a fire-ring many times before. Charka instructed them to put green, or even damp, foliage onto the fire. The smoke produced by the less-than-dry fuel kept the insects down to merely an annoyance.

“Make sure the fire burns throughout the night,” Charka ordered to his newest companions. “If the flame dies, we’ll have visitors.”

“Trolls?” Reneeke asked.

He nodded. “Trolls, bog-beasts, swamp-bats, and others even more unpleasant. Gather more fuel but stay close. If you see or hear anything...strange, return to the camp immediately.”

“And don’t shout,” Seward added. “That only encourages the beasties to attack.”

“Thank you,” Reneeke said. “We’ll keep that in mind.” Then to his friend, “Let’s go, Jaik.”

They spent an hour collecting wood until Charka deemed they had compiled a sufficient quantity to see them through the night. By that time, Seward had a stew going that they would be able to share.

“Save the rations you got from Bella for when we’ll need them,” Charka explained. “They’ll last longer than the meat we brought.”

“Thanks,” Jaikus said.

Charka shrugged. “As long as you are part of my *Troupe*, you’ll be taken care of. It’s the least we can do.” Seeing as the stew would take a little longer before it was ready, Charka asked to see their swords. “I’m assuming they were cheap?”

“Probably from Keeler’s back room,” Seward guessed.

“How did you know?” Reneeke asked.

“There isn’t any place in all of Reakla where you can find a cheaper blade,” Seward explained. “At least, none worth staking your life on at any rate.”

Reneeke pulled his from the scabbard and handed it over. A long exercise in polishing and using the whetstone the night before had removed most of the rusty patches and left the edge moderately sharp.

Taking the blade, Charka first eyed down its length then tested the balance. Moving over to one side of the knoll, he struck the flat of the blade against the side of a gray tree whose dead limbs reached up into the sky as if for salvation.

“It’ll do,” he stated upon returning the blade to Reneeke. Then he turned to Jaikus.

“Mine’s fine,” the Springer said. Visions of his last blade shattering at Keeler’s made him nervous to trust this one to Charka.

“As leader of this Troupe, it is my responsibility to ensure the safety of each of its members. I cannot allow a member to endanger the rest of us by using a blade that won’t last the first passage of arms.” Holding out his hand, he said, “Hand it over.”

Reneeke nodded for him to do it. Still having mixed feelings about it, he handed him his sword. Then he watched Charka go through the same motions as he had with Reneeke’s. “Keeler said it would suffice.”

“And so it will,” Charka replied once the ringing of the blade from being struck against the side of the tree faded away.

Reclaiming his sword, Jaikus quickly reinserted it back into the scabbard.

“Not so fast,” said Charka. “Just because your blades are satisfactory doesn’t mean they’re good, or that you will be good with them.” He then eyed both of them. “Those weapons still have a long way to go before they will cleave troll-hide. I want the rust off those blades and to have an edge you can shave with before the sun comes up.”

For the rest of the evening until the stew was ready, and for a stretch afterward, Charka instructed the lads from Running Brook on the proper care and maintenance of their swords. Much of the time until they turned in was spent with rag and oil, working to remove the last of the rust. When one would polish, the other would use the whetstone to sharpen. Charka oversaw their efforts until satisfied they were doing it properly.

Reneeke was an apt pupil, willing to learn and taking to the tasks set for him well. Jaikus took to it as well, seeing in the instruction the means whereby he could become a better swordsman, and thus, one step closer to becoming the hero he always longed for.

They took turns on watch that night. Neither of the boys were allowed a turn by themselves. Being new to the *Troupe*, Charka wouldn’t trust them to go it alone until they’d proven themselves. Reneeke was paired with Charka while Jaikus had the dissatisfying duty with Seward.

When Seward awakened Jaikus to join him at watch, he did so with a nudge to the side of the ribs. Though nudge was a loose term, his “nudge” could in some instances have been termed a kick. “Wake up, boy.”

“What?” Looking around bleary eyed, Jaikus saw the man standing over him.

“It’s our turn at watch.”

Jaikus nodded and climbed from his bedroll. Keeping his blanket wrapped tightly about him to ward off the chill, he moved to sit next to the fire.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I was going to warm myself by the fire.”

“No, you aren’t. We’re on watch boy and that means, *we watch*. First rule in guard duty, don’t look into the fire. It ruins your night vision. Second rule, walk the perimeter and keep alert for any movement or strange noises coming from within the Swamp. And third, don’t fall asleep. Your life, and the lives of us all, could well depend on your alertness.”

“Fine.” Pulling his blanket even tighter, he moved from the welcoming warmth of the fire to the less hospitable fringe of the knoll. There, he began walking along the dry ground along the bog’s edge.

As his eyes began scanning the darkness, his ears picked up all sorts of noises that he hadn’t been aware of before, a rustle here, the cry of a night creature there. After completing his third circuit around the knoll, it gradually began to unnerve him. Shadows seemed to be everywhere, and perhaps it was only his imagination, but he would catch movement out of the corner of his eye only to discover that upon turning his full attention toward it, nothing was there.

“Don’t get jumpy,” he mumbled to himself.

He well remembered Charka’s assurance that there were no trolls or other fell beasts in this part of the Swamp. But could there be? Back home on the farm, once in a while one of the mountain beasts would wander down to the plains where they were rarely seen. Perhaps in the Swamp, such things could happen too?

The snapping of a twig out in the Swamp caused him to jump. Hand resting shakily on the hilt of his sword, Jaikus peered into the darkness for what had caused the twig to snap. His heart was racing. Could this be it? Could this be when his mettle would first be tested?

Then a form emerged from the Swamp. “Run!” Seward screamed. Face awash with blood, he fell to his knees before the young adventurer. “Flee for your life!” he shouted before keeling over completely.

Jaikus’ eyes were wide and fear rose up inside him like a volcanic eruption. Reaching out to see if Seward still lived, a roar splitting the silence of the Swamp, forestalled him. Then the huge form of a troll with blood on its lips materialized from out of the darkness. Roaring again, it raced for Jaikus.

“Trolls!” Lady Kate screamed from the top of the knoll. “Run, you fool!”

Jaikus didn’t need any more prompting. He lit out of there like a hare with a fox on its tail.

Reneeke, brought out of a dead sleep by the troll’s cry, stood with sword in hand. He looked to Lady Kate.

“You and your friend get out of here! You’ll never stand against them.” Then raising her arm, a ball of fire appeared in her cupped hand. “Run!” she shouted to Reneeke as she let fly the burning sphere.

Reneeke saw Jaikus hightailing it out of there and he moved to join his friend. As they fled down the far side of the knoll, the sound of an explosion came from the other side. Jaikus was in total flight and Reneeke tried desperately to catch him. He finally caught up with his friend just as the sound of Lady Kate’s painful shriek came from the camp. Glancing back toward the knoll,

he discovered they had passed some distance into the swamp and that their campsite was no longer visible through the undergrowth and trees.

Then, the Swamp was deathly quiet.

Chapter 4

Glancing up from his bedroll, Master Hymal turned sleepy eyes upon the scene unfolding at the edge of the knoll. Troll emerging, new guy screaming, more shouts for them to flee, fireball exploding, and two Springers racing for their lives. The troll moved up onto the knoll and made its way toward the camp.

“Do you have to do this *every* time?” Hymal asked.

Taking off the troll head, Charka gave him a grin. “No, but why waste the opportunity?”

Lying back down, the apothecary pulled his blanket up over his head. From beneath came, “It’s gotten so a man can’t even get a good night’s sleep anymore.”

Charka knew Hymal was only grouching because he was tired. Most times when they enacted the troll attack on a Springer, he would play along. Sometimes he would even be one of the bloody victims. But the night before he had been up late due to a prior commitment and thus hadn’t felt inclined to participate.

Seward got to his feet and looked toward where Jaikus and Reneeke had disappeared. “Think we should go get them?”

“Probably.” Removing the entire mocked-up troll body, none of which was in fact constructed from what had once been an actual troll, Charka nodded. “You get cleaned up and I’ll go find them.”

“Just be quiet while you go about it!” Hymal exclaimed.

Two figures huddled behind a stump at the edge of a bog. Looking back toward where their comrades must assuredly have fallen to the trolls, Jaikus turned to Reneeke. “Should we return to see if anyone survived?”

“I...I don’t know.”

It was quiet. Light from the camp’s fire could be seen through the trees and indistinct silhouettes would at times move about.

“We could try to make it back to Reakla,” Reneeke suggested.

Jaikus didn’t like the prospect of returning without having completed the mission. How were they supposed to get into the Guild now after having not only failed to see Hymal safely to their destination and back again, but losing the rest of their party to a troll attack?

Movement in the trees near the knoll brought all thoughts back to their present situation. They each had their hands on their swords, though flight was on their minds more than fighting.

“Come on back, lads,” Charka shouted into the Swamp. “It was all just a bit of fun.”

Jaikus wasn’t laughing. Soiling oneself in a moment of terror wasn’t something he enjoyed.

Reneeke chuckled. When Jaikus flashed him a look he knew meant his friend was mad, Reneeke slapped him on the back. “Aw, come on Jaik. It wasn’t that bad. Kind of funny now that the moment is behind us.”

“It wasn’t funny.”

Making sniffing noises, Reneeke said, “I can tell.” Then he chuckled again as he slapped Jaikus’ back once more. “Over here!” he hollered to their *Troupe* leader. Coming around the stump, Reneeke waved.

Charka gave them a grin. “All in good fun, lads,” he said. “No hard feelings?”

Reneeke shook his head. “Naw.” Jaikus glared.

“It wasn’t just to make sport of you two, though there was an element of fun to it. This was also to see what sort of men you two were and how you would react.”

“And?” Jaikus asked.

“You two didn’t flee until after we shouted for you to. Which tells us that not only would you have remained to fight, but that you are not so prideful as to ignore directions given by those with more experience.” He placed a hand on each of their shoulders. “You two are all right.”

“Thank you,” said Reneeke.

On their return to the camp, Jaikus got over his annoyance at the trick they played on him. And once he cleaned himself, felt better about it.

The next morning, the *Troupe* seemed much more relaxed and amicable toward the pair of newcomers. Perhaps the events of the night before had been sort of an initiation, a way for them to be drawn into the camaraderie of the others. Even Seward’s attitude had softened somewhat.

“Here,” he said as they sat around the fire eating their breakfast. He handed a rag and a small vial of polish to Jaikus. “Now, you won’t have to share with your friend.”

“I appreciate this.”

Seward shrugged.

Before they got underway, Charka inspected their blades and found them to be much improved. There were still a few patches of rust adhering to each, but by and large the greatest concentration had been dealt with. “You should be able to get the rest when we make camp tonight.”

Hymal took the lead from this point with Charka walking beside him. The rest of the marching order remained the same as the day before.

As the day wore on, the Swamp deepened, growing ever more wild. Solid ground was also becoming harder to come by as bogs and waterways took over. Hymal seemed to know where he was going, and their path somehow remained upon what little dry ground there was. At times, they navigated through bogs from which bubbles would emerge, gases coming from unknown depths.

At one point, Reneeke lost his footing and slipped a foot into the murky waters. Immediately, the muck began to roil with small creatures not more than a finger in length. Seward grabbed Reneeke by the collar and yanked him back, dragging his foot from the muck. "Keep to high ground," he warned.

Pulling his knife, he used the tip to pry the jaws of one little creature from where it had its teeth embedded in the heel of Reneeke's boot. "They can strip the flesh from a man in a matter of minutes."

"I'll keep that in mind," Reneeke assured him.

Jaikus came to his friend and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah." He stared at the surface of the bog which had quieted down now that his foot was no longer mired in its muck.

"Let's get going, lads," Charka hollered from where he stood with Hymal and Lady Kate.

During the noon break, Charka showed Jaikus and Reneeke the proper way in which to hold their swords. He also instructed them in the rudimentary methods of hack, slash, parry, and thrust. The sword arms of both lads were leaden by the time they resumed their progress.

Later that afternoon, Jaikus commented to Lady Kate, "Charka is certainly being nice in giving us pointers with the blade."

Turning an amused look his way, she said, "Nice has nothing to do with it. You and your friend are our greatest liabilities at present. Showing you the proper use of your swords helps to reduce that liability should swordplay be required. He's doing it, because *that* is what a good leader does."

"Is that why you are part of his *Troupe*?" Reneeke asked who couldn't help but overhear the conversation.

"In part. He and I go way back. When I first embarked upon the *Arcane Path*, he had just entered the Guild and we both signed on with Hulga and his Stickers. A band of raiders had attacked the small town of Rock Point and taken off with five young girls. The town's elders contracted with Hulga to retrieve the captives and slaughter the raiders."

"Did you find them?" Reneeke asked.

"Hulga tracked them down in four days. Not one raider lived to see the fifth."

"And the girls?"

"One was dead, the other four were the worse for wear but we were able to return them to their families. After Hulga let go those recruited for that specific venture, Charka and I signed on together again with Ye's band. It wasn't intentional. They needed a spell caster and another sword, and we just happened to be the ones selected. It was during that trip a friendship developed between us. Then when Charka decided to form his own *Troupe*, he asked me to come along and I agreed."

"What about Seward? Was he with you from the beginning?"

She shook her head. "No, he didn't join until a year later."

"I'm going to have my own party one day," Jaikus boasted.

Giving him a smile, she said, "I'm sure you will."

Then he slapped Reneeke on the back. “And Rene here is going to be part of it, won’t you?” Nodding, Reneeke replied, “Yeah, sure.”

Twice more were rest breaks called before arriving at that night’s campsite. Each break entailed more drills.

Charka was a hard taskmaster who demanded perfection with every movement of the sword. If they didn’t halt their blade at the right angle, or they didn’t thrust far enough, he made sure they knew about it. Even when the campsite was reached, he had them practice their drills rather than set up camp.

Reneeke’s form was steadily improving. Jaikus looked like he was fighting it all the way. Never quite stopping at the right angle, or would have his feet set too far apart to suit Charka, he was the focal point of the leader’s tirade more often than not.

“You should be able to halt your sword at the right position by now!” he shouted when Jaikus’ blade came to a stop a few degrees off center. Grabbing him by the wrist, he repositioned his hand. “Keep it in line with your elbow and the blade. Think of the area from your shoulder to the tip of your blade as one.”

“I’m trying!” Jaikus retorted.

“A dead man tries, an Adventurer does. Or *don’t* you want to be an Adventurer? What if your buddy’s life depended on you being able to take out your opponent and come to his aid? Is he going to want you to *try* and help him? Or *would he want you to help him?*”

Assuming a determined look, Jaikus once again went through the motions, intent on getting it right. When his sword finally reached the ending position, he maintained the position as he flicked his eyes toward Charka.

“Hmmm, better. But your wrist is still slightly twisted. A well placed blow against your sword could snap the bone. Another score of sets before you eat.”

Arm already protesting with pain, Jaikus replied, “You got it,” then returned his sword to the primary position and began again.

During watch that night, Jaikus was again paired with Seward. This time, he kept more alert, not only watching the Swamp, but also his fellow comrades. He didn’t want a repeat of the night before.

The hours of his watch passed slowly. Seward kept near the fire, satisfied to allow Jaikus to do the brunt of the work. Which if truth be known, suited Jaikus just fine. The man wasn’t all that friendly, and even though Seward had thawed a bit after the previous night’s escapade, his company continued to be a bit unsettling.

When it came time to wake Reneeke and Charka for their turn, he woke his friend then climbed into his bedroll and quickly fell asleep.

Before leaving the campsite on their third day of travel, Charka explained to Jaikus and Reneeke that they would be entering troll territory. “Keep on your guard and speak only when necessary. It is unusual for us to encounter one of the beasts, but it does happen. If we *should*, stay together and do exactly what we tell you.”

Two heads bobbed understanding.

With that, Charka signaled for Hymal to take the lead.

Dry land continued to grow less and less abundant as the day progressed. Wherever they were going must be in the middle of some great mire, or so Jaikus thought. Walking along strips of land threading between bogs on one side and stagnant pools of water on the other, he worked diligently to keep his feet from finding their way into the water and muck.

He couldn't understand how Hymal knew the way. Had Jaikus needed to return to Reakla on his own, he seriously doubted his ability to accomplish such a feat. He had no clue as to where they were, or even the way back.

During their few rest breaks, he tried to discover the method by which Hymal guided them. But with Charka still drilling them, and at times sparring with them, he was never able to figure it out.

Noon came and went with no troll sightings. At one point, they came to a long, narrow strip of dry land upon which a post had been set within the ground adorned with skins and human skulls.

"Troll totem," Charka stated. He brought the *Troupe* to a halt. "This wasn't here the last time."

"A clan has claimed this area?" Seward asked.

Charka nodded. "That, or one that's gone rogue."

"A rogue, troll?" Reneeke asked.

"A rogue troll is one whose clan no longer accepts it and must fend for itself."

"They're usually pretty mean," Seward stated. "More likely to attack than one claimed by a clan."

The Swamp was quiet but for the normal sounds of birds and the odd gas bubble bursting after escaping the clutches of the muck and mire. Jaikus and Reneeke scanned the surrounding area for sign of the totem's owner.

"It may be off hunting," Charka said. "Let's get moving and pass through its territory before we are discovered." Turning his attention upon his two newest members, he added, "Keep quiet and eyes open."

Charka walked side by side with Hymal as they passed the totem and continued down the strip of land. Reneeke slowed slightly when passing the totem. Inspecting the skins, he realized that they were definitely human, probably from the same donors as the skulls. The sight gave him the shivers.

"Hurry up," Seward urged from his position at the rear.

Reneeke quickened his pace once more and caught up with Jaikus. "Scary," he whispered to his friend.

"You're telling me," Jaikus replied.

They had just reached the end of the widened area of land, and were about to continue along a narrow strip when the beast was spotted off to their right. Moving in the same direction as they, it traversed a similar strip of land on the far side of a stagnant pool of water. Charka brought them to a halt. Using hand gestures, he signaled for everyone to remain still and quiet.

Jaikus watched the beast lumber along, his hand rested upon the hilt of his sword, ready to draw at any sign the creature took notice of their presence. Part of him wished to face the creature toe to toe, while another hoped it would keep right on going. The former wish was granted when the troll, for whatever reason, happened to glance their way.

It came to an abrupt stop and stared, almost as if it couldn't believe what it saw. Then it roared. Lurching into the water, it raced across to the meal waiting on the other side.

To Jaikus and Reneeke, Charka said, "You two watch the mules. Seward, Kate, let's do this." Drawing his sword, he moved to stand shoulder to shoulder with Seward while Kate took position behind them. "Wait until he's closer."

Kate nodded.

Roaring, the troll reached the end of the water and raced onto their strip of dry land.

"Now!"

Three bolts of red fire shot forth from Lady Kate's hand to strike the creature dead center on the chest.

Howling with rage and pain, the bolts knocked it back a step before the creature recovered and charged. It's long, muscular arms struck out toward Seward only to have the man's shield knock them to the side. Again it howled as Charka and Seward's swords cut deeply into its side. Then it was slammed with another round of red fire from Lady Kate.

Eager to join the fray, Jaikus said to Reneeke, "We should help."

"They told us to watch the mules."

Suddenly, a green, web-like substance bound the troll's legs together and it fell face forward onto the ground. Immediately, Seward and Charka moved forward with swords raised to impale the creature.

But it wasn't out of the fight yet. Before the blades could fall, the claws of one hand shot forward and raked Seward's calf, shredding his pants and the flesh beneath. Crying out from the pain the blow delivered, his strike fell off-center and sliced the creature through the shoulder.

Charka's blade, however, struck true. Using both hands, he impaled the creature through the spinal cord and chest cavity. Leaving the sword within the creature, he backed away.

"It doesn't look as if they need our help, Jaik," Reneeke commented as the creature lay on the ground, twitching.

"No, lads, they don't," Hymal affirmed. "Charka, Seward, and Lady Kate have been doing this for some time."

When it appeared the fight had gone out of the troll, Charka pulled his sword free and quickly stepped back. As soon as he was several feet away, Lady Kate spoke three words that made Jaikus' skin crawl.

Whoosh!

The troll went up in flames. From feet to head, fire consumed the body.

"You got to *burn* 'em, lads," Hymal stated. "If you don't, they'll regenerate and become mobile once more in a day or two."

As Lady Kate saw to the immolation of the beast, Charka helped Seward over to where their Springers watched the mules. Going to the packs one of the mules carried, he pulled out a small flask and had Seward drink from it.

“Healing potion?” Jaikus asked.

Charka nodded. “Always have half a dozen of them, just in case.”

Intrigued, the two lads moved so they could observe how the healing potion worked its magic on Seward’s wound. This was the first time either of them had ever seen a healing potion at work. First, the bleeding stopped. Then, the wound began to close. In less than a minute, pink skin grew to cover the damaged area.

“Does it hurt?” Reneeke questioned Seward when it looked as if the healing potion had run its course.

He shook his head. “Not anymore. Just a tingling sensation akin to how it feels after your foot falls asleep and starts waking up again.”

“Good work,” Hymal praised as he came up to Charka.

The *Troupe* leader shrugged, “It’s what you’re paying us for.”

“True. Still, good work.”

Seward tested his newly healed leg and found it sound with only a minor twinge in the freshly grown skin. It would take some time before it grew as flexible as the rest of his skin.

Reneeke walked to where Lady Kate’s spell was reducing the troll to ashes. “I don’t suppose you could teach me that?”

She shook her head and grinned. “I’m afraid not. This particular spell took me the better part of a year to learn. And that was after already spending *two* years apprenticed to another, *three* years honing my abilities, and *lots* of healing scrolls.”

“Healing scrolls?”

“You don’t think learning the *Arcane Arts* is easy do you? Far easier is it to wield a blade than the forces of the universe.”

“I’m sure it’s not, Lady, uh, er, Kate. But what about these healing scrolls. Where does one acquire them?”

“There are two places in Reakla that specialize in scrolls for Adventurers. One of course is located within the Guild grounds. Not every Guild member has access to it I’m afraid. The other is *Travel Scrolls* operated by a Scriber named Olaf. His scrolls tend to be less expensive but quite common. The best ones can be had only in the Guild.”

“Does he sell the healing scrolls?”

She nodded. “Rather inexpensive too, only two golds each for the lesser ones. He sells two kinds. One is for minor wounds similar to what Seward received during the troll attack. The other can heal much more extensive damage and costs five golds each. It won’t bring you back from the dead, but will take care of just about everything else. If you plan on adventuring, and don’t intend on hiring a cleric to travel with you, then you will need to have a supply of either the healing scrolls or healing potions. Since you two are new, I would advise having a *lot* of them.”

Ceasing her spell, she used a stick from off the ground to poke amidst the ashes for any part of the troll she may have missed. Coming across a small piece, she used a lesser fire spell and took care of it. "I think that will do."

"How much can be left before a troll is able to come back?"

"Surprisingly little. I knew this one magic user during my apprentice years who claimed to have cut a finger off of a troll just to see if the finger would regenerate back into the troll."

"And did it?"

"According to him it did."

"Man. They are some tough beasts."

"That they are," Charka commented from over his shoulder.

Lady Kate and Reneeke glanced toward him.

"Is it finished?" their *Troupe* leader asked.

She nodded. "Nothing but ashes."

"Then let's get going. It may not have been alone."

"But, I thought you said it was a rogue?"

Charka turned an unamused grin to his Springer. "Son, never believe yourself to be safe in the Swamp. Always assume that where there is one troll, there is another. Only Mossbacks are completely solitary. Now, let's get going."

Mossbacks? What were Mossbacks? Deciding there remained much to the Swamp of which he was ignorant, Reneeke left the questions unspoken and rejoined Jaikus.

Jaikus greeted his friend with a wide grin. "Hymal said that the *Troupe* gets a bonus for every attack thwarted."

"That's nice," Reneeke replied.

"*That's nice?* Don't you know what this means? Our share will be bigger!"

"If you say so."

Jaikus rolled his eyes as Charka took the lead with Hymal right behind pointing the way. Now that a troll had been encountered, it was no longer prudent to have the apothecary lead.

As they left the scene of battle, Jaikus scanned the Swamp for signs of other creatures that might be nice enough to allow their bonus to be raised by attacking. Perhaps next time, it could be two trolls instead of one. Calculating the figures, he hoped for three.

Chapter 5

Mid-afternoon found them traversing through a series of mounds rising from the muck. There was little in the way of firm ground upon which to walk, necessitating that each watched their step carefully.

Hymal led them alongside the mounds rather than taking what Jaikus figured to be the better path, over them. Some were quite large, almost islands in themselves, and would appear to afford safe passage from the bog.

"Why do we go around?" Jaikus questioned, as he barely avoided slipping his foot into the muck for the untold time.

"Quiet!" Charka whispered back to him. "No talking."

"I would rather be on the mounds as well, Jaik," Reneeke whispered, from where he walked just behind his friend.

"This is a cursed place," Seward told the boys in a hushed voice. "Some say the spirits of the dead walk among the mounds at night. It would be best not to anger them by treading upon their graves."

"Graves? These are graves?" Jaikus whispered back. Visions of treasure buried with the dead sprang to mind.

His thoughts must have been written upon his face for Seward said, "Don't even think about it, boy. The dead don't take kindly to those who remove their trinkets."

"But the dead are, well, *dead*, aren't they?"

"You don't know nothing about nothing, do you?"

Just then, Charka held up his hand and brought the *Troupe* to a halt. He and Hymal were stopped at a junction where the corners of four mounds converged. Motioning the others to gather near, he knelt and inspected the ground.

Pointing to a line of tracks running between the mounds coming from their left and disappearing to the right, he said, "Trolls." He paused a moment as he inspected the ground further. "And something else too, maybe a mossback."

"Are the trolls hunting it?" Seward asked. "Or is it hunting them?"

"Hard to tell. I make out five trolls, so I would be inclined to believe that they were after the mossback." Standing back up, he said, "Mossbacks rarely try to take on so many at one time."

"Sir?" Reneeke asked. "What is a mossback?"

"Large reptile," Charka explained, "about the size of a cow with razor sharp teeth and a mean disposition."

"It gets its name from the small patch of hair upon its back that resembles moss hanging in the trees. The younger ones are able to climb up into the trees where the moss conceals them until prey passes below, then they pounce."

Reneeke came forward and examined the tracks as well. "They look a couple hours old."

Charka nodded. "You have a good eye, boy."

Shrugging, Reneeke replied, "My father used to take me hunting in the hills."

"Handy with a bow?" Seward asked.

"Fair. I tend to hit more often than not."

"Then you should have brought one with you," Seward stated with irritation.

“We didn’t have enough coins to buy one, and my father wouldn’t allow me to bring the only one he had. To be honest, he didn’t think our chances of getting into the Guild were very good.” He grinned. “And neither had I.”

“Well, you aren’t in the Guild yet,” Seward pointed out.

“But we will be,” Jaikus asserted. “Once we return, Charka said he would put us forward for membership.”

“Boy, you have to survive before that can happen.”

“Enough,” Charka interjected. “All this talk will surely draw the attention of creatures we don’t want to meet. It appears this area is no longer as safe as we thought. There is still a day to go and standing around here jabbering won’t get us there any quicker. Keep alert and no talking.” He eyed his two Springers meaningfully before resuming their trek through the mounds.

Later that afternoon when the sunlight was beginning to fade, Charka again brought them to a halt. He stood still with head cocked to the side. They had left the mounds behind some time ago and were now making their way through a dense forest consisting of dead trees and scraggly bushes.

“What do you hear?” Lady Kate asked, as she came up behind him.

He held his hand up for silence as he turned his head from side to side, then pointed to a position almost directly ahead. Without saying a word, he held up two fingers. Glancing back to the others, he laid a finger against his lips for silence.

So intently was Jaikus peering into the forest of dead trees before them, that he about jumped out of his skin when Seward patted him on the shoulder. Seeing the man holding out the mules’ reins for him to take charge of, he took them.

Drawing his sword, Seward moved forward to stand with Charka. Lady Kate positioned herself behind them. Hymal and his horse moved to the rear with Jaikus, Reneeke, and the mules. Then they waited.

Minutes ticked by as six pairs of eyes and ears searched for any sign of what Charka had sensed. Jaikus was about to announce that he hadn’t heard anything when a troll’s lumbering silhouette appeared as it passed laterally through the trees before them. Then another.

Jaikus couldn’t understand why Charka wasn’t going on the offensive. Didn’t two beasts mean a larger bonus? After all, hadn’t they easily taken care of the last one? Two shouldn’t be any greater difficulty. Yet, their *Troupe* leader acted as if he didn’t *want* to face the beasts. Jaikus began to wonder if the man was a bit of a coward.

As he watched the “increase in bonus” fail to take notice of their presence and continued moving off through the trees, he coughed. Charka, Lady Kate, and Seward turned angry eyes upon him as the beasts, drawn by the noise, glanced their way. Seeing dinner waiting amidst the trees, they charged.

Snarling, the pair of trolls crashed through the dead trees and withered foliage. Lady Kate shouted a single word and a myriad of miniature, dancing lights sprang into being around the first troll’s ugly head. Distracted, it slowed its pace as it tried to bat the lights from out in front of its face.

The second troll paid the predicament of the first no heed. Continuing forward, it was met by Lady Kate's trio of fire bolts, each impact causing the beast to misstep and roar in pain. But her effort hadn't stopped it.

The two fighters stood as a wall before the charging troll, Charka on the left, Seward on the right. When the troll drew near, Seward stepped forward and met its attack with his shield, just as before. Knocking aside a forceful swipe of claws, Seward thrust forward with his sword. Blade sinking deeply into its side, he danced quickly backward as the other arm shot forward to grasp the top of his shield.

Whack!

A mighty downward hack of Charka's sword severed the arm at mid-forearm. Lady Kate's *Webs of Binding* trapped the creature's legs and down it went. Immediately, the two fighters stepped forward to impale their swords through the creature's back.

Giving the troll a moment to stop twitching, Charka then pulled his sword free and glanced toward the second troll. The spell of *Dancing Lights* had run its course and it was once again charging forward.

"*Scroll!*" their *Troupe* leader shouted.

Prepared for the call, Lady Kate passed him a bound piece of parchment.

As Seward moved forward to meet the attack of the second troll, Charka placed the scroll upon the first. Already, the regenerative nature of the beast had begun restoring it, and its limbs were starting to twitch. "Immolate!" Instantly, the power of the scroll caused the troll's body to burst into flame.

Fire bolts slammed into the oncoming creature, knocking it backward slightly, only enough to ruin the force of its charge. Seward moved forward to deliver a slice across the beast's chest before it could recover. Webs appeared to entrap its legs sending it crashing to the ground. Then as before, Seward and Charka moved forward to deliver the telling blows.

Lady Kate came to the beast's side and brought forth fire to consume it.

"You guys are good," Jaikus praised as he came forward with the mules. "I only hope to one..."

"Think you're pretty smart, *do you?*" Cutting him off, Charka turned a visage full of wrath and anger upon him.

"What...what do you mean?" Jaikus stammered.

"You coughed on purpose," Seward accused.

"No one coughs that loudly when danger is near, unless they intend to."

Withering beneath the two men's glares, Jaikus turned to his friend Reneeke for aid. But none was forthcoming from that quarter. He could see it in his friend's eyes that he, too, believed the legitimacy of the accusations being laid.

"I...I..."

"I'm afraid it was my fault," Hymal said. "I was foolish enough to tell him that the *Troupe* gets a bonus for any attacks." Glancing to Jaikus, he shook his head. "Boy, I didn't think you were that stupid."

Charka's eyes narrowed. "Is this true? Did you put the lives of myself and my *Troupe* in danger just to pad your share of the bonus?"

Jaikus didn't need to reply, for the answer was clearly written across his face. Trying to come up with something to say, he was flattened by a blow from Charka's fist. Breath knocked from him by the impact with the ground, he tried to rise only to find the point of Charka's sword at his throat.

"You *ever* do something like that again, and I'll leave your body to rot in the Swamp. Do you understand?"

He looked from face to face but there was no mercy, no leniency. Jaikus knew he had lost the respect of everyone there, and for what? A few more coins?

"Boy," Charka said, pressing his sword painfully into the softness of Jaikus' throat, "I asked you a question."

"*Yes!*" he shouted. "I understand."

Meeting his eyes for a few seconds more, Charka returned his sword to its scabbard. "Master Hymal, there will be no charge for this attack. It will come out of *his* share." Then he glanced back to where Jaikus was sitting up and rubbing his throat. "As well as the cost for the scroll."

Jaikus had the good sense to lower his eyes and hang his head.

For the rest of the day's march, no one so much as looked at him. Even Reneeke was giving him the silent treatment, spending most of his time in hushed conversation with Lady Kate. Jaikus felt bad for what he had done. He would take it back if he could. But what was done, was done.

Their evening's campsite, the last before reaching their destination, was again situated on top of a knoll. Jaikus tossed his pack down and immediately began collecting firewood. Much to his relief, Reneeke joined him.

"Are you okay?" his friend asked.

Jaikus nodded. "I'm sorry."

"I know you are. I think the others are getting over their resentment and by tomorrow, things may be close to as they were." He paused a moment then said, "I hope."

"So do I, Rene."

Returning with an armload of wood, he dumped it by the fire where Seward was busy preparing another batch of his stew. Their eyes met for a moment before Seward turned away. Shoulders sagging, Jaikus returned to the surrounding trees to collect more wood.

Returning with his own load of firewood, Reneeke paused as Jaikus met him halfway. "Lady Kate told me that Charka meant what he said, about the money for the scroll coming out of your share."

Turning gloomy eyes upon his friend, Jaikus asked, "Really?"

Nodding, Reneeke continued. "The scroll was fifty golds, Jaik. She doesn't think your share will amount to anything when this is said and done."

"Great," he moaned. His moment of ill-conceived greed had cost him dearly.

"And that's not all."

“There’s more?”

“I’m afraid so. That stunt you pulled may have just changed his mind about putting you forward for Guild membership.”

“What?”

“He considers such an act as not honorable.”

“That’s...he can’t...”

“He *might*. She wasn’t completely sure how he plans to handle it. She did say, however, that you might still have a chance if you adhere to the highest standards of honor and bravery from now until our return to Reakla. It’s a small chance only.”

“How about you?” Jaikus asked. “If I’m a wash, will he still put you forward?”

“We’re a team, Jaik, you and I. Either we both get in, or neither of us will.”

“That’s awfully considerate of you, Rene. But I wouldn’t want to stand in your way should you be able to join.”

Reneeke put his hand on his friend’s shoulder and looked him in the eye. “Why would I want to join if you weren’t there with me? I’ll wait until we both can join together if I must.” Then he grinned and slapped him on the back. “Plenty of opportunity for two Springers such as ourselves to prove our worth in the days to come.”

Jaikus gave him a half-hearted grin. “You got that right. Let’s be quick about our task and see to our drills.”

“That’s the Jaikus I know!”

Charka required twice the wood as they had collected the previous nights. “We must keep the fire bright tonight, lads,” he explained. “Came across fresh tracks from a mossback. They don’t care much for fire and tend to avoid it whenever possible.”

“Yes, sir,” Jaikus replied with great enthusiasm.

Their *Troupe* leader eyed him but remained silent.

Once the desired amount had been accumulated, Charka set them to practicing their basic sword maneuvers until dinner. Then during the hours afterward, they spent time on oiling and sharpening their swords. “You may have need of them before the night is over.”

“Will the mossback attack?” Reneeke asked.

Charka glanced to the Springer and said, “There are more than mossbacks abroad in the Swamp at night. Where fire keeps mossbacks away, there are other creatures that it will attract.”

“Like glow-moths,” Seward offered. “They are not very big, barely larger than a gold coin. But they have stingers longer than your little finger and have no qualms about using them.”

“If you see soft, pale lights moving about in the Swamp, it’s the glow-moths. Did Bella give you sleeping mesh?”

Pulling the large, finely weaved mesh net from his pack, Reneeke asked, “Is this it?”

“That’s it. Make sure you cover yourself with it when you sleep. It will keep the moths away.”

“Yes, sir,” they replied in unison.

“Jaikus, you have first watch.”

“By myself?” he asked, surprised.

“Is that a problem?”

“No, sir.”

“Okay then. Wake me for the second.”

“Yes, sir.” Glancing to his friend, Jaikus saw him shrug.

“Perhaps he’s giving you a chance to prove yourself,” Reneeke suggested.

“Not so,” Seward interjected. “First shift is often given to those deemed the most untrustworthy.”

Crestfallen, Jaikus asked, “It is?”

Seward nodded. “It’s the easiest to stay awake, and most likely Charka won’t even fall asleep since he has elected to follow you.” The man then moved over to where he had laid out his bedroll earlier that evening on the far side of the fire near Lady Kate’s.

“I still think it shows he has some faith in you,” Reneeke asserted. “This is the first either of us have been allowed a solitary turn at watch.”

“I hope you are right, Rene.”

“Of course I am. You’ll see.”

“Get some sleep,” Jaikus told his friend. “Your turn at watch will come all too soon.”

Flashing him a grin, Reneeke replied, “Don’t I know it.” Pulling his blanket over him, he then maneuvered the mesh so it covered his upper body. It wasn’t large enough to cover him completely. “*Ware* the moths.”

“I’ll see you in the morning.” And with that, Jaikus moved to the outer fringe of firelight and began his circuit of the perimeter.

The others settled into their bedrolls, each moving their mesh nets into position in anticipation of glow-moth incursions. Jaikus’ mesh netting remained atop his bedroll as he didn’t figure on needing it right away. How wrong that supposition turned out to be.

Not more than twenty minutes into his watch, the first glow appeared out in the Swamp. He paused to watch it move about amongst the trees. Even though it didn’t head directly toward the camp, it did steadily draw closer in a roundabout way.

A second one appeared, then a third. By the time the fourth one began its way forward, Jaikus decided it to be time to get his mesh and drape it over his head. He felt kind of silly with the thing on him, but since everyone else seemed to believe in its effectiveness, he would trust in it.

The night was silent as more and more lights appeared. From all directions, the glow-moths were drawn to the light of their fire. Four became eight, eight grew into sixteen, and their numbers steadily increased.

Jaikus was rather nervous when the first one came his way. He saw the stinger Seward had mentioned. Long and barbed at the end, it definitely wasn’t something with which he wished to be impaled. As the glow-moth fluttered near his face, he quickly realized that should it decide to attack, the flimsy mesh would hardly impede it.

But the glow-moth didn’t attack. In fact, it veered off before coming within six inches of the mesh. Intrigued, Jaikus stood his ground and watched as a myriad of glow-moths flittered about

on their way toward the fire. Very graceful and beautiful to behold, Jaikus would have tried to grab one if it hadn't been for their barbed stingers.

He had to let Reneeke see the aerial display for himself. Going to his friend, he gently woke him. "The moths," he whispered as Reneeke started awake. "Aren't they something?"

Reneeke nodded sleepily. "Yeah. They're great, Jaik." Then after another brief glance at the fluttering insects, he rolled over and immediately fell back asleep.

The display lasted for only an hour before the glow-moths departed. A few had come a bit too close to the flames and were consumed. But by and large, they appeared to have come to dance around the flames, then leave. Once the exodus began, it took only a few minutes before the last glowing moth had vanished back within the Swamp. Taking off the mesh, he went to wake Charka for his turn at watch. He approached the *Troupe* leader cautiously, wondering if he were in fact asleep.

At Jaikus' first touch, Charka's eyes snapped open. Focusing on the lad standing over him, he asked, "Everything go okay?"

"Yes, sir. The glow-moths came and departed. Everyone is fine."

"Good." Then as he came to his feet, he said, "Get some sleep."

"I'll do that."

Turning in, he placed the mesh over him in the event of the moth's return. He thought of their graceful ballet as he drifted off to sleep.

The following morning dawned with a drizzling rain. An overcast sky was spitting just enough water to make life miserable. It didn't soak. There wasn't enough moisture to do that, it just made traveling...unpleasant.

"We'll be there a little after noon," Charka announced. Taking a rope from his pack, he had everyone tie themselves to it until they were secured in tandem.

"What's this for?" Reneeke asked.

"Sythal doesn't care much for visitors," their leader explained. "As we get closer, it will try to make us turn aside. Without the rope, we would be scattered and lost in no time."

"Can't we just follow the person in front of us?" Jaikus asked.

"It isn't that simple. You'll see." And see, he did.

Tied between Lady Kate and Reneeke, Jaikus thought the whole idea of the rope to be rather foolish. After all, how hard could it be to follow the person in front of you when they were only a few feet away? But when he felt a tug on the rope behind him, and discovered Reneeke had started wandering away on a tangent, Jaikus began understanding the need for the rope.

Time and again, Jaikus would be following right behind Lady Kate only to feel the pull of the rope and discover that he, too, had begun to wander off. At the head of the line, Hymal the apothecary led them unerringly.

"How come he doesn't get misled?"

"He never does," Lady Kate replied. "In all the times we have escorted him to Sythal, he has never once become lost, or been misdirected. It's either magic or some sort of innate ability he possesses."

“Intriguing. I...” but then he felt the pull of the rope and discovered he had been moving off to the right before the rope brought him up short. “*Damn!*”

“What’s the problem, Jaik?”

Jaikus glanced over his shoulder to his friend. “I was in the middle of speaking with Lady Kate when I found myself wandering off.”

“I know. It’s disorienting. I’ve been brought up short by the rope at least half a dozen times by now.”

“How much farther is this place?” wondered Jaikus.

“Not much,” came the reply from the front. “Maybe another league or two.”

Feeling the rope pull him up short yet again, Jaikus sighed. “It can’t be soon enough.”

Chapter 6

The transition from the Swamp into Sythal was rather abrupt. One moment they were trudging through a tree-filled, treacherous bog, and the next emerged onto dry land. The broken remains of what once had been a rather large edifice loomed before them. Its columns lay shattered, walls had long since collapsed leaving only a small upright section.

“We have arrived,” Charka announced. “You can untie yourselves.”

Jaikus looked in awe at the remains of the structure. Others could be seen farther back and to either side. None were intact; most were in similar states of ruination as the one before them.

“Fascinating,” Reneeke said. Once he had untied himself from the rope, he went forward to the building. “How old is this place?”

Coming up behind him, Hymal replied, “A thousand years, maybe more. I don’t think anyone knows for sure.”

“What do you know of it?”

“Not much more than what you have already learned,” was all the answer he was willing to give.

Coiling the rope they had used to keep from being separated, Charka said, “We don’t have time to stand around talking. We still have an hour or more to go.”

“Is that correct?” Jaikus asked Hymal.

The apothecary nodded. “Where I harvest the reagents is still some distance away.”

“I take it Sythal is large?” Reneeke asked.

“Larger than Reakla,” Seward replied. “*Much* larger.”

Hymal took the lead as they continued on. Skirting around the ruined edifice, he maintained a route that took them past many buildings that had fallen in disrepair. When they came to a stone

dome rising ten feet out of the ground, Lady Kate pointed it out to the two Springers. “See, there? Most of Sythal lies beneath our feet.”

“Is there a way to reach the areas below?” Jaikus asked.

“Oh, yes,” she replied. “Everything above ground is but the tops of what is buried beneath. Sythal was a massive city in its day. You may not believe this, but once, we found a building that extended a hundred feet below the ground.”

“No way,” Reneeke replied. Glancing to one of the taller stone structures still partially intact, he tried to picture it extending to such a distance below. “No building could be built so high. Wouldn’t the weight of the stone cause it to collapse in on itself?”

“Apparently not,” said Lady Kate.

“Wow.” Jaikus was impressed. If the city extended that far beneath the surface, assuredly there must be treasures down there just waiting to be discovered. He longed to ask if they could take time to investigate, but after the debacle with the trolls, decided to keep his desires to himself. Jaikus would try to remain satisfied in the knowledge that they would have an opportunity to explore the ancient city once Hymal reached his destination.

The stone dome was but one of the architectural marvels encountered during their trek through Sythal. Tall spires, other domes equally as impressive, even the top of a pyramid rose from the depths. One spire appeared to be solid gold, but Seward threw water on the fire of Jaikus’ excitement by stating the substance was not gold, but instead composed of another material that quickly disintegrated if removed.

“I’ve never seen its like anywhere,” he explained. “It’s hard as iron, yet can be scraped off as easily as a man’s beard.”

“That doesn’t seem possible,” Reneeke argued. “If it was that hard, how could you scrape it off?”

Seward shrugged, then gestured over to the spire. “See for yourself.”

“We’re not stopping,” Charka announced.

Reneeke simply *had* to check it out, his innate curiosity could not be denied. So while the others continued on, he hurried over. Taking out his knife, he tapped the gold-looking plating with its butt and didn’t so much as make a dent in the material. Then, using the knife’s blade, he tried scraping the gold-like material off and it peeled away like butter.

“Jaik!” he hollered. “Come look at this.” But by the time Jaikus joined him, the part that had been scraped off had already disintegrated into dust.

“How could it do that?” his friend asked.

Reneeke shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“Would you two stay with us?” Charka shouted. Having moved off, they were about to round the remains of another large building that still had two walls more-or-less intact.

The friends left the spire behind and hurried to rejoin the others.

For the rest of the journey, they encountered more of the same: a couple of the gold-like spires, one dome protruding from the ground covered in the gold material, and of course, a myriad of other buildings of various sizes, all in advance stages of ruination.

Upon reaching a wide expanse bordered on one side by the tops of three columns coming out of the ground, Charka brought their group to a halt. To either side of the columns, jagged remains of what may have once been walls gave the enclosed area a boxed-in feeling. Two fire-pits were in evidence, indicating this area had previously been used.

"We shall make camp here for the duration of our stay," Charka told his two Springers.

"Lady Kate, you and Master Hymal set up camp while Seward and I take our young Springers out to secure the area."

"I didn't think there would be anything around here to worry about?" Jaikus queried.

Seward laughed. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Well, I just thought..."

"You thought wrong," said Charka. "While it is true that Sythal's boundary works to keep out all those who seek to enter, it isn't foolproof. Once in a while, something gets through."

"Just like us," Seward added.

"Exactly," Charka agreed. Then he pointed to the three columns and passed his hand to the left. "Seward and I will sweep this area while you two search to the right." He eyed Jaikus. "This isn't a treasure hunt. We will do that on the morrow, and when we do, we do it *together*."

"Yes, sir," Reneeke replied.

"Go out a hundred yards," Charka instructed. "Look for fresh tracks, dung, and anything else which would indicate that we are not alone. Then return."

"What if we find something?" Reneeke asked.

"Use your own judgment. But don't be heroes. Come get us if you think you two can't handle it."

Seward chuckled. "And considering the way you two handle your swords, I'd say anything larger than a rabbit would warrant calling for help."

Reneeke smiled as he knew good-natured kidding when he heard it. Jaikus on the other hand took it personally. "I think we could handle ourselves," he grumbled.

"Come on, Jaik," Reneeke said, slapping his friend on the back. "Our first solo mission."

"Yeah. *Yippee!*" he said with voice dripping in sarcasm.

They made their sweep and found little to indicate the presence of impending danger. Mid-way through, they came across a ruined building in less a state of collapse than most.

One wall remained completely intact, two others were partially intact, and the fourth had disintegrated into rubble. Looming in the intact wall was the enticing maw of a doorway.

When Jaikus moved toward it, Reneeke said, "Charka said to wait until tomorrow."

"Ah, come on, Rene," his friend said. "Just one little peek. Who knows what could be in there?"

"Jaik, you are already on Charka's bad side. Don't make it worse."

Pausing at the door, Jaikus glanced back to his friend. It was clear by the expression on his face that he very much wanted to go take a look inside that building. Fortunately, the desire to regain the good grace of Charka won out, and he backed away. Sighing, he left the doorway unexplored.

“We’ll have our time to poke around tomorrow,” Reneeke assured him. “And they will know where there is likely to be treasure worth our trouble.”

“That’s true,” Jaikus said. Then with a last, longing look at the doorway, he rejoined his friend and they completed their sweep of the area. Neither group found any evidence of worrisome creatures lurking about.

After the evening meal was over and a cheery fire kept the darkness and cool night air at bay, Reneeke mentioned the doorway Jaikus had almost investigated. Lady Kate nodded.

“I know the one you are talking about,” she explained. “We’ve searched through there a couple of times. During the first, we found a few gems and a small, golden statue of a tree that fetched a few coins. Subsequent explorations failed to turn up anything else of value.”

“Most of the buildings nearby have been searched repeatedly,” Charka added. “There’s a group of them an hour away to the north that we have yet to tackle. We’ll see what they have to offer in the morning.”

“Master Hymal, will you require assistance in the gathering of your reagents?” Reneeke asked.

The apothecary shook his head. “No, but thank you for asking. As long as the area is safe, I will be fine by myself.”

Seward flashed him a mischievous grin then turned his attention to Reneeke. “He doesn’t want anyone to know where he gets them,” the fighter explained.

“Not true. It’s just that none of you would wish to forego hunting for treasure to come along with me gathering herbs and other essentials.”

“What kind do you harvest? I have yet to see anything that I would call out of the ordinary.”

Master Hymal smirked. “You just have to know where to look, boy.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Reneeke agreed.

“What sort of treasures do you typically find?” Jaikus asked, bringing the conversation back to his favorite topic: treasure hunting.

“Oh, the usual assortment one would expect to find in a place like this; scrolls, tomes, coins, gems, perhaps a weapon or two. Once we uncovered a room with seventy-seven ingots of gold. It took us three trips before we managed to haul the last one away.”

“Any magical items?” Reneeke asked. “Like a ring, wand, or crystal ball?”

“Rarely, but it does happen. As for crystal balls, I’ve never come across one. Those are just something bards put in their tales to spice up a more mundane world.”

“We did find a *Torc of Might* once,” Lady Kate offered. Then she jerked a thumb toward Seward, “But *he* dropped it in the Swamp.”

Seward made an annoyed sound and rolled his eyes. “Aren’t you ever going to let that go? It wasn’t my fault!”

“One would think, that with an item such as that, you would have found a better place to carry it than *stuffed* in your belt.”

Reneeke chuckled. “In your belt?”

“Hey, it was very secure there. Besides, I didn’t want it to get scuffed by the equipment in my pack.”

“In Seward’s defense,” Charka interjected, “he lost the *Torc* during a scuffle with a mossback. Its jaws had clamped onto his leg and was beginning to pull him beneath the surface. By the time we ‘*persuaded*’ the mossback to let go, and dragged Seward from the water, the *Torc* was gone.”

Seward lifted the leg of his trousers to reveal the mossback’s bite-mark that ran the length of his calf and even up onto his thigh. “They were so mad with me for losing the *Torc*, that all they gave me was just enough healing potion to save my life. The scar was left as a reminder.”

“Needless to say, items of such worth are carried *in* packs from now on.” Charka gave his man a stern gaze, then chuckled. “We live and learn.” His face turned grim as he added, “Or we die.”

“There is only one thing about this that I don’t understand,” Reneeke said.

“What’s that?” asked Seward.

“If the mossback dragged you into the water, why didn’t those little flesh eaters devour you?”

“I was fortunate in that, that particular stretch of water didn’t have any. Those little fishes aren’t in every pool within the Swamp.”

“How can you tell?” Jaikus wondered.

“The only sure way is to throw meat into the water and see if there is a reaction,” Lady Kate explained. “Alive, dead, cooked, it makes no difference to them.”

“That is correct,” Charka added. “They seem to leave trolls and mossbacks alone for some reason. Perhaps the taste of troll isn’t to their liking.”

Seward nodded. “And a mossback’s hide is far too tough for their little jaws to tackle. Although I did once see a mossback emerging from the water only to shake off a score of the little critters.”

Jaikus was excited over the prospect of treasure hunting. His error in judgment may have cost him his share, but that did little to dampen his enthusiasm for the hunt. Delving into hidden rooms, uncovering lost treasure, perhaps even accessing a secret treasure room filled with a king’s ransom, these scenarios and more played through his mind until Charka announced it was time to turn in.

Lying awake, listening to the fire crackle while Seward moved about the area during his turn at watch, Jaikus found it hard to fall asleep. He was simply *too* anxious for the morning to come, and the fun begin.

The sun’s first rays woke him to a cool and dew shrouded world. Sitting up, Jaikus looked to the others and found them still asleep. Lady Kate was up as the last watch had fallen to her. He made his way over to where she stood by the fire.

“Good morning,” he greeted her.

Turning, she gave him a smile. “And to you as well.”

Noticing their number was one less than the night before, he asked, “Where’s Master Hymal?”

“Gone. He will be back tomorrow morning.”

“Isn’t going off on his own a little...dangerous?”

She shook her head. “It’s his way. And besides, he *is* the patron. If he wants to go alone to collect his reagents, who are we to gainsay him?”

Jaikus noticed that the apothecary’s horse was missing as well. Turning back to Lady Kate, he asked, “When are we to get going?”

“Charka likes to sleep late in the morning after our arrival. It’s best not to speak too loudly or you may wake him.”

Nodding, Jaikus glanced to where their leader still lay asleep. “Do you think he would mind if I looked around some?”

“Not if you stay nearby. Should you come across any valuables, be sure to let him know. After all, you are working for him.”

“Of course,” he replied, though doing such was the last thing he wanted to do. But if it would aid him in regaining Charka’s good grace, and thus be put forward for Guild membership, he would do so.

Reneeke still slept and Jaikus was loathe to wake him since his friend had just come off his turn at watch. Pointing over to where he and Reneeke had found the building that remained mostly intact with the enticing, opened doorway, he said, “I’ll be over there.”

Lady Kate glanced in that direction then turned another smile his way. “Going to investigate the building you mentioned last night?”

“Yes. I thought I might poke about for a bit.”

“Very well. Just be careful.” As he was about to depart, she laid a hand on his arm. “I’ll send your friend after you once he awakens.”

Jaikus nodded and headed off toward the building.

Oh, man, this was going to be good. Rooting around in an ancient building had long been something he desired to do. Ever since his days spent on the wooden floorboards of *The Creaking Tap* (the sole tavern of his hometown, Running Brook) as a lad, listening to itinerant bards weave their tales of daring-do.

He stepped lively as he headed toward the building. The opened doorway gaped just as tantalizingly as the day before. Giddy with excitement, he hurried to the doorway where he paused a moment to peer within. Not seeing much of interest in the room on the other side, he entered and crossed to the opening in the far wall leading to the room beyond.

“Where’s Jaik?” Reneeke asked shortly after awakening. In the quiet of the morning, the sound of Seward preparing the morning meal provided a home-like air. Naught more than flour cakes and jerked beef, it was still better than the trail rations he and Jaikus had stashed away in their packs. He was beginning to wonder why Bella had given them so much.

“Off exploring the building you two came across yesterday,” Lady Kate replied. A glance to the position of the sun and she added, “He has been gone almost an hour.”

Charka sat up in his bedroll. “You might want to go get him, Reneeke. We’ll be eating shortly.”

“Sure thing,” he replied.

Getting up, he stretched then made his way through the ruins toward the building Jaikus had gone to explore. When he drew near, he hollered, “**Jaik!**” No answer came back as he reached the doorway. Stepping within the room, he hollered, “*Jaik! Time to eat!*”

Then from deeper within the building, he heard Jaikus reply, “Rene, you’ve got to come here and see this.” Entering the room, he walked across to the doorway on the other side of the room. “Charka wants you to return,” he said.

Renee found Jaikus standing before a mural depicting a great battle of some distant past. A walled keep was encircled by armored beasts of hellish vision. Siegecraft rained stones and fire over the walls to devastating effect upon the defenders. From the way the part of the keep’s wall was in mid-collapse, it was apparent the attackers were winning.

Jaikus cast a grin to his friend. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“Yes, it is. But that still doesn’t alter the fact that our leader wishes you to return. You are in enough trouble already without giving him more reason to dislike you.” Glancing around the barren room, Renee asked, “Did you find anything?”

Disappointment tinged his friend’s words when he replied. “Not yet.” Then he indicated an opening located on the far side of the room. “There is a whole series of rooms further down that way I explored until the light grew too dim. The only thing interesting I came across was this mural. There was a patch of darkness even further in that I thought might have been a stairway leading down. I would dearly love to go check it out.”

“Maybe tonight. But right now, I think it best for us to return.”

“You’re right, of course.”

The two friends left the room with the mural and headed back through the ruins to the *Troupe’s* campsite. Breakfast was ready. It wasn’t the most flavorful of meals, but it did fill one’s stomach.

“We’re going to leave most of the equipment and two of the mules,” Charka explained while they ate. “Travel light on the way there...”

“And heavy on the way back,” Seward finished.

“That’s the plan,” Charka agreed.

Seward glanced over to the two Springers with a grin. “Are you boys ready?”

“Ready for what?” Jaikus asked. Mouth full of flour cake, he turned a questioning stare to the man.

“To be Springers of course.”

Two faces gazed at him in confusion.

“Don’t you know what that means?” he asked.

“Of course they do,” Charka interjected. “They volunteered for the job, didn’t they?”

“*Springer...is a...job title?*” Renee asked.

“Yes. What did you think a Springer was?”

Renee glanced over to Jaikus. “We thought it meant someone new to the Guild. You know, like a new adventurer.”

Swallowing the flour cake, Jaikus nodded agreement.

Seward laughed. "Where did you hear that?"

Before they could answer, Charka stepped forward and held his hand up to just below his chin. "Was it from a boy about yea high?" When Jaikus nodded, he asked, "Dark hair, and probably hanging out with another five or six others just like him?"

"Yeah," Reneeke answered. "That's him. He mentioned you usually take along a couple of new adventurers such as Jaik and me."

"Why, in the name of all the gods, would I want a pair of useless lads along on a trip through the Swamp?"

"He...uh," clearing his throat, Jaikus grew a bit red in the face, "said that you were...uh, '*pretty nice about such things*'."

"That's right," Reneeke nodded. "That you were '*always one to help out the new guy*.'"

Seward doubled over in laughter. "Oh, man. That's *funny*!"

"Quiet," Charka ordered his man.

"Yurki?" Lady Kate questioned.

Charka nodded. "Sounds like something he would do." Turning to his two Springers, he explained. "Yurki is the leader of a pack of young'ens that hangs around the Guild. It seems he played a small joke on you boys."

Jaikus looked at their Troupe leader with growing apprehension. "What...*kind* of joke?"

"You aren't going to hold them to the contract are you?" Lady Kate asked. "They didn't know."

Charka nodded. "A contract is a contract. Besides which, if not for their volunteering, we would have contracted a thief for this venture."

"What kind of joke?" Jaikus reiterated for a second time.

Seward smirked. "Springer is *not* the term for a new adventurer."

From Lady Kate's expression, Reneeke was certain it wouldn't be good. "What *does* it mean?"

She sighed. "A *Springer* is someone that we at the Guild use in lieu of a thief."

Jaikus was even more confused. "I don't get what you're saying."

"Springers '*spring the trap*,'" Charka explained.

"You mean...?" Jaikus questioned with growing horror.

The Troupe leader nodded. "That's right, lad. If we feel there is an element of danger, you and your friend go first. If there's a chest to be opened, you open it."

"But, we'll be *killed*," Reneeke objected.

"Most likely," Seward agreed. "Only about one in three Springers makes it back alive."

"We're not going to die just so you can get rich!" Jaikus exclaimed.

Charka stepped right into his face. "I'm not going to lose out on recovering treasure just because you didn't know what you were agreeing to. You *are* our Springers. You *will* be Springers! And if you fail to uphold your end of the contract that you so readily signed before we left Reakla, you can forget about accompanying us back through the Swamp. And you will *never, ever*, be admitted into the Guild!"

Chapter 7

Under the withering glare of their *Troupe* leader, Jaikus and Reneeke moved off a ways to discuss this latest development.

"We're going to die," Jaikus moaned.

"Everyone dies, Jaik."

Flashing his friend an annoyed look, Jaikus spat, "*Don't* start in on one of your philosophical musings. Not now." A glance back to the others revealed them impatiently waiting for their answer.

"There is no way he's going to put me forward for Guild membership anyway."

"I think you are correct, Jaik. But that still doesn't alter the fact that we are in a dire situation."

"Rene, I don't want to die on my first adventure!"

"Neither do I; nor on any other for that matter."

"And for what? Just so they can get rich?"

Reneeke was silent a moment as he pondered various courses of action. Finally, he said, "I see that we have only two choices before us. First, we agree to be Springers and possibly die some grisly death at the hands of a long dead trap-setter."

"You put that so *well*!"

He ignored his friend's outburst. "Or, tell them that we renege on the contract and forge our way back to Reakla through the Swamp on our own." He met his friend's eyes. "You know there is *no way* we could even begin to make it back on our own. The Swamp would swallow us up as sure as anything."

"So what are you saying?"

"Being Springers may be a death sentence, but at least there is the possibility, however small, that one or both of us might actually survive to see Running Brook again."

At mention of the village where they had grown to manhood, Jaikus envisioned the worry his mother would experience should he fail to return. The thought saddened him greatly.

"It's better than nothing," Reneeke said.

"I don't like it."

"Sometimes, Jaik, life only gives you the choice between bad, and worse."

Sighing, Jaikus nodded. "You are correct, as usual."

Reneeke laid a hand on his friend's back. "Come on. We may as well get this over with."

Resolved to face the unenviable task of being Springers, the pair walked back to where the others waited.

“So? What’s your decision?” Seward asked. “Are you going to die here, or in the Swamp?” Reneeke shot the fighter a look of annoyance. “Neither.” Then to Charka, he asked, “What do we have to do?”

The trip through the skeletal remains of Sythal took a little under the hour foretold by Charka. During the trek, Lady Kate walked with the forlorn, and despondent, Springers.

“It isn’t nearly as bad as what you two are thinking,” she announced.

“What isn’t?” Reneeke asked. “The chance of us surviving this ordeal?”

“The fact that you are Springers does not relieve us of the obligation to do everything in our power to see that you survive. We have a score of healing potions and scrolls with us for no other reason than because the two of you are along.”

Hope glimmered. “Really?” Jaikus asked, almost afraid to believe it to be true.

“Of course. We are not heartless mercenaries. What Yurki said is partly true. Charka takes care of those under his command. And that means you two, too.”

“Don’t let him hear you say that,” Seward commented. Glancing ahead to where their leader led the way, he said. “He isn’t *that* nice.”

“Perhaps not,” she agreed. “Although, a leader who habitually returns with fewer than what he left with, quickly finds it difficult to recruit more when the need arises.”

Reneeke gave Jaikus a glance and grinned. Perhaps their situation was not completely hopeless as they had thought.

“You see, Jaik? We’re going to be fine.”

Seward couldn’t resist one last barb. “Springers are considered expendable. It goes with the territory. So should he come back with one, or none, very few would think much about it.”

Lady Kate turned a withering gaze upon her cohort. “Perhaps you could curb your tongue and leave these boys alone?”

He gave her a bow with half a dozen flourishes. “As you wish, milady.”

Rolling her eyes, she shook her head.

Their destination turned out to be a group of buildings that, somewhere far below the surface, may have formed the four sides of a plaza. The northern side was rubble, while the east and south sides each had a few walls jutting upward out of the ground, but held very little in the way of areas in which to explore. Three buildings were still relatively intact on the west side, though *intact* was a generous term.

The building on the left had three walls still in place, with the fourth having disintegrated into a pile of rubble. The one on the right boasted two walls still proudly standing, while the other two were in various stages of collapse. In the center, four sturdy walls rose in almost perfect majesty for a span of two floors before quickly tapering to a point. It was to the center building that Charka led his people.

An opening loomed in the side. The interior was lit by intermittent rays of sunlight making their way through cracks and other imperfections in the structure.

“A doorway,” Jaikus commented.

“No, a window,” Lady Kate corrected. “Remember, the bulk of Sythal lies buried deep below our feet.”

“So that means it wasn’t a doorway I entered earlier when I went exploring. It was a window?”

“Hey, we got ourselves a smart one here.” Seward flashed Jaikus a humorless grin.

“Ignore him.”

“I’ll try,” Jaikus assured her.

Charka brought them to a halt before the window. “We will explore the upper areas first. After that, we will descend into the depths.”

“Shouldn’t we explore the lower areas first?” Reneeke asked. “It would seem that there is where treasure would most likely be found.”

“No. You’re thinking about this all wrong. If you were on the ground before a tall building, where would you expect the treasure to be secreted away? In the uppermost reaches, of course. People tend to stash their really good items as far from the entrance as possible. Before Sythal was buried...” he pointed toward the edifice rising before them, “this was the area furthest from the entrance. And thus, more likely to still contain items of value.”

Jaikus nodded. “That makes sense.”

“Okay, then.” Glancing to his two Springers, he said, “Who wants to be first?”

Exchanging glances with Reneeke, he was about to volunteer when Reneeke said, “I will.” Relief flowed over him, but so too did concern for his friend.

“You two will rotate the duty.” Turning to Jaikus, he said, “Until I say otherwise, stay back with Lady Kate.”

“Yes, sir.” Moving to stand beside the magic user, he watched as Charka removed a rope from his pack.

Passing one end to Reneeke, Charka said, “Tie this around your middle.”

About to ask why, Reneeke stopped the urge and took the end of the rope. While he secured it around his waist, Seward removed a lantern from his pack. It was a bulls-eye lantern, one that shined its light through a single opening in one side. There was a shutter whereby the light could be reduced in smaller increments to a tighter, more focused, beam. By the time Reneeke was securely bound, the lantern was lit and its light was being directed in through the window. With the shutter opened to its widest, the light filled the room.

Charka motioned for Reneeke to precede him into the room. “You first.”

Seward handed Reneeke the lantern before the Springer carefully made his way through the window.

Following ten feet behind came Seward and Charka, both keeping a firm grip upon the rope. After them came Lady Kate, with Jaikus bringing up the rear.

A single doorway broke the empty monotony of the room. Other than dust and dried leaves that had been blown in by the wind, there was nothing else of note. Reneeke paused and turned back to where Seward and Charka still stood on the other side of the window. “Should I go through the doorway?”

“Go ahead.”

Moving forward, Reneeke heard the others making their way through the window and into the room.

A hallway extended from the other side of the doorway. Further openings appeared in the walls on either side at staggered intervals. The first one was on his left and opened onto a room similar to the one behind him.

"If you don't see anything," Charka instructed, "continue to the next."

Keeping that in mind, Reneeke moved from doorway to doorway. At each, he would pause to inspect the room by directing the lantern's light from one side to the other. When he failed to see anything of interest, he would continue on.

As he approached the fifth doorway, his eyes caught sight of a flash of light coming from within the room. He immediately came to a stop. "I think I see something."

"What?" Jaikus asked. Despite the possible lethality of the situation his friend was in, Jaikus couldn't help but be drawn into the excitement of the moment.

"I'm not sure," Reneeke replied.

Moving to the doorway, he paused and slowly roved the light across the room's interior. When the edge of the light reached the far right, the flash appeared again. A closer look revealed that whatever it was, was partially hidden amidst a pile of debris.

He sensed someone had come up behind him and glanced back to find Charka peering over his shoulder. "It might be a coin. Go find out." As Reneeke entered the room, the *Troupe* leader added, "Be careful."

The debris held bones, stones, and tufts of fur which may have once belonged to an animal. "Looks like this may have been a predator's den."

"If it was," Charka replied, "then that would indicate the room is safe."

Crossing to the pile of debris, Reneeke aimed the lantern directly toward it; there were more than a single item glittering within. Upon reaching it, he used the toe of his boot to disperse the pile and revealed two round, golden disks, each the size of his palm. There was also a silver one of the same size tucked beneath the two golden ones.

"Three disks," he announced. "Two golden, and one silver." He then bent to pick them up.

"Wait," Charka ordered. Turning to his magic user, he motioned for her to enter and check it out. "We've encountered these before," he told his Springer. "Most are harmless. Others are not."

Reneeke stepped back as Lady Kate came forward to kneel by the three disks. A moment later, they glowed a soft blue. The glow lasted for only two seconds.

She glanced to Reneeke. "They are safe," she announced then collected the disks and slipped them into her pack.

"What happens when they are not safe?"

"Of the two we have encountered that were not, one exploded, and the other caused a colony of warts to appear and spread across Seward's face." She gave the Springer a grin. "Lucky for him, Charka was willing to foot the bill for a curse removal at the temple upon our return."

"Why would it do that?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? There are all kinds of magical items out there of which the intrepid adventurer should be leery. In the Tower back at the Guild, there is an entire room devoted to the weird and odd."

From the doorway, Charka said, "If that is all, then we should continue."

"Yes, sir," Reneeke said, then made his way from the room and headed down to the sixth door.

Therein they discovered a small room with a narrow, winding stairwell extending to both the floor above and the floor below.

"Let's finish this level first before heading for the next."

"Yes, sir."

Continuing down the hallway, Reneeke reached where it ended at another hallway moving perpendicular to theirs. Down to the right, this new hallway ended with a pair of doors, one to either side. To the left, the hallway extended for a good thirty feet before the first doorway appeared. Relaying the information to the others, he waited until Charka instructed him to first investigate down to the right.

The doorways where the hallway came to an end sat directly across from each other, and like the others, didn't have doors. Reneeke thought that odd until the notion occurred to him that had the doors been constructed of wood, they would have succumbed to rot long ago. Given the age of Sythal, such was a very good possibility.

Coming to the doorways, he shined the light through the one on the right. The room beyond was small and devoid of anything of interest. Turning to the other, a brief scan revealed it was just as barren.

"There's not much in here," he commented to Charka upon returning to the hallway junction whereat the others waited.

"Sometimes it's like that," the *Troupe* leader replied. "There have been trips in the past where we've come away with only Hymal's gold for accompanying him."

"At least we have the three disks," Jaikus piped up.

Charka nodded. "Yes, indeed."

Moving down to the left this time, Reneeke made his way toward the doorway thirty feet away. When he had gone ten feet past the junction of passageways, the lantern's light revealed something past the doorway that protruded from the side of the wall. Directing the beam toward it, he discovered the protrusion to be a face.

Constructed of stone, the face stuck out several inches from the wall with a diameter of a foot and a half. It was human, sort of. There was an odd slant to the eyes, and the ears seemed a bit larger than they should be, as was the nose. Its mouth gaped open and appeared to be a hollow cavity.

Giving the room only a cursory examination before continuing to the mask, Reneeke shone the light within the mouth. "There's an opening here," he explained to the others. "It looks like it extends for over a foot before coming to an end."

"We've come across these before as well," said Charka. "I would be extra careful from this point on."

Glancing back to his leader, Reneeke asked, "Why?"

"They are quite often found in the proximity of a trap," Lady Kate explained.

Charka nodded. "More times than not, we've discovered."

Backing away from the face, Reneeke stared uncertainly at it. "What should I do?"

"Avoid the mouth for starters. Keep as far from it as possible as you make your way past. If nothing happens before you reach the other side, it's safe."

"And if it does?"

"That's part of being a Springer," Seward piped up.

"Good luck, Rene," Jaik said to his friend.

"Thanks."

Reneeke sidestepped to the wall opposite the face. There he pressed his back against its hard, cold surface and began to shuffle his feet as he started working his way past.

Eyes glued to the mouth opening, heart racing, expecting at any moment some dreadful, painful fate to befall him, the young Springer worked his way down the hallway until he was directly opposite the face. For a brief moment he stood frozen, transfixed by the imminent doom weighing down upon him. But then his feet started working again and carried him past.

"I made it!" he hollered back to the others.

"Yes," Seward replied, "we see that."

"Great job, Rene," Jaikus praised from his position at the rear.

"*Great job?*" Seward asked as he turned to him. "He didn't do anything other than walk down a hallway."

Jaikus met the man's eyes and would have liked nothing better than to close them for him.

"You really are annoying sometimes," Lady Kate commented.

Seward broke off the gaze with Jaikus to give her a crooked smile. "It is but part of my charm."

"Charm of a snake," Jaikus murmured under his breath.

"What was that?" Seward asked.

Once again being the focal point of the man's attention, Jaikus murmured, "Nothing."

Charka turned to them. "Can we continue now?"

"Certainly," Seward replied.

Charka eyed his man disapprovingly a second before signaling Reneeke to continue.

Following along beside Lady Kate, Jaikus asked, "Why does Charka put up with him?"

"His father was a cartographer," she explained. "And aside from being able to read a map with ease, Seward has an unusual ability where the area of a building is concerned. Practically every secret room we have uncovered has been due to his ability to tell when there is less space being used than there should be. After we make sure a level is safe, he goes back through it and determines if there is a hidden area or not."

"How?" Jaikus asked.

She only shrugged. "He's never been able to satisfactorily explain it to me. Claims he just *'knows'*, that his years as a youth working at his father's elbow instilled it in him."

"So what happens when he thinks there is a hidden area?"

“We search for the opening mechanism.”

Further discussion was curtailed when a shout from Reneeke announced that he had found something.

He stood at the end of the hallway. Before him loomed an opening wider than the doorways previously encountered. “It looks like some kind of hall.”

The others came up behind him and saw by the lantern’s light that the “*hall*” was quite large, large enough in fact so that the home Jaikus had grown up in could comfortably fit within, with room to spare. Two staircases located against the walls to the left and right rose toward a balcony that completely encircled the upper reaches.

“A ballroom perhaps?” Reneeke suggested.

“Perhaps,” Charka said.

There were five other doorways spaced around the room, each granting access to parts unknown. Vacant recesses dotted the walls in fifteen foot intervals where statuary or other items could have been placed for display. A pair of torch sconces haloed each of the recesses.

After a brief visual examination, Charka announced that the room would most likely be safe. “Snares in such a place would run the risk of catching the unwary as well as the unwanted.” Even though he felt it was safe to enter, he still had Reneeke lead the way.

Seward removed two torches from his pack. Then using flint and steel, he lit the brands and placed them in torch sconces near where they emerged from the hallway. The light did much to dispel the darkness.

Jaikus came to his friend. “How is it going?”

Reneeke gave him a nervous smile and shrugged. “I still live. So, not *too* bad I guess.”

“Let’s check out those other rooms.” Charka directed Reneeke toward the closest.

“I’ll come with you,” Jaikus offered.

“We’ll *all* go,” Seward asserted. “If we start getting separated in a place like this, someone is apt to come up missing.”

“True,” Charka agreed. “We stick together.”

“Understood,” Jaikus replied.

The first doorway led down a short hallway and ended at another small, empty room. They checked two more and found similar areas, each holding nothing of interest. The fourth doorway entered onto a room a third the size of the hall. Its walls were as dark as night and seemed to absorb the light coming from the lantern. In the center of the room was a dais rising two feet from the floor. A pair of steps led to the top. Reneeke directed the lantern toward the top of the dais and saw a square, stone block. The block was not black like the walls of the room. Instead, it looked to be constructed of the same material as was the building. The dais, and the stone block resting upon it, were the only items of interest within the room.

“Better check it out,” Charka told his Springer.

As Reneeke moved toward the dais, Jaikus asked Lady Kate, “Ever come across anything like this before?”

She shook her head. “No. This is something new.”

Upon approaching the steps, Reneeke paused to pan the light across the surface of the dais, and of the stone block. Both appeared rather nondescript. Hesitantly, he moved his foot to the first step. Quickly putting his weight upon it, he jerked his foot back, fully expecting something bad to happen. When nothing did, he tried the second one. When still nothing happened, he took the steps up to the dais top and came to a stop.

A feeling came over him, something that was completely alien. Unsure what it could be, he *was*, however, fairly certain that the feeling emanated from the stone block. "I feel something."

"What?" Lady Kate asked. Things magical and out of the ordinary were her bailiwick.

Reneeke glanced over his shoulder toward her. "I don't know. I've never felt anything like it before."

She came forward until she stood at the dais' edge. "I don't feel anything."

"Neither did I, until I stood up here." He pointed to the stone block. "It's coming from that."

"Is it a good feeling, or bad?"

"Do you mean, like, does it make me afraid?"

She nodded.

He thought for a moment. "I...it, uh..." Then he shook his head. "I wouldn't call it either, actually. Merely a strange sensation."

"Don't approach any closer," Charka told him. To Lady Kate he asked, "What do you think?"

Not taking her eyes from the stone block, she said, "We should leave it alone. If he feels something, then it is either magical in nature, or spiritual. In either case, it would be best not to tempt fate."

"Spiritual?" Jaikus queried. "Like a ghost?"

"Perhaps. A cleric might be able to make a more accurate assessment if such were the case. But, seeing as we don't have one..."

"Can't magic users cast spells to learn about items?"

"If I felt the situation warranted it, I could," she replied.

Suddenly, everyone in the room felt a momentary pulse radiate from the dais. Jaikus was just beginning to think that the odd sensation of the pulse must be similar to what Reneeke was feeling when darkness surged outward from the dais's surface. His friend quickly vanished from sight as the darkness rose to engulf him, forming a shimmering dome that completely enshrouded the area above the dais.

"*Reneeke!*" he shouted.

"**Pull!**" Charka yelled as he and Seward yanked on the rope attached to the young Springer. The line snapped taut and budged no further. Jaikus and Lady Kate were quick to take up the rope and lend their aid. Yet despite their added strength, they were unable to bring Reneeke from the darkness.

Jaikus feared for his friend. "We have to get him out of there!"

Then in an instant, all tension on the rope vanished. Snapping back like a coiled serpent, the rope came free as the darkness which had risen to swallow Reneeke, returned back into the dais.

"Where is he?"

When the darkness vanished, Reneeke was gone.

Chapter 8

Making a dash for the dais, Jaikus was abruptly brought to a halt by Charka grabbing him about the chest.

“Let me go!”

“He’s *gone*, son.”

Jaikus struck him across the chin in an effort to loosen Charka’s grip. “I have to get to him.” Squirming, he had almost wriggled from the *Troupe* leader’s grasp when he heard Charka say, “Ready?” To which Lady Kate responded, “Yes.”

Then he was free, but only for a moment. He took all of one step toward the dais before Lady Kate’s *Webs of Binding* encased his lower half in their sticky, immobilizing mass.

“*No!*” As he toppled over, he broke his fall with his hands, then used them in an attempt to crawl forward, but the webbing adhered him tightly to the floor.

“Son, listen to me.”

Twisting, he turned to look back with tear-laden eyes.

“He’s gone.”

“No. He can’t be!”

“Yes, he is.”

“*We can get him back!*”

“You don’t know that he went anywhere,” Charka reasoned.

“That’s right,” Seward added. “For all we know, that blackness could have simply dissolved him into nothing.”

Charka eyed his man with unvoiced retribution. “You let me handle this.”

Seward merely shrugged.

Returning his attention back to the lad on the floor before him, Charka said, “Kate will see if she can determine what that thing is, and maybe even a way to get your friend back. If that is even possible.”

Casting a hopeful gaze toward the magic user, he asked, “Will you?”

“I shall do my best,” she affirmed.

“But first, you are going to have to calm down. I am *not* going to lose both of you. Not if I can help it.” He paused a moment to let that sink in. “No one goes near that thing until she says it is safe to do so. Understand?”

Wracked with worry and fear, it was hard for him to see the logic in doing nothing. But he quickly understood that Lady Kate may be the best shot they had of finding out what had happened to his friend.

Miserable, yet resigned to waiting, he nodded. "Yes."

Charka nodded to Lady Kate who then dispelled the webbing binding Jaikus' legs. He watched him rise, ensuring his remaining Springer wouldn't do anything foolish, then signaled for Lady Kate to begin.

Jaikus remained sitting on the floor. With knees brought up to form a rest for his chin, he wrapped his arms around them tightly for comfort. He watched Lady Kate as she cast her first spell. At any other time, he would have been greatly intrigued by the workings of magic. But now, all he could think of was that Reneeke was lost, or maybe even gone forever. Either way, it was his fault. He had been the one to drag Reneeke into being an adventurer. And if his friend never returned... Jaikus couldn't bear to contemplate such a thought. Lady Kate *would* be successful, and they *would* be reunited!

"Jaik?"

The sudden immersion in darkness had completely unnerved him.

"Charka?"

Not even the barest hint of light could be discerned.

"Lady Kate? Seward?"

Reaching outward with his hands, he sought the comforting feel of another human being. But all he encountered was the cold, hard surface of the stone block that rested upon the dais. Had he gone deaf as well as blind? If so, the others should have taken charge of him by now. Yet they hadn't.

Checking his waist, he found the rope to still be there, with a little over a yard hanging from where it knotted about his middle. Feeling the rope's end, he discovered that it had been severed cleanly. He couldn't feel so much as a single, frayed strand.

"Jaik!"

Shouting at the top of his lungs, he was rewarded with an echoing of his cry. "At least I'm not deaf." By the sound of the echo, he was in a large, enclosed area. Back home near Running Brook, there had been a series of caves high in the hills that he and Jaikus often explored. Their voices had echoed in a similar manner.

Concentrating less on sight and sound, he focused more on his sense of smell. Detecting the odor of earth and mustiness reminiscent of the caves back home, he nodded. Somehow, he had been relocated. It was the only explanation. Unless he had gone mad, a supposition to which he gave little credence.

In his pack was the bundle of torches acquired at Bella's, as well as his flint. Kneeling on one knee, he took off his pack and rummaged within until feeling the hard surface of the flint. Praying to see sparks, he took out the flint and scraped it across the side of the square stone.

A line of sparks appeared in the darkness. Seeing them greatly eased his sense of unsettledness, for it meant he wasn't blind. Reneeke then removed a torch from his pack and worked to set fire to its business end. Several flint strikes later, the combustible material ignited.

As the torch grew to full brilliance, Reneeke stood and looked around at his new surroundings. Though he still stood upon the dais, he was no longer in the hall, that much was certain. Rather, this new locale was located, as he had earlier suspected, within a large, underground cavern.

Gazing about his new environs, he saw another of those stony faces carved into the cavern's wall not far from the dais. Ones that Charka said often indicated the presence of a trap. Fortunately, the cavern grew wider as it extended outward from where he stood, and the face's vicinity could readily be avoided should further exploration be required.

The cavern itself wasn't remarkable in any way, at least not the corner of it illuminated by his torch. Rock growths dotted the floor as well as cascading down from the ceiling. The floor was uneven as a cavern's should be, though there was a narrow area moving away from the dais that looked slightly worn down, quite possibly due to the passage of many feet.

How did he get there?

The answer to that in some way dealt with the dais. Being the only similarity between where he had been, and where he was now, it had to mean something. Reneeke put the fear he felt aside as he considered the problem.

He had been with the others one moment, then there in the dark the next. *Magic?* Had to be. Bards often spoke of devices used to travel far distances in a blink of an eye. They were rumored to be rare and powerful, and not to be trifled with. It was also said that such devices were jealously guarded by those who created them. That thought brought him no peace of mind. Alone as he was in an unfamiliar place, the last thing he wanted to think about was fending off an attack of some kind.

"I have to do something," he murmured to himself. Recalling the earlier shouts for Jaikus, he worried that perhaps he had inadvertently alerted someone, or some *thing* to his presence. He scanned the darkness surrounding his small radius of light. Should he remain where he was in the hopes that the others could find him? Or would he have to make his own way back? As he struggled to determine which course of action would best suit the situation, he again started to feel that odd sensation he had felt when first he climbed onto the dais before arriving in the cavern. Nervousness filled him as he didn't know what it could mean.

Before he was able to decide on a course of action, the darkness took him once again.

"It is very powerful," Lady Kate said after several minutes of magically examining the dais and stone block.

"Can you tell what it did to Reneeke?" Jaikus asked anxiously. He stood back a ways with Charka and Seward while they waited for Lady Kate.

She turned her attention onto the young, worried Springer. "It wasn't so much that it did something *to* him. Rather, it sent him somewhere." Gesturing to the dais, she said, "This, is a teleporter."

"*A teleporter?*" asked Jaikus and Charka simultaneously.

Jaikus glanced to his leader and could see the man had a certain gleam in his eye.

She nodded. "I'm not sure how he activated it, but your friend was sent somewhere."

"*Can we follow?*" Jaikus and Charka spoke in unison.

Nodding again, she said, "I would think so. Most devices like this need to recharge their magical energies before a second teleportation can take place."

"How long?" Charka questioned.

"That, I don't know. It could take a minute, or even a week before the magical energies are refreshed."

Charka slapped Jaikus on the back. "Boy, you may see your friend again!"

"You mean to follow?" Seward questioned.

"*By the gods, I do!*" He gazed at the teleporter with undisguised avarice. "Something like that has to lead to a treasure horde, or some other place of importance. There's no telling what we'll find on the other side."

"But, oh fearless leader," Seward began, "we must be back to meet Hymal by the time the sun rises. And as our Lady of the Arcane Arts has just said, it could take longer than that before this teleporter thing is ready."

"Let's try it now," Jaikus suggested. "I'm the Springer, so it is my job to test it first." Such an offer would never have left his lips, had it not been for his need to discover the fate of Reneeke.

Charka glanced questioningly to Lady Kate. "What do you think?"

She shrugged. "Either it is ready and he will be sent to wherever his friend went, or nothing will happen." Turning her gaze toward Jaikus, she said, "Reneeke claimed to have felt something strange when he stood upon the dais. It would be reasonable to assume that what he felt was the power of the device."

"So if I feel something, it might be ready?" He waited only long enough for her to nod before dashing for the steps. Vaulting to the top, he moved to the exact spot where Reneeke had stood prior to disappearing.

"What now?"

"Do you feel anything?" Charka asked.

Jaikus closed his eyes. Not sure exactly *what* he searched for, it didn't take him but a moment before he felt...something. He nodded. "Yes. There is something here."

Lady Kate moved closer until she almost came into contact with the dais, then stopped. "Can you describe it?"

"No. It's just like Reneeke said, *a strange sensation*."

Then just as the first time, a quick pulse radiated outward from the dais followed immediately afterward by the rising of the darkness.

"It's working," Charka observed as his last Springer was swallowed by the dark field until a shimmering dome covered the area above the dais. He and the other two watched as the dome remained in position for several seconds, then quickly sank back down into the dais.

The vanishing of the dome left behind a person, but it wasn't Jaikus.

“Hey!” Reneeke exclaimed in jubilation. “I’m back!” Torch held aloft, he turned toward the trio of onlookers. It didn’t take him long to realize they were one short. “Where’s Jaik?”

“Are you okay?” Lady Kate asked.

“Yes.” Hopping from the dais he asked again, this time with more urgency tingeing his voice, “Where’s Jaik?”

“Wherever it was the dais took you,” Charka replied. “He was trying to reach wherever it was you had been sent.”

Seward laughed. “Now the other one is missing.”

“Quiet,” Charka ordered and his man reined in his amusement.

Lady Kate came and looked into his eyes. “Where did the teleporter take you?” Seeing nothing untoward about them, she relaxed.

“Yes, lad,” Charka asked, “Where did it take you? Was there treasure?”

“Treasure? No. It was a large cavern. Jaik’s there?”

“He was on the teleporter when it activated,” Lady Kate explained. “You came here, he went there.”

Turning back toward the teleporter, he said, “Then I have to go back and get him.”

“We *all* will,” said Charka. “I think that cavern may be a good place to continue our search for treasure.”

Taking the steps, Reneeke returned to his spot while the others gathered in about him. “There wasn’t any treasure.”

“Are you sure? Did you check every nook and cranny?”

“Well, no. I was more concerned about how to return.” Pausing a moment, he then added, “But I did see one of those stone faces carved into the cavern wall.”

“I knew it!”

They had to wait several minutes before they felt the strange sensation.

“Magic,” Lady Kate told the others. “This is magic that you are feeling. Very...powerful... magic.”

“Interesting,” Charka commented just before the teleporter activated and they were no longer in the room.

“Rene!”

Jaikus’ cry drew his friend’s attention to where he stood next to a tall stalagmite. Face alight with happiness at seeing his friend, Jaikus hurried his way. “I was getting worried there for a moment.”

Reneeke hopped off the dais and met Jaikus halfway. “You know I wouldn’t leave without you.” Giving his friend a brief, fierce hug, he heard Jaikus say, “Neither would I.”

Seward had the lantern in hand and was beginning to investigate the vicinity surrounding the dais.

“Don’t go too far,” Charka said to his man. “That’s a Springer’s job.” Turning to Jaikus, he held out the now shortened rope and said, “Your turn.”

Resigned to the inevitable, Jaikus nodded and took the rope. After tying it securely around his middle, he gave Reneeke a half-grin. "I hope it goes as well as your stint did."

"It will," his friend assured him. "Adventure awaits."

Jaikus nodded. "Adventure awaits."

Charka indicated for him to proceed along the narrow, slightly worn path Reneeke had discovered leading away from the dais. Jaikus held the lantern and panned the light to the left and right as he continued along.

The path led through a forest of stalactites and stalagmites, some actually having grown together to form magnificent columns that stretched from the cavern floor all the way to the ceiling high above. For a hundred feet or more the path remained discernible. It wasn't until the cavern narrowed that a man-made construct came into view from out of the darkness ahead. Five feet tall and obviously made of stone, an obelisk rose from a squat, box-like base to a tapered peak. Runes were etched into the surface.

"Hold up a second," Charka said to Jaikus. As his Springer came to a stop, the *Troupe* leader asked his magic user, "Is it a threat?"

After speaking a single word and making a gesture toward the obelisk, she shook her head. "It holds no magic and I detect nothing malignant in its nature."

"Have you seen these before?" Jaikus asked.

"A few," Charka replied. "But none bearing this writing." Returning his gaze toward the obelisk before them, he added, "It must mean something special."

"Like turn back or you're dead?" Seward quipped.

"Quite possibly," Charka agreed in all seriousness.

Jaikus gave the obelisk a thorough once-over, then turned the lantern's light toward the cavern ahead. The well-worn path continued through the illuminated area and disappeared into the dark. Considering how the walls of the cavern continued drawing closer together the farther they went, he figured they should be fairly close to reaching the end.

Glancing back to Charka, he asked, "Shall I continue?"

"By all means."

Once past the obelisk, the cavern diminished rapidly as the walls and ceiling steadily drew closer together. When the light at last reached the end of the cavern, Jaikus was greeted by the sight of two massive rock columns, three feet in diameter, standing a mere two feet apart before the rock wall. The path continued through the columns and into a dark opening beyond.

Jaikus came to a stop. "Something ahead," he hollered back to the others.

Charka saw the twin rock formations and had him continue on. "My guess would be that once past yon pillars, things will get more interesting."

"You think so?" Reneeke questioned.

"Yes, I do." Then to Jaikus he hollered, "Keep on your guard."

"Yes, sir," he replied. But then under his breath he added, "What do you think I have been doing?"

A rough-hewn passage extended past the twin columns and made its way deeper into the rock. Jaikus eyed the opening with suspicion, but as he could discern no tangible threat, continued forward.

Charka's words prophesying that things would "*get interesting*" were ever present upon his mind. A sense of foreboding settled over him that increased with every step. Twenty paces beyond the pillar, he found himself placing each foot carefully before him, dreading some unpleasant repercussion to descend upon him for daring to defy the totem's warning.

Maybe it wasn't a warning? It could have been nothing more than a marker, such as the one the elders of Running Brook had placed to inform visitors of the village's name. His edginess slackened off somewhat as he began thinking of alternate, non-lethal meanings behind the totem and its enigmatic etchings.

Another thirty paces passed before an abrupt widening of the passage became visible in the lantern's light. Not rough-hewn as was the passage they had been following, it instead was constructed of worked stone. Ceiling, walls, and floor were all crafted of stone blocks set one atop the other, or side by side as was the case in the floor and ceiling. So well did they fit together that there were hardly any seams. Not far from where this new area started, it came to a dead end.

Jaikus paused at the end of the narrow passage just before the new area of worked stone. "We can't go any farther."

"What?" Charka queried. Coming to stand beside his Springer, he saw where the new passage ended. "There must be a hidden door."

"Do you think so?" Jaikus asked.

Giving his young Springer a grin, he replied, "I'd stake Seward's life on it." Patting Jaikus on the back he indicated for him to continue. "Walk to the wall, then back. If nothing happens, I'll send Seward in. This is his area of expertise."

"I wouldn't exactly call myself an expert," came the reply from back in the narrow passage.

"You're the best we have," replied Charka. Then to Jaikus, he jerked his head toward the dead end and said, "Go ahead."

This is it, he thought to himself. I'm going to die. After first taking a calming breath, he stepped forward. Recalling tales of adventure spun by bards, Jaikus made sure to place his foot on only single blocks of stone. One tale in particular came to mind about a thief that had infiltrated a demon's lair. He remembered how the bard had described the way a thief had stepped on single blocks of stone in an attempt to make his way through a trapped area. Jaikus wasn't sure if such a strategy would be effective, but he wasn't about to take the chance.

Two steps, then three. He carefully made his way toward the wall at the far end.

"Do you see anything strange or out of place?" asked Seward.

Pausing, he glanced back. "Like what?"

"One stone not sitting flush to its neighbor. Or maybe of a slightly different color?"

Panning the light about the walls, he shook his head. "I don't see anything."

"Okay," Charka said. "Continue."

A quick count of the stone rows making up the floor revealed he had nine more to cross. Nine steps before he could turn around and return to safety. *Let's do this quick.*

Picking out the most stable looking stone in the row before him, he stepped forward.

One.

When that was easily accomplished, he did two more in quick succession.

Two. Three.

Then...

Four. Five. Six.

At seven, Jaikus froze when he felt the stone shift beneath his foot.

Reneeke saw his friend come to a sudden stop. "What's wrong, Jaik?"

"The stone!" he shrieked. *"It moved!"*

"It's probably just loose," his friend hollered back.

"Don't count on it," Charka said.

"What do I do?"

"Does it move up and down, or side to side?" Seward questioned.

"Both, I think." A pause, then... "There's more side to side movement."

Charka glanced to his man. "What do you think?"

His gaze lingered on the stone floor beneath Jaikus' foot. "The fact that the stone is near the center of the passage would tend to make me believe it's a trap. But it *is* possible he could have found the way to access the hidden areas."

Thinking for a moment, Charka then asked, "Did you put all your weight on the stone?"

"No. I had barely touched it when I felt movement."

"Remove your foot," Seward suggested.

"Are you crazy?"

"For good or bad, you are going to have to take your foot off sometime," Charka explained. "It may as well be now."

"O...okay."

They watched as Jaikus simultaneously lifted his foot from the stone floor and leaped backward with a powerful thrust from his other leg. He stumbled upon landing, but kept his balance by placing a hand against the wall.

Reneeke came to his side. "Pretty snazzy footwork there." He couldn't help but chuckle.

Knees and arms trembling, Jaikus leaned upon the shoulder of his friend.

Amusement turned immediately to concern. "Are you okay?"

Jaikus nodded. "Just a little shaky."

"He'll be all right."

Turning they saw Charka standing behind them.

"Seward, see if you can see what that stone is about."

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather have the Springers mess with it first?"

"Not this time."

Shrugging, Seward took the lantern from Jaikus and went to investigate the loose stone that had caused Jaikus such anxiety.

Lady Kate offered the shaky Springer her water flask.

Taking the proffered flask, he said, "Thank you," then drained it dry. The water helped calm his nerves. As Seward knelt down to inspect the floor stone, Jaikus whispered to Reneeke, "I don't think I can keep doing this."

His friend eyed him with compassion. "I know it's nerve-wracking. But we have only the one day and it will be over. On the morrow we head back to Reakla." Glancing over to where Charka watched Seward's efforts, he said, "Why don't you sit down until he's finished?"

Jaikus nodded. Putting his back against the wall, he slid to the floor. Reneeke followed suit.

"You two are doing a wonderful job," Lady Kate praised.

"Thank you, Lady," Reneeke replied.

Turning his attention toward her, Jaikus asked, "Do you think Charka will put me forward for Guild membership?"

She was quiet for a moment before answering. "I don't know. He did smile at you earlier, so I think your chances are better than they were. Just keep doing the best you can and cause no problems."

"I will," he asserted.

Reneeke nodded. "We *both* will."

They sat quietly while Seward worked. Jaikus had his eyes closed and head leaned back, resting against the wall. He had almost fallen asleep when Reneeke jostled his shoulder.

"He's done."

Coming awake, Jaikus saw Seward and Charka walking toward them.

"It wasn't a trap," Seward explained. "At least, I don't believe it to be. There are three loose stones, not just the one. I believe them to be the triggering mechanism that will open the secret way."

"Did it work?" Jaikus asked.

Seward gave him a half-grin. "We won't know that until *you* try."

"*Me?*"

"You *are* the Springer, after all."

The look Charka gave Jaikus indicated he agreed with Seward.

"Fine. What do I have to do?"

"It's simple really. Press the stones in the correct order, and the way should open."

"*Should* open?"

Seward turned to Reneeke and nodded. "Of course, if your friend gets the order wrong, the results could be disastrous."

"*Of course*," Jaikus said, copying Seward's tone in a less than flattering way. Seward merely grinned. "Any idea what the correct order may be?"

"Nope. You're going to have to trust in your luck."

Reneeke laid a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Do you want me to do it?"

Jaikus shook his head. He would be ashamed if he allowed his best friend to assume a risk that he feared to face. And if Reneeke were to be hurt due to his cowardice, the guilt would be unendurable. "Thanks. But I'll do it."

“All you need do, is put pressure on the stones until you feel a click.”

“Are you certain this will work?”

“No.”

Jaikus paused and glanced at the man to see if he was messing with him. To his distress, it didn't look like he was. Unable to escape this fate, he steadied his nerve, took the lantern and walked down to where the loose floor stones waited.

Three stones bore charcoal lines, markers placed by Seward to indicate which stones to press. Each looked identical to the next. Jaikus had hoped that perhaps there would be some tell-tale marking or deformation which might offer a clue, but was sadly disappointed. Picking one at random, he placed his foot upon it, and braced himself for the unexpected. Then he slowly transferred his weight to the stone and felt it shift under him.

With a quick, downward thrust, he stomped on the stone and stepped back quickly. When he looked, the stone was now recessed half an inch into the floor.

“Good work,” praised Charka. “Now, pick the next one.”

“Be careful,” he heard Reneeke holler from where his friend waited with the others. He cast a glance back over his shoulder and saw Reneeke's encouraging expression. Jaikus nodded, then returned his attention to the task at hand.

Now another. Either it will be the right one, and all will be fine. Or it won't, and he may not live much longer. Moving in front of the charcoal-striped stone nearest the end of the passage, he gently placed his foot upon it. Then just as before, he stomped on it hard while a fraction of a second later, jumped back.

Again, he completed the maneuver without eliciting a response. The second stone was now recessed into the floor half an inch same as the first.

“I think you got it,” said Charka. “Now do the third.”

As he moved into position, he heard Seward say, “I hope this works.”

Having successfully depressed the first two stones, he had some confidence in his chances of surviving the third. Setting his foot atop the stone, he put his full weight upon it, this time without the leap backward. Beneath his foot, he felt a click and a rumbling sound came from before him.

A section of the wall began sliding into the floor.

Chapter 9

“Lucky guess.”

Seward's voice could not negate the feelings of relief and satisfaction Jaikus felt at seeing the wall slide open.

"Way to go, Jaik!" Reneeke's shout of congratulations, on the other hand, did much to bolster those feelings.

"Yes. Well done indeed." Charka came up from behind and slapped him on the back. Gazing into the opening, he asked, "Now, what do we have here?"

The opening of the door revealed a passage equally as large and well formed as the one in which they now stood. A pair of torch sconces sat as sentinels several feet from the opening, one to either side. Both were empty.

"Looks like a passageway," Jaikus replied.

Charka nodded. "Let's see where it goes." He then gave Jaikus a slight nudge to get him moving.

Relief and satisfaction quickly gave way to nervousness and fear as he once again proceeded into the unknown. Shining the light before him, he moved to, and then through, the newly formed opening.

After his last experience, he gave the floor a much greater scrutiny. Though how to tell if there were more loose pressure plates similar to those encountered before was something about which he hadn't the faintest clue.

Upon reaching the pair of sconces, the light from the lantern revealed another pair farther down. He was beginning to wonder if similar pairs would be encountered at regular intervals when the floor dropped out from beneath him.

A cry of fear escaped him as he started to plummet. Arms and legs flailing to find any means by which to halt his fall, he felt the rope about his middle snap taut. The abrupt halt caused him to slam into the side of the shaft. Then he heard from above. "Look out, Jaik!"

Horror filled him as he glanced up toward the call. Small sections of the walls to which the torch sconces were attached, were rotating outward and down. He had but a moment to ponder this new development before, from out of one sconce, a liquid gushed forth.

Twisting and pushing himself along the side of the shaft, Jaikus fought to avoid coming into contact with the liquid. Was it acid? Poison? An image flashed into his mind of the equipment in Keeler's back room, the ones the smith had claimed an acid trap had destroyed.

Despite his best efforts, some of the liquid hit him as it passed. An involuntary cry and much contorted thrashing later, he realized it was not acid at all, but oil. Possibly lamp oil.

"Catch it!" he heard Charka yell.

Something else fell from above. Its basic shape was spherical, but misshapen. He tried to do as instructed and catch it, but the object slipped through his grip and vanished into the darkness below. Two seconds later, he heard the object strike the bottom. There was a flash, then fire sprang to life forty feet below. As the smoke began to rise, he felt a tug on the rope. The others were drawing him from the shaft like a bucket from a well. When he reached the top, Reneeke was there to grab him by the hand and pull him the rest of the way out.

"Are you okay?" his friend asked, concern evident in his voice.

Smoke issuing from out of the shaft caused him to cough, but he nodded. “Yeah, Rene. I’m fine. Now I understand the need for the rope.”

Reneeke grinned. If Jaikus was able to quip a response like that, he would be fine.

Jaikus glanced back to where a good section of the passageway had fallen away. “Another trap?”

“Looks that way,” affirmed Charka. “You must have tripped it when you passed through.”

Reneeke shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t?” asked Charka.

“No, sir.” Gesturing back to the hole bellowing smoke, he said, “It doesn’t feel right. I think that Jaikus tripped the trap when he pressed the stones to access this secret area. They opened the way, true, but they also triggered this trap to catch the intruder after he passed through. By lulling us into believing any wards had been circumvented, we stumbled into the trap quite readily. Without the rope, Jaikus would be dead.”

“True enough,” Jaikus agreed.

“I don’t know about that,” Charka argued, then shrugged. “Anything’s possible.”

“It was a nasty one, too,” Seward added, appreciatively. “Not only was it designed to drop the intruder down a pit, but it poured oil and dropped a Pyra stone to finish the job.”

“Is that what that was?” Jaikus questioned. “A Pyra stone?” He recalled someone shouting for him to catch the falling object, which he had failed to do.

Charka nodded. “That it was. Strike a Pyra stone hard enough, and it will ignite.”

“So that was how the oil caught fire?”

“Exactly. When the Pyra stone hit the bottom, it did so with enough force to cause it to ignite and the oil went up in flames.”

Jaikus swallowed hard. “If it hadn’t been for the rope...”

“You would have been roasted alive. Provided of course that the fall hadn’t killed you first.”

“Wicked,” Reneeke exclaimed. “Oh, that reminds me, Bella said he would take any Pyra stones you find. Claimed to have a buyer wanting some.”

Charka grinned. “I’m sure he would. They are in high demand by the magic users. Am I not right, Kate?”

“You are. The Tower always pays well for such.”

“Maybe there are more where that one came from?” Reneeke suggested. Glancing toward where the section of the walls had settled before dropping their lethal cargo, he couldn’t see any means to access the inner workings of the trap.

Seward shook his head. “You would have to find the trap’s back side. The stones are worth some gold to be sure, but not enough to warrant us wasting our time trying to get to them.”

“Indeed,” Charka agreed. Coming to Jaikus, the *Troupe* leader asked, “Are you able to continue?”

Jaikus nodded. “I think so. Just a little shaky.”

“I’ll continue as Springer for the next bit,” Reneeke offered.

“Very well. That may be for the best.”

“Thanks,” Jaikus said as he untied the rope from around his middle and handed it to his friend.

“No problem.”

Once the rope was securely in place, Reneeke moved to the edge of the shaft. He could readily leap the four foot gap to the other side. But before he did, he couldn’t help but look down at what was left of the fire burning far below. Gauging the distance to the bottom at around sixty feet, he was glad that Charka had insisted they use the rope. Without it, Jaikus wouldn’t have fared nearly so well.

About to leap across, he paused when a thought occurred to him. Glancing over his shoulder toward Charka, he said, “I wonder if there is anything at the bottom of this pit.”

Seward laughed. “They wouldn’t stash their treasure in such a place.”

“That’s not what I was thinking,” he explained. “Perhaps Jaikus wasn’t the first to run afoul of this trap. Could it be possible that someone else happened this way in the past? What’s left of them could be lying down below.”

“They’d be nothing but dust by now,” replied Charka. “It would have to be centuries since the last person wandered these passages.”

“I wasn’t thinking about their body, but what they may have had *on* them; treasure, and what-not.”

A calculating look appeared in Charka’s eyes. “Can you see anything down there?”

Reneeke glanced back down the shaft. “I can see shadows in the firelight, but nothing definite.” Grabbing hold of the rope already tied to him, he shook it then asked, “Want me to take a look?”

Charka nodded. “Might be worth the time. Go ahead.”

Seward joined him on holding the rope as Reneeke moved into position. With one hand holding it, and the other gripping the lantern, Reneeke scooted over the edge. As his weight came full upon the rope, he glanced to the two holding him secure and nodded.

Down into the shaft he went. Charka and Seward let out the rope slowly, keeping his descent steady and manageable. Jaikus stood at the lip with Lady Kate to observe his progress.

Smoke continued rising from the shaft, though it was beginning to taper off now that most of the oil had been burned off. In the light of the dying fires, Jaikus and Lady Kate could see that the bottom of the shaft was littered with debris.

“Your friend has a good head for this business.”

Jaikus nodded. “Reneeke has always been smart. Or perhaps *creative* would be a better way to describe him. You can always count on him to approach a problem in a way unexpected. Often, advantageously.”

Below, Reneeke had reached the halfway point. “He’s halfway there,” she told the two playing out the rope. “How is the rope holding out?”

“I think we may have enough,” Charka replied. Panning out more, he and Seward kept lowering the young Springer closer to the bottom.

In the shaft, Reneeke was close enough now to direct the lantern's light downward to reveal what treasures might await at the shaft's bottom. The smoke had continued dissipating until now it was barely a hindrance.

Three sets of bones laid in various states of repose across the bottom. Two were human, one was not. Of the humans, one had a cracked skull while the other looked to have broken his leg upon impact. He wasn't sure what the nonhuman one may have been, but there was a sword lying across its midsection indicating the creature had been sentient. Reneeke was fairly certain the sword did not belong to the two human skeletons as they each had swords of their own.

His feet alighted upon the stone bottom and the rope grew slack. "I'm here!" he hollered.

"Anything?" came Charka's question.

"Yes! Give me a moment and I'll give you a full inventory." He looked at the glitter of coins and jewels that laid scattered about, as well as several other items that he wasn't sure what they were. "Toss down my pack!" A moment later, he saw the brown leather pack freefalling toward him. Once he had it, he began scooping up valuables.

The human skeleton's swords were in bad repair. As pitted and rusted as they were, Reneeke thought that even Keeler would refuse them. He stepped on the blade of one and felt it crumble beneath his foot. *How long would it take for a blade to be reduced to such a state? Centuries? Longer?* He may never know.

On the other hand, the blade of the nonhuman was still in good shape. It looked rather plain with a simple, unadorned crossguard. There was no filigree or anything else that might indicate it to be more than a simple blade. Taking the sword, he noticed that it felt lighter and better balanced than the one he carried. Running his finger down the business end he discovered that it still held an edge. Reneeke removed his blade from its scabbard and slid the new one in. The fit was a bit loose as this new blade was slightly narrower, but it would work. Since his old sword wasn't worth much, he left it lying on the floor of the shaft. He felt certain Charka would not begrudge him this new blade.

The glitter of gold drew his attention to the skeletal hand of one of the humans. Two rings rested upon the bony appendages. One was a plain, golden band, and the other was silver bearing a ruby set in white gold. He knew Charka would like the second one.

Once he had gleaned everything of value from among the misfortunate trio that had long ago succumbed to the trap far above, he hollered that he was ready to be pulled up.

"Excellent job," Charka praised when Reneeke emptied the contents of the pack onto the passageway floor. And as he had thought, Charka zeroed in on the ring with the ruby. "Yes. Excellent indeed."

Lady Kate on the other hand was more interested in the objects gathered along with the coins and jewels. There were four: a six inch branch that looked like it had been taken from a willow tree; a crystal orb whose center was the color of aquamarine; and a pair of black, onyx-like spheres that had irises etched into their surfaces. What her supposition may have been as to the properties, or lack thereof, of the items was forestalled by Charka's announcement that it was time they continued on.

“We can give this all a more thorough examination upon our return to camp.”

Nodding, Lady Kate put her items into her pack while Charka and Seward divvied the rest between theirs.

“Doesn’t Reneeke get something?” Jaikus queried. He knew better than to ask about himself.

“Your shares will be given upon our return to Reakla.”

Jaikus was less than thrilled, but Reneeke took it in stride.

Pulling his new-found sword from the scabbard, he said, “I also found this.” Reneeke held it out for Charka’s inspection. “It was better than my previous one, so I took it.”

Charka nodded to Lady Kate who took possession of the sword. After the metal glowed blue for a brief time, she said, “There is a definite aura to it.”

“Magical?” Jaikus asked.

“To some degree, yes.” She handed it back to Reneeke. “I detect nothing malignant about its prowess.”

Reneeke glanced to Charka before taking the sword back.

“Keep it,” the *Troupe* leader said. “For without your insightful proposal of investigating the shaft, it would have remained there along with these other treasures. Consider it a bonus. It will not be accounted against your share of the profits.”

“Thank you.” Taking back the sword, he flashed Jaikus a grin before resheathing it. His friend was green with envy.

Charka shrugged.

“Can you tell what the, uh, *aura* does?” Jaikus asked Lady Kate.

“Not without expending much more time and effort. If he wishes to know more, he will have to do that on his own. Olaf’s would have scrolls to do the trick, though they are a bit pricey. It might be wiser to invest your take from this venture in armor and other items. Or maybe even training at the Guild should you become a member.”

“*Other items?* You mean like healing scrolls?”

She nodded. “Exactly. Olaf has something he calls the Basic Pack. It’s a dozen scrolls for less than it would cost to buy singly.”

“Thanks. We’ll keep that in mind.”

Over by the shaft, Reneeke leapt across the opening to land safely on the far side. Moving down only a short distance, he waited for the others to cross before continuing. Once Charka and Seward made the crossing, he directed the lantern’s light to shine down the passageway, then proceeded into the unknown.

The passageway continued straight for fifty feet before it was clear they approached another room. Slowing his pace, Reneeke scanned the floor ahead for irregularities as he went. He reached the room without incident.

“Got a room up here,” he hollered over his shoulder.

“Anything in it?” Hurrying forward, Charka came to stand behind his Springer.

Starting on the right, Reneeke panned the light slowly across the room. Midway through, he paused when a square, iron-bound wooden box entered the field of light. Its sides were

composed of wood, though the wood was in an advanced state of decay. The box's left side sagged noticeably.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?"

"A chest, maybe?" Reneeke queried.

"Definitely." He then had Reneeke finish panning the light through the rest of the room, whose effort revealed another doorway in the wall to their left. The sagging, iron-bound box was the sole occupant of the room.

Bringing the light back to settle upon the chest, Reneeke asked, "Want me to check it out?"

"If you wouldn't mind?"

Reneeke directed the light toward the floor before him, gave it a once over, then carefully began making his way across to the chest.

"It will be your turn when we continue," Charka told his other Springer.

Jaikus merely nodded as he watched his friend's progress.

It's a trap!

That thought was very much on Reneeke's mind. He may not have been a thief, but something like this chest, left all by itself out in the open, said something was not quite right. Logically, he couldn't fathom why it would be left in such an exposed way, except perhaps, to tempt the unwary into doing something fatal. Like what he was doing right now.

As his proximity to the chest narrowed, so too did his pace slow. He rotated the iris of the bulls-eye lantern in order to focus a more direct beam of light upon the chest. There were definite cracks in the wood, some large enough to expose that which was contained within. The lantern's light was being reflected off of something metallic and bright from the inside.

The lock was an internal one with a keyhole waiting invitingly. He had no great desire to try and open the chest. To do so would most likely be extreme folly. Reneeke pictured himself being sprayed with acid, or perhaps struck by a dart covered in the most deadly of poisons, along with a dozen other situations bards had peppered their stories with. Each tale contained a more gruesome outcome than the one before.

He hadn't realized he had remained motionless for an extended time until Seward hollered, "Are you going to open it or not?"

"Yeah!" he hollered back. Gazing at the keyhole, he added silently, *but not this way.*

Taking in the advanced decay and rot undermining the integrity of the chest, an idea came to mind. Moving around to the side of the chest, he kicked the rotten wood with as much strength as he could muster.

Splintering under the blow, the wood of the chest collapsed, but not entirely as the iron bands held bits and pieces of it together. He could now clearly see items of gold and silver forming a small pile within. Another kick completely obliterated what remained of the wooden chest. Simultaneously, a liquid spray exploded outward from the chest's front to coat a sizeable area of the floor.

Reneeke began sifting through the remains of the chest as the others entered the room and approached. He glanced to Charka, grinned, and asked, "Did I do that right?"

Laughing, Charka nodded. "Boy, you did that perfectly. We'll make an adventurer out of you yet."

There were five more of the golden disks, six gems of varying sizes and colors, what once had been a book but all that was left was the hard, leather binding that had bound the pages together, and a dagger long succumbed to the ravages of time and rust.

Charka divided the booty between himself, Seward and Lady Kate. Jaikus couldn't help but look longingly at the treasure his earlier misjudgment would probably keep him from ever sharing. He knew that at least Reneeke would receive a part, and that his friend would share with him.

Coming to Reneeke's side, he started untying the rope from around his friend. "My turn."

"You know, Jaik, this is easier than they led us to believe."

"So far, I would have to agree with you. But we aren't out of it yet." He glanced to the dark doorway he would be leading the others through. "The worst could be yet to come."

"If we keep our wits and do nothing stupid, I believe we will survive this."

"Rene, I sure hope so."

Securing the rope around his middle, he then waited for the signal from Charka for him to get going. When it came, Reneeke moved to the rear with Lady Kate, and Jaikus headed for the doorway.

Another passageway made a quick left turn not far from the room, then continued unabated for only a short distance before coming to where it widened to twice its former size. Three pedestals sat centered in the passageway, three feet apart. Made from gray marble, they were but two feet in height. Atop each sat a small statuette. The one atop the first pedestal was of a miniature, naked man; its face similar to that of the faces carved on the walls. The second statuette was of a little tree, possibly oak. On the last pedestal rested a simple, three inch silver cylinder. Dark runes were inscribed upon its surface.

Jaikus came to a stop a good six feet before the first pedestal. "What do you make of this?"

The others came up behind him and looked at the naked man, the tree, and the cylinder.

"Decorations perhaps?" Reneeke suggested.

Charka didn't immediately answer. "It's possible. Kate?"

"There is definitely magic at work here," she replied after a moment of spell casting.

"I don't suppose it's the good, helpful kind of magic?" Jaikus asked.

"No, it isn't." Turning her attention upon the young Springer, she said, "To put it bluntly, it's more the '*You come close and I'll fry you*' kind."

"Wonderful," Jaikus groaned.

Shining the light so it illuminated the passageway beyond the three statue-bearing pedestals, he saw where the walls again narrowed, bringing the passageway back to its original width.

Charka kept silent as he contemplated what they should do. The words of Lady Kate weighed heavily upon him. He desperately desired to find out what lay at the end of this passageway, but he didn't want to needlessly throw away the lives of his Springers. True, that's what they were there for, but he had just enough of a conscience not to do so simply because he could.

Turning to Lady Kate, he asked, "Is it passive?"

“The magic?” she asked. When he nodded, she said, “I can’t be sure. What I can be certain of is that it’s strong, and that it permeates the area in and around the three pedestals. It may react if we try to pass, or it may react only if we move the statuettes, or it may not react at all. But I get the feeling, that should the magic react, it will be bad. *Very* bad.”

Face turning grim, he struggled with vying emotions: greed and caution. In the end, greed won out. He glanced to Lady Kate and she could see the decision in his eyes.

“You can’t.”

“It’s what we are here for,” he replied. Turning to Jaikus, he indicated for the Springer to continue down the passageway.

Jaikus looked at him with undisguised horror. “You can’t be serious. After what she just said?”

“Merely pass through,” Charka instructed. “Touch nothing.”

“But...”

“But nothing. Fulfill your contract, or leave.” He met Jaikus’ gaze with one of grim determination.

A quick glance to Reneeke showed him to be just as fearful as was Jaikus. “Good luck,” he said.

“Thanks.” Mouth dry from nervousness and fear, Jaikus almost hadn’t been able to get that single word out. Turning toward the pedestals, he could feel his legs trembling.

“...it’s more the ‘You come close and I’ll fry you’ kind.”

Lady Kate’s words kept running through his mind. Doing his best to banish them to the nethermost recesses, he took a step forward.

“Hug the wall,” she advised. “Keep as far away from them as you can.”

“I...I’ll do that,” he stammered, without bothering to glance back.

He took another step forward, moving closer to the wall at the same time. Eyes glued to the statue of the naked man, he cautiously took a third.

Was it his imagination, or were the naked man’s eyes tracking his movements? His fourth step brought him within arm’s reach of the pedestal. The overactiveness of his imagination was dispelled when he moved out of the naked man’s line of sight. Having made it this far with no ill affects, he took two more quick steps, then paused.

Glancing back to where the others waited, he saw Charka, Seward, and Reneeke all maintaining a grip on the rope. Just behind them stood Lady Kate. In her right hand she held a black, rune-inscribed wand.

“You’re doing great,” Reneeke said encouragingly.

Moving once again, he quickly came abreast of the tree statuette. Back when he stood with the others, it had looked like a regular, normal tree. But now that he was closer, could see that the leaves of the tree were in an advanced state of wilting. Slightly curled in on themselves, each leaf looked like a hand, frozen in the act of curling in on itself to form a fist. The entire aspect of the diminutive tree disturbed him far more than had the naked little man.

Several rapid steps took him past the tree and brought him near the final pedestal atop which rested the silver cylinder. Passing his eyes over the dark runes marring its surface made his skin

crawl. Of the three, the cylinder unnerved him the most. Why it should be so, he couldn't even hazard a guess. Moving past, he was just glad the three pedestals and their objects were behind him. And that he was still alive.

"I made it!" he cried.

Back at the other end, Charka had Seward follow, with Reneeke waiting until Seward traversed the pedestaled area and joined Jaikus, before following.

While waiting for the others, Jaikus directed the lantern's light into the as yet unplumbed section of the passageway, curious to see what may lie ahead. He was surprised to discover that the light was being reflected, or rather refracted, by a glittering circle just beyond the lantern's reach.

"Look at this," he said to Seward when the man reached his side.

"Hmmm, interesting," was all the reply he received.

The circle drew his gaze. Curiosity impelled him to take a step forward. But the rope drew taut, preventing him from proceeding.

Seward jerked the rope another two times. "Wait for the others."

Charka was the last to pass through the pedestaled area. When he arrived and saw the circle glittering farther down the passageway, he indicated for Jaikus to continue.

His Springer nodded, took two steps forward, then collapsed.

"*Jaik!*"

Reneeke shouted his friend's name as he raced forward to render what aid he could. Charka grabbed him by one of his pack straps and jerked him back. "Hold up there, lad."

"But Jaik needs me!"

Ignoring him, the *Troupe* leader signaled Lady Kate who cast a spell toward their unconscious Springer. "Dart," she announced.

"Haul him back." Pulling the rope quickly, Charka, Seward, and Reneeke dragged Jaikus back to where they stood.

Lady Kate had already drawn forth a small flask from her pack by then and knelt down next to Jaikus' head. Seward knelt on the other side and held open the Springer's mouth while she poured a portion of the flask's contents through the parted lips. She then stoppered the flask and set it aside.

"Here's the culprit," Charka said as he drew forth a small dart from where it lay embedded within Jaikus' neck. "He must have triggered some sort of trap." To Seward he said, "See if you can find it."

Seward nodded then moved to carry out his leader's request.

Reneeke knelt beside Lady Kate. "Will he die?"

"Not if I can help it. I gave him a powerful antidote, which negates the effects of almost all poisons."

He looked to her with great anxiety. "What if the poison isn't one of the ones it negates?"

She turned a serious look upon him. "Let us hope that is not the case." Returning her attention to the one lying before her, she moved his head to expose the area just below his left ear that had been struck, and gasped.

It was swollen an angry red with a single, dark vein gradually making its way downward along his neck. They watched as it drew ever closer to where the neck merged with the upper body.

“Give him the rest of it,” Charka said.

This time, Reneeke parted Jaikus’ lips while Lady Kate emptied the flask into him. Again, they turned his head to the side. The line of red had stopped its downward progression.

“It’s working,” Reneeke announced with relief.

Lady Kate wasn’t so assured of the potion’s effectiveness, but kept her concerns to herself.

“Come on, Jaik.”

Then, the line slowly began to fade and the swelling subsided. In a matter of minutes, all redness was gone. When his eyes fluttered open, Lady Kate said, “Thank the gods.”

Feeling weak as a kitten, Jaikus glanced from face to face, uncertain as to how he came to be lying on the passageway floor. “What happened?”

“You were hit by a poisoned dart,” Lady Kate explained.

“Yeah, man. It was ugly. But she fixed you up with an antidote. Now you’re right as rain.” Reneeke couldn’t help but smile.

“We’ll take a short break so you can recover your strength,” said Charka. To Lady Kate he added, “If he hasn’t recovered in that time, give him a healing draught as well.”

She nodded, then had Reneeke help her in moving Jaikus against the wall where he could sit in greater comfort. Producing the less than appetizing trail rations, she handed them to her two Springers and they ate while Seward worked to discover the mechanism by which Jaikus had triggered the dart.

Chapter 10

“It was just another pressure plate beneath a floor stone,” Seward explained. “There are three. I marked each with a bit of charcoal. Make sure you don’t step on them.”

The dart that had laid Jaikus low was now nestled safely within a bit of rolled leather at the bottom of Charka’s pack. He informed his two Springers how thieves back at the Guild often paid for samples of hitherto unknown substances.

“Poisons, you mean?” Reneeke asked.

“Yes, lad. Poisons. And considering the way it brought your friend down, this one should fetch quite a bit.”

Ever the killjoy, Seward added, “Unless they already know about it.”

Charka shrugged. “Still, it won’t hurt to bring it back.”

Reneeke took the Springer duty as Jaikus was still in no condition to adequately perform the function. Rope now tied about his middle, he stood before the stones marked with lines of charcoal. He made sure to avoid them as he navigated the trapped area and continued down the passageway.

The first thing he became aware of, was the circle of refracted light Jaikus had seen shortly before being struck by the dart. It glittered in an explosion of rainbow color that gradually increased in luminosity the closer he came.

Unlike Jaikus before him, he didn't fail to pay attention to the floor as he went. Good thing, too, as he came across another two stones that shifted beneath his feet. In neither case had he put any great amount of weight upon the stones, and thus, avoided tripping the trap. He signaled the stones' position to those that followed, then continued on.

Reds, greens, blues, every color imaginable seemed to be part of the dazzling circle. It wasn't until coming to within ten feet that he saw how the circle was composed of a myriad of tiny gems, and that it surrounded another stony face. This one, however, was different. Its eye sockets were vacant cavities, as was the mouth.

Intent as he was on watching the floor and viewing the display of color, he failed to realize they had reached the end of the corridor until he was almost upon it. Reneeke glanced back to his leader. "Dead end," he announced.

Charka came to stand next to his Springer and contemplated the gem encircled face before them.

"I would advise against removing any of those gems," Lady Kate warned.

"Magic?" Reneeke asked.

"Yes."

"Is there another hidden way to uncover?"

Lady Kate nodded. "It looks that way."

Reneeke gazed at the face on the wall. Every face previously encountered had been identical from one to the next. The fact that this one was not could in no way be a coincidence.

As if they were thinking the same thing, Charka said, "Accessing the next area must have something to do with the face."

"I thought that as well," Reneeke commented.

"Maybe we should put a gem in its mouth or something," Jaikus suggested.

"Don't be foolish," Seward argued.

"I agree," Charka said. "Such a course of action would provide little in the way of results."

"No," Reneeke said as he turned to his friend. "Probably not." Then he glanced toward Lady Kate. "But maybe something else..."

"Such as?" she queried.

"If I'm not mistaken, two of those items in your possession that were recovered from the bottom of the shaft bore the etching of irises? And wouldn't those same items fit perfectly within the empty sockets of the face?"

Unshouldering her pack, she said, "You may be right." Once she had it opened, she reached in and pulled out a small, velvet pouch. Untying the golden, velvety thong keeping it closed, she poured the two marble sized objects onto her palm.

"Yes, indeed," Charka said. Glancing from the face, to the two items, then back again, he nodded. "They would fit perfectly."

Jaikus looked confused. "How did they get down at the bottom of that trap?"

The Troupe leader shrugged. "Could have been a thief who acquired the items, yet ran afoul of the trap before being able to use them."

"If that's the case," Seward began, "then the third item, that uh, *orb*, may fit in the mouth."

Lady Kate reached into her pack and removed the crystal orb whose heart was aquamarine. Stepping close to the face, she held the orb before its oral cavity. It was a perfect fit.

"But the question is, should we?" Turning her attention toward Charka, she added, "These items, the eyes and the orb, are imbued with magic. Setting them within the face could start something we would be in no position to stop."

"Or, by doing so, we could gain access to a treasure trove," he argued.

"That is true." Lady Kate continued to meet the *Troupe* leader's gaze. "Is the reward, worth the risk?"

"We don't even know if there is anything worthwhile to be had," Reneeke stated. "For all we know, we could be opening a long lost prison of some demonic monster that upon release, will kill us and then lay waste to the world."

Seward shook his head. "Boy, you've been listening to too many bards."

"I am simply saying that we should proceed with caution," Reneeke explained.

"I agree," Jaikus chimed in. "With being cautious that is."

Lady Kate still held Charka's gaze. Moving the orb closer to the face's mouth, she asked, "Shall I?"

There was only the briefest hesitation on his part before Charka nodded. "Yes."

Then she glanced to Reneeke who shook his. "It's a bad idea. Better to leave with nothing, than die a rich man."

Seward nodded when her eyes came to him. "It's what we are here for. Let's see what happens."

Then she turned toward Jaikus. "I say no. So it is now two for it, and two against." She gave him a grin. "It's all up to you."

"This ain't up to him," Charka argued.

"His life hangs in the balance as does the rest of ours. He will be allowed his vote."

Charka scowled, but knew it would do no good arguing with her once her mind was set upon a course of action.

Jaikus saw Reneeke shake his head for him to declare negatively. But then Charka said, "Boy, if you say yes, I'll forget all that's gone before. When we return, I will do everything in my power to see that you are allowed to join the Guild."

He couldn't believe it. Glancing to Lady Kate, he asked, "Does he mean it?"

"Oh, yes. I'm sure he does."

Reneeke shook his head vehemently. “Don’t you do it, Jaik.”

A Guild member! Dashed hopes were made new. How could he do otherwise? “Sorry, Rene. Let’s do it.”

“So be it.”

Lady Kate slowly moved the crystal orb toward the mouth. When it was but a hair’s breadth away, a force from within the face’s mouth drew the orb out of her hand and sucked it into the opening. Such unexpectedness startled her, but when nothing further developed, she calmed.

Next were the two round objects with irises etched upon their surfaces. This was against her better judgment. Unfortunately, she couldn’t come up with a valid reason *not* to go through with it. Moving the two objects before the face’s eyes, she again felt a force reach out and pluck them from her hand, only to draw them into the empty sockets.

Aquamarine began to swirl deep within the orb that now resided within the mouth of the face. The color within began to spiral.

“It didn’t open anything,” Jaikus observed.

She shook her head. “No, it didn’t.” Unable to take her eyes from the color fluxation within the orb, she slowly pulled her wand from out of her sleeve.

“Then what...?”

A sudden burst of color from the gems surrounding the face cut short his inquiry. Taking a step backward in apprehension, he cried out when a wave of color exploded outward from the gem-shrouded face, then was drawn back into it. He gasped when he saw the eyes *move*. The irises turned upon him and he knew that the face understood he was there. Then they passed from him and took in each of the others in turn. Charka was the last, and when the eyes left him, the mouth began to speak.

The orb was no longer present within the mouth. Stony lips moved with perfect fluidity as words of a long dead language issued forth.

Lady Kate was quick to react. Speaking arcane words, her hands moved swiftly in accompanying gestures as she cast a *Spell of Understanding*, and the face’s words were no longer incomprehensible.

...or you will surely perish as had Nevinixi in the last days of Koetha. Let darkness arise and light to fall, before death comes to call.

As the last vestiges of the word “*call*” faded away, the gems around the face once more flashed in brilliance, this time expanding outward to completely envelope the humans before it. One moment they were engulfed by intense color, and the next, found themselves standing in a dark room.

Shocked to say the least, Reneeke turned about but found nothing but a stone wall behind him.

Charka drew his sword, as did Seward. Seeing the pair with blades in hand, Jaikus followed suit. “Wh...where *are* we?” Jaikus asked, his tremulous voice cutting through the silence of the room.

“Be quiet!” Charka commanded, his tone indicating that he wasn’t about to put up with being disobeyed.

Four pillars in the middle of the room rose to form the points of a square. Centered within the pillared square was a golden statue that easily stood a head and a half taller than any of them. Its hands were outstretched to either side with palms up. Upon the right palm rested a diamond the size of a man’s fist, on the left was a crudely formed stone of blackest night.

Set around the room were a dozen pedestals, each bearing a bowl made of precious metals and decked out with gems. When Reneeke panned the lantern’s light toward the nearest of the bowls, its light was refracted back by the myriad of gems contained within.

“We found it!” Charka cried.

“Yes, we did,” Seward agreed.

Moving toward the bowl of gems which Reneeke’s light illuminated, he reached in and scooped out a handful. Rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and more were gripped within his fist. That single handful could ensure a man lived to the end of his days in grand style. And there was more, oh so much more, still within the room. ““We’re rich!”

At sight of the treasure, Jaikus lost what nervousness their sudden translocation had produced. Sheathing his sword, he quickly joined Seward next to the bowl. About to reach in, he felt Reneeke place his hand upon his shoulder and pull him back. Glancing back, quite ready to berate his friend for undue caution, Jaikus’ retort died on his tongue when he saw the expression on Reneeke’s face. His friend wasn’t looking at him, but at Seward. Turning his gaze upon the focus of Reneeke’s attention, he gasped and backed quickly away.

“What?” asked Seward. Then he glanced toward the hand holding the gems, it was the color of gray ash. He looked on in growing fear as the grayness steadily darkened toward black. “*Cursed!*”

It wasn’t only his hand that had been affected, but his face as well.

As Charka cried “*Scroll!*” and raced forward, the whites of Seward’s eyes began to darken, and the pupils flattened into ovals.

Gems fell to the floor as the hand grasping them spasmed. Seward looked in abject terror at the hand as its transformation from gray to black quickened from one heartbeat to the next. Then in a voice a full octave deeper than it should have been, cried, “What’s...happening to me?”

“Don’t touch him!” Lady Kate shouted to the others. Scroll now in hand, she came forward and held it out so Seward could grasp the other end. As soon as his fingers tightened around the parchment, she spoke the activation word.

A burst of white light exploded outward from the scroll, its energy being immediately drawn into Seward’s hand. Jaikus watched in wonder as the surface of Seward’s skin grew luminous as light traveled beneath his skin from the hand, up his forearm, until finally disappearing beneath his tunic. A heartbeat later, the sub-dermal light appeared throughout the rest of his body, giving his skin a subtle, luminous glow wherever it was exposed. When the luminosity reached his face, he collapsed.

Charka was there to catch him and laid him out upon the floor. “Is it working?” he asked.

“Hard to tell,” she explained. “What has hold of him is far more powerful than anything we’ve previously encountered.” There was a second scroll in her hand.

The two Springers looked on in horror. Neither of them, even in their darkest dreams, could ever have envisioned something akin to what they were witnessing unfold before them.

“Hang in there, Seward,” Reneeke encouraged. But it didn’t appear as if the power of the scroll was going to be sufficient to counteract whatever it was that afflicted Seward. Patches of darkness began fighting off the encroaching luminosity faster than it could spread. Areas that once had glowed with the power of the scroll, were gradually returning to their darkened state.

“Use the other one,” said Charka.

“It’s our last,” Lady Kate warned. “I told you before we left that we needed more of these.”

“I don’t care.” His man was dying. “Do it.”

Lady Kate nodded. This time, she placed the scroll beneath Seward’s tunic so it would touch his skin before activating it. Light flared again. Instead of the luminosity the first scroll had produced, the second application caused Seward’s skin to glow a ghostly white.

Battles of light and dark waged across the surface of Seward’s skin, only this time, it appeared as if the light was winning. Areas of darkness fell beneath the onslaught of light and didn’t reappear.

“It’s working,” Lady Kate announced.

Seward’s skin slowly began regaining its normal, healthy appearance. Even his eyes returned to normal. The final part of his body to be free of the curse, was the hand where it had begun. Once the scrolls had run their course and he had been completely restored to normalcy, Lady Kate administered a few drops of a healing potion to give his body a boost in repairing any lingering damage.

She glanced up from her patient to Charka and the two Springers. “I wouldn’t touch anything in here if I were you.”

Jaikus swallowed hard as he nodded. Reneeke simply said, “I didn’t plan to.”

Charka wasn’t at all happy. Bowls of gems, enough to last several lifetimes of extensive debauchery, were simply waiting to be harvested. *And none of it could be touched!*

Looking down at the still comatose Seward, Reneeke asked, “What was it, exactly, that happened to him?”

“Stupidity,” Charka replied. “All this wealth made him forget the cardinal rule of adventuring.”

“And that would be?”

“Never assume anything is safe. Usually, he’s rather smart about such things.”

Gesturing to the room about them, Lady Kate added, “Quite often, places like these are warded by curses. They act fast and are almost always lethal to the one who runs afoul of it.

“Seward was lucky in that we never start an adventure without scrolls blessed by priests to counteract the curses of their evil counterparts.” She then flashed Charka a glance. “*Usually*, we have more than just two.”

“Time was short and we had to get our Springers before rendezvousing with Hymal.”

“Time wouldn’t have been short if you and Seward hadn’t tied one on the night before,” she said accusingly.

Jaikus interrupted what was sure to be a rehashing of an old argument by asking, “Will Seward be okay?” Bringing everyone’s focus back to their recently afflicted comrade, he said, “Reneeke and I can carry him if we need to.”

Lady Kate gave him a smile. “Thank you for the offer, but I think he will come around in a little bit.”

“In the meantime...” said Charka, “let’s take a look at where we are.” To Lady Kate he added, “Cast your *Spell of Detection* on the room, if you please, so we may see where the hot spots are located.”

“You can do that?” Jaikus questioned.

She merely nodded. “Keep an eye on Seward until I’m done.”

“Sure thing.”

Coming to her feet, Lady Kate moved as close to the four columns as she could without entering the area between. Then as arcane words flowed from her, she slowly rotated until she had faced every part of the room. Upon coming full circle, she raised her hands.

Jaikus watched as her hands clapped three times, and then heard her exclaim, “*Ey-uhd.*” Instantly, blue lights flared into being throughout the room. Each of the bowls and their contents glowed brightly, as did the diamond and dark stone resting upon the statue’s hands.

Charka nodded. “At least we know.” Glancing around the room, he frowned as everything of value glowed blue, indicating they were cursed in one way or another. It was at that time that another detail of the room, one that had been overlooked before, finally registered. The room lacked an egress. *There was no way out!*

A slap brought his attention back to his man upon the floor. Having struck him across the face in the hopes of awakening him, Lady Kate now gently shook his shoulder.

“Seward?” she asked. About to strike him again, she saw his chest suddenly rise and fall as he took a deep breath.

Eyes popping open, they settled into a half-open state. “Am I dead?”

“Yes, you are,” she replied with a grin. “Or at least, you almost were.”

Very weakly, he raised his hand and was greatly relieved to see the normal skin tone.

“It took *two* scrolls,” she explained, “but I think you will recover.” Then taking his hand, she squeezed gently and asked, “Can you feel this?”

He nodded. “Yes. It’s a bit tingly, kind of like it feels after having fallen asleep and is trying to wake again.”

“That’s good.” When he tried to sit up, she placed a hand upon his chest to keep him down. She didn’t have to exert much pressure to have her way. “Lie down and rest while you can. You are weak as a kitten.”

Seward ceased his attempt to rise, grinned, then laid back down. “If you say so.”

“I do.”

Glad to see Seward recovering from the curse’s effects, Reneeke brought the lamp over to where Charka now stood gazing at the statue of the naked, golden man.

“Seward’s going to be all right,” he said.

Charka nodded. “Glad to hear it,” he replied without moving his gaze from the statue.

“It’s just like the miniature one we passed earlier.”

“Almost. This one has its arms raised.”

“Do you think it represents a god of some kind?” asked Reneeke.

“I haven’t a clue,” he shrugged. “I’ve never seen the likeness before.”

“It could have been meant to represent nothing more than just a man,” offered Jaikus. Having come up behind them, he too took in the golden man.

“We have a problem, lads,” Charka told his Springers. “There appears to be no avenue by which we can leave this room.”

Jaikus quickly glanced toward each of the four walls. Each appeared quite solid with no evidence of doorway, or any other form of egress. “How are we to get out?”

“Same as we came in,” Reneeke answered. “If magic was the means by which we arrived, it stands to reason that magic should be the means by which we depart.”

Charka nodded. “Quite possibly.”

“I wish we could have heard the entire message given by the face,” Reneeke said. “The parts we missed may have divulged the means of our escape.”

“What *did* it say, exactly?” Jaikus asked. “Something about death, wasn’t it?”

In a close approximation to the voice of the face, Reneeke said, “...*or you will surely perish as had Nevinixi in the last days of Koetha. Let darkness arise, and light to fall, before death comes to call.*”

“Obviously, there is a chance of our perishing. If only Lady Kate had cast her spell quicker.”

“What about that part where ‘*darkness arises and light falls*’? Could that refer to the end of the day when the sun goes down?” Jaikus looked to his friend, more than to Charka, for an answer. Years of habit were difficult to overcome.

“It doesn’t feel right,” his friend replied with a shake of his head.

“I agree,” said their leader.

“Or the curse?” Jaikus asked. “Seward turned awfully dark after scooping up those gems.”

“That wouldn’t make much sense, Jaik. The people who built this place wouldn’t want to go through being cursed just to leave. No, there must be another meaning.”

“Or none at all,” Charka added. “It wouldn’t be the first time when the sole purpose of an age-old message like that was to mislead intruders.”

“You mean, give them the wrong clue so they make a fatal mistake?” Jaikus asked. He was shocked by such a revelation.

“It’s been known to happen.”

Reneeke paid their conversation little heed. He loved a good riddle, and this sure was a dilly. The part ‘*before death comes to call*’, seemed to indicate that if they didn’t figure out what darkness must arise and which light fall, they wouldn’t live to see the outside world.

Light...Darkness...

Those two words *had* to be the key to getting out of there. He just knew it. The room offered little in the way of clues. Aside from the golden man, there were only the four columns, and

pedestals bearing the cursed bowls full of gems. No inscriptions, pictographs, or any other markings were in evidence anywhere. The room, for all its grandeur, was rather plain.

Charka wandered over to where Seward lay. "How are you doing?"

"Aside from the fact I'm 'weak as a kitten', to use Lady Kate's words, I'm feeling good and glad to be alive."

"I thought you were a goner for sure."

"So did I when I saw my hand."

"That should teach you to help yourself to another person's treasure."

Seward gave him a grin. "At least before Lady Kate has said it to be safe."

She harrumphed. "Like you are ever going to be so cautious." Glancing over to the two Springers, she saw that Reneeke had entered the column area and stood very close to the side of the statue as he gazed up toward the golden man's left armpit.

To Charka she said, "You better go see what trouble your Springers are about to get into."

"What?" he asked as he turned to look. As soon as he saw where Reneeke stood, he shouted, "*Get away from there!*" and stalked forward.

"They pivot, Jaik," Reneeke said, just before Charka's outcry.

Seeing their leader en route to administer a good tongue-lashing, both lads stepped away from the statue.

"What in the name of all the gods do you think you are doing?" Gaze directed upon Reneeke, his ire at the perceived lack of judgment was quite evident.

"Trying to figure a few things."

Charka eyed him quizzically. "Such as?"

"For one, both of the statue's arms are hinged." When he saw that their leader failed to understand the significance, he added, "The arms can move up and down."

"So?"

Reneeke directed Charka's gaze to the hands of the statue. "If you will notice, a diamond has been set within the statue's right palm, while in the left is a stone of blackest night." He paused a moment to let that sink in. "One is light, one is dark, and the arms upon which they rest move up and down. Or in other words, they *rise* and *fall*."

Nodding, Charka replied, "I see where you are going with this. But both the diamond and the stone are cursed, same as the gems."

"True, the stone and diamond are cursed, but the arms are not." Which was true, the glow from Lady Kate's spell had not been apparent on any part of the golden appendages. "We should be able to raise one and lower the other without risk of meeting a fate similar to what Seward experienced. In doing so, *darkness* will rise and *light* shall fall."

"Providing your assumption is correct."

"True."

Charka contemplated the situation. "If you are wrong, simply touching the arms could curse the one making the attempt."

"I don't think that will happen."

"Are you willing to take that risk?"

Reneeke glanced over to where Lady Kate sat with Seward.

“Understand lad, that if the curse afflicts you, we have no more scrolls to counter it.”

“I know.” Then he shrugged. “But this is what a Springer does, right? Be the one to tempt fate?”

Jaikus was not happy about the course of action his friend was contemplating. Turning to their leader, he asked, “Isn’t there anything else we can try?”

“None that readily comes to mind,” Charka replied. “Your friend’s logic is sound.” Then he glanced to Reneeke. “But before you try, we should examine the walls of the room in greater detail. There may be a switch, or something else, that might open a hidden way.”

“Time thus spent would also allow Seward to further recuperate,” added Lady Kate from her position at Seward’s side.

“I’m not that bad off,” he objected.

Laying her hand upon his chest, she applied gentle pressure before saying, “Fine, then. Get up.”

He tried to rise, but the minimal pressure her hand exerted kept him down. Struggle though he may, Seward could not produce enough force to overcome her efforts. Finally giving up, he resigned himself to further rest.

She merely chuckled and took her hand from off his chest.

Charka led his two Springers to the nearest wall. Gesturing to their right, he said, “You two check that way. Be careful, and if you find something, anything, let me know immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” Jaikus replied.

Over the course of the next half hour, the three of them combed the walls for any sign of a way to leave the room. During that time, Lady Kate’s detection spell ran its course, causing the blue glows throughout the room to vanish. When at last the three secret door seekers came together at the opposite side of the room, Charka was forced to admit that Reneeke’s idea about moving the statue’s arms would have to be attempted.

“I don’t like it,” he said, once he and his Springers had returned to where the other two waited. “Too many dire things could happen.”

There was silence for a moment before Reneeke asked, “Do you want me to do it?”

Charka glanced to Lady Kate. “Any suggestions?”

She shook her head. Then to Reneeke she said, “Good luck.”

“Thank you.”

Leaving the others, he made his way to the statue of the naked, golden man. First, he moved to the arm on the left, the one with the black stone. Very cautiously, he placed his hands against the underside of the statue’s forearm, and pushed. The arm moved a fraction of an inch, then came to a stop. He tried using more strength, but the arm simply would not budge any farther.

The thought that perhaps the other side had to be moved first prompted him to leave the left arm and crossed over to the right. This time, he grabbed the forearm and pulled down. Again, just like the left arm, it moved only a miniscule distance before coming to a halt. Reneeke even

tried lifting his feet from the ground, causing his entire weight to hang from the arm, yet even that failed to accomplish anything. He finally let go.

“I can’t get them to move,” he hollered to the others.

“Maybe your theory was incorrect,” Charka replied.

Reneeke was certain that it wasn’t. Then an idea occurred to him. “Jaik, come here and give me a hand.”

Moving to his friend’s side, Jaikus asked, “What do you need?”

“It could be that the arms must move simultaneously. You push up on the left while I pull down on the right.”

Not looking very thrilled at being in such close proximity to the cursed item resting within the statue’s palm, Jaikus moved to do as requested.

Reneeke grasped the arm once again. When Jaikus was ready, he said, “Now.”

He pulled down, Jaikus pushed up, and the arms moved.

“It’s working,” he said and strained all the harder. Jaikus did the same. Together, they managed to move the arms twenty degrees before they would move no further. As Reneeke let go of the arm, he heard a grinding noise coming from behind him. A section of the wall was slowly sinking into the floor. They had found the way out.

Chapter 11

At Charka’s urging, Jaikus lent Seward a shoulder as they made ready to leave. Reneeke, with rope still secured about the middle, took lantern in hand and directed its light into the opening as he approached. Therin he discovered a tunnel extending outward at a slightly upward slant. Narrower by half than the previous passageways encountered, the tunnel continued past the reach of the lantern.

“Looks like an escape route,” Charka commented as he came to stand beside his Springer.

Reneeke nodded. “And unlikely to be trapped, wouldn’t you think?”

“Yes, I would. But then I wouldn’t trust my life to that assumption either. Be careful.”

Flashing him a half-grin, Reneeke stepped through the opening and made his way through the tunnel.

Charka followed, all the while keeping a firm grip upon the rope, just in case Reneeke ran afoul of another trap. Behind him came Lady Kate, with Jaikus aiding the still much weakened Seward.

The tunnel continued its upward slant for a good hundred feet before coming to a dead end. Attached to the stone wall at the end was a sliding bar whose end was firmly ensconced within a receptacle cavity in the wall on the right.

Getting the go-ahead from Charka, Reneeke slid the bar free of the cavity, and pushed on the stone wall. It slid open several inches before coming to a stop. Sunlight filtered in through the newly formed opening.

"It *is* an escape route," he concluded. For a moment, he stood with face upraised, reveling in the sun's warmth.

With Charka lending his strength, he and his Springer managed to push the wall far enough to allow for their passage. They discovered that the secret exit had been built as part of a wall, less than thirty feet from where they originally began their exploration earlier in the day.

"*We made it!*" Jaikus exclaimed jubilantly.

Charka glanced to the sun. "Still have several hours left."

"You can't be serious," Lady Kate objected. "Seward is in no condition to continue rooting around through ancient buildings."

Turning a questioning look toward his man, Charka asked, "How about it?"

Legs trembling, dots flashing before his eyes from the exertion of having traversed the tunnel on their way out, panting and feeling as if he was on the verge of passing out at any minute, Seward replied, "Sure. Let's go."

All it took was a glance and Charka could tell by Seward's pale countenance and the sweat dotting his brow that he was at his end. The welfare of his man outweighed the possibility of recovering further treasure. There was always next time. "You're right, Kate. We'll return to camp."

With the prospect of triggering traps now no longer a concern, Reneeke untied himself from the rope. Then after returning it back to Charka, went to lend his aid in supporting Seward.

"At least this trip wasn't a total loss," Charka stated as they left the site of the recently explored ruins. "We did recover a few items that will bring a coin or two."

"Thanks to Reneeke," Lady Kate added.

The Springer shrugged, or at least as well as he could with Seward's arm draped across his shoulders. "It was nothing."

"*Nothing?* I would hardly call gems, rings, and new sword for yourself, nothing."

"I suppose. But those aren't the treasures I'm glad to have brought out with us."

"Oh?" she asked. "You have something else?"

"You know you are supposed to inform Charka of any treasure you find?" Seward's voice was raspy from exhaustion.

Reneeke smiled. "I am referring to my life, and Jaikus'. Going in, it seemed one or both of us were doomed to not return."

"You can thank Seward for that," Charka explained. "If not for his current condition, we would even now still be delving into the unknown."

They found that their camp had remained undisturbed. Everything was exactly as they left it.

“Master Hymal hasn’t returned?” Jaikus observed.

Lady Kate shook her head. “We won’t see him until just before dawn. That is when he normally returns.”

She directed the two Springers to bring Seward near the fire-ring and lay him down.

“I tell you, my strength is coming back,” Seward complained.

During the last half hour of their return, Seward had been blustering about how he no longer needed to be coddled, that he could walk on his own. It hadn’t been until they allowed him to make the attempt, and the ensuing crash to the ground, that he had finally ceased his squawking. Now however, his objections at having to rest resurfaced.

Lady Kate knelt beside him. Then just as she had before, she placed her hand on his chest. “If you can get up, I’ll leave you alone.”

Time had rejuvenated his strength to the point where he managed to gain a sitting position against her efforts to keep him down. “Perhaps you are no longer in such a poor condition after all.”

Pale from the exertion, Seward breathed a bit harder than he should. As sweat once again formed upon his brow, he said with some forced bravado, “See.”

She gave him a smile. “Just don’t go wandering off and collapse.”

He knocked her hand from where it still rested on his chest. “I’m not a baby that needs to be looked after.” Pulling his flask from out of his pack, he took a long drink.

Lady Kate glanced over to Charka. “I think he’ll live.”

“He better,” their leader replied. “I don’t fancy having to haul his carcass back through the Swamp.”

Draining the last of the water, Seward flashed him an annoyed look. “You won’t have to.”

“Good.” Charka had just settled down and begun breaking out some rations when the shadows of his two Springers fell upon him. Looking up, he glanced to Jaikus who was slightly more forward than Reneeke. “Yes?”

“We, uh,” Jaikus said before pausing a moment to clear his throat. “We were wondering if you wouldn’t mind if me and Reneeke did a little more exploring.”

“Haven’t you lads had enough for one day?”

“We thought to have a look through that building I investigated this morning.”

Acquiring a stern look, Charka’s glance passed from one Springer to the other, then he chuckled. “I suppose you can’t get into too much trouble, seeing as how we have already gone through there a couple of times. It should be safe.”

Jaikus’ eyes lit up. “Thank you.”

Charka nodded. “Be back by sundown.”

“We will,” he assured their leader. Then indicating for Reneeke to follow, Jaikus said, “Come on, Rene.”

As they rushed off to explore on their own, Lady Kate moved to sit next to Charka. “Think they will find anything?”

“No. But I well understand the need compelling them.” He watched the pair disappear before starting in on a package of trail rations.

Before they entered through what Jaikus now understood to be a window, Reneeke insisted they secure themselves together with one of their ropes. When it looked as if Jaikus was about to object, Reneeke reminded him that the rope had already saved his life once. “Despite Charka’s assurance that this building is secure, I would feel better if we used the rope.”

Jaikus gave in and tied the rope around his middle.

Since the lantern had remained back at camp, they each lit one of their torches supplied by Bella. Then with Jaikus taking the lead, they entered the building and quickly passed through the room with the mural depicting a Keep under siege. After that, he made a beeline for the darkened area that earlier he had figured to be a way down. He wasn’t disappointed. A spiral series of steps led to the unknown depths below.

“Isn’t this great?” he asked as he quickly began taking the steps down. The sheer ancientness of the place made him giddy with excitement.

Reneeke nodded. “Yeah.” In the back of his mind, he knew they wouldn’t find anything as Charka and his crew had already covered this area. But there was still an element of thrill in the hunt.

They descended the steps to the next level, only to discover they continued still farther. “Let’s see how far down we can go,” Jaikus suggested.

Shrugging, Reneeke replied, “Sure.”

After giving the room on this new level only a cursory examination, Jaikus continued down the steps to the third level. Again, the steps continued down where they ended at the fourth and Jaikus pressed on.

“We’re quite a ways down now,” Reneeke stated as he left the steps and entered the fourth level. Jaikus simply nodded as he took a quick look around.

The room was of average size with a single doorway looming in one wall. Naught but dust and a carcass left behind by a long ago scavenger was to be found. Jaikus moved to the doorway and passed through into a hallway lined with doorways spaced every twenty feet.

Pausing at the first, he moved his torch within the room and saw where dirt had cascaded through a window from the outside to form a large mound. A brief glance at the rest of the room revealed nothing of interest.

Moving on, he encountered further rooms that must have been located along the outer perimeter of the building as each bore windows and held similar mounds of earth. After the tenth such room, they encountered another series of steps leading down. Jaikus glanced to Reneeke who nodded for him to continue.

They descended deeper beneath the surface; making their way down to the fifth level, then the sixth, until finally coming out into a room on the seventh.

“Can you believe it, Rene? We’ve come down almost a hundred feet.”

“I wonder how much farther until we reach what would have been ground level in Sythal’s time?”

“I don’t know.”

Level seven was little different than the ones preceding it. The only real difference was that the passageway leading from the room was slightly wider. Such a change could possibly indicate that they were getting close to the original “ground level.”

Not far after leaving the room, they came upon a gaping hole where the floor should have been. The hole was roughly the same size as the trap that had attempted to drop Jaikus to his death. Moving to the edge, they peered down into the shadowy depths below.

“Think there could be treasure down there like last time?”

Reneeke shrugged. “Possibly.”

Jaikus laid his torch so the burning end extended past the lip of the opening. “Lower me down.”

Reneeke set his torch down as well, then grasped the rope. Once Jaikus had swung his lower half from the passageway and into the opening, Reneeke lowered him down.

Jaik grabbed his torch as he fully entered the pit.

This trap’s shaft wasn’t nearly as deep as the other, merely fifteen feet. Aside from the two-dozen, foot and a half barbed spikes set in the floor of the shaft to impale the unwary, there was naught to find but a single, human skull skewered by one of the spikes.

Disappointed, Jaikus hollered up to Reneeke, “Nothing here. Lift me back up.” As he neared the top, he heard Reneeke say, “Can’t expect to find treasure all the time.”

“No. But it would be nice to bring *something* away.”

“If you expect to do that, we first need to find an area Charka has yet to explore.” Reaching down, he took Jaikus’ hand and hauled him the rest of the way out.

“How do you propose we do that?”

Reneeke shrugged. “Haven’t a clue.” He reclaimed his torch.

Leaping across the opening, they continued down to the next doorway. There, they discovered another windowed room full of dirt. Only this time, the window was not completely clogged with earth. In the lower left corner, a small hole had been bored out by what may have been some small, burrowing animal, and not that long ago either. For beneath the hole, loose dirt cascaded its way to the floor. Jaikus entered the room to give the hole a more thorough inspection.

He was no stranger to gophers, moles, and other burrowing animals, they were enemy number one when you lived on a farm. Though he couldn’t tell exactly which one had made the hole, he was certain that the hole couldn’t have been more than a day old.

Moving the torch so its light could pierce the hole’s dark interior in full measure, he peered down its length. Three feet in, something glittered in the torchlight. *Excitement!*

“There’s something in there!” Jaikus cried.

“What?” Stepping closer, Reneeke tried to see what had caused Jaikus’ excitement. When his friend moved aside to allow him to peer into the small tunnel, he saw where the glittering object was still buried within the dirt filling the window. That only a very small portion was visible. However, that small portion glittered like gold.

Jaikus stuck the end of his torch in the pile of earth beneath the window. “Give me a hand,” he said as he grabbed a rock and began scrapping dirt from out of the window.

Picking up a flat rock suitable for excavation, Reneeke set to with gusto. "I bet Charka never knew this was here."

"No way," Jaikus agreed. Excited with the untold possibilities of what it could be, he scrapped with fevered enthusiasm.

Dirt flew and the pile beneath the window grew larger. The hole widened until they were finally able to excavate the dirt surrounding the glittering object. It was revealed to be a hand, a human hand.

As more dirt was removed, the hand turned into an arm. The arm in turn was attached to an upper torso. Removing still more dirt revealed a head attached to the torso.

"It's a statue," Reneeke announced. Covered in dirt, his dust-tinged face streaked with rivulets of sweat, he grinned. "I don't think we'll be able to carry it out, Jaik."

"What do you mean?"

"A statue of that size, made entirely of gold, would weigh far too much for us to move, let alone haul it up eight flights of steps."

"Oh, come on. It can't be that heavy!" Encouraging his friend to move aside with a well placed nudge, Jaikus crawled into the recently excavated cavity and grasped the hand. He shook it, causing clods of dirt to be dislodged. "See?" he said. "I can move it." Then, giving it one last shake, he started backing out of the cavity when the hand moved.

In stunned silence, Jaikus watched as the portion of the statue they had thus far uncovered shook, then toppled backward. He could hear a solid thud as the statue came to land somewhere below.

"Rene!" Jaikus shouted.

"What did you do?"

"I...I don't know. Hand me one of the torches."

When Reneeke passed him the burning brand, Jaikus climbed further into the hole with torch held before him. "Oh man, Reneeke." Voice filled with awe, he glanced back over his shoulder. "You have *got* to see this." Scooting forward, he disappeared into the hole.

A circle of over a dozen statues, each looking to be constructed entirely of gold, leaned toward a central point at a roughly forty-five degree slant. Their upper ends had come to rest against the bole of what appeared to have been a massive tree. Its upper reaches couldn't be seen as an earthen dome had formed over the backs of the statues, leaving an opened area beneath.

Half a dozen other, smaller statues were either standing, or lying, within the dome's interior. Three others were partially encased within the earthen wall of the dome, just like the first one had been before Jaikus dislodged it, causing it to topple over.

Sliding down the embankment to the area below, Reneeke said, "This is incredible." The reflected light from the golden silhouettes gave the area a surreal glow.

"How much do you suppose these would be worth?"

"More than a man could ever hope to spend," Reneeke replied. "Though I doubt if any of these could be brought to the surface." Stepping toward a small statue of a fawn, he tried lifting it. Strain though he might, all he managed to accomplish was to rock it slightly on its base. "Far too heavy."

“Too bad.”

Jaikus went to the bole of the tree and was surprised to find it rock-like. “This is stone!”

“It is?” Leaving the fawn statue, Reneeke joined his friend at the tree. Running his hand along its surface, he nodded. “It sure enough is.”

“A tree statue?” Jaikus questioned.

Shrugging, Reneeke replied, “Why not?”

Turning his gaze toward the statues forming the ribcage of the dome, he shuddered at the thought that they were watching them. Why he felt that way he didn’t know.

“We must be at ground level,” Reneeke surmised. “This may have been a garden, or perhaps a plaza.”

“I wish there was more here than just statues,” Jaikus complained. “A ring, or better yet, a sword like yours would be great.”

“True. Though we couldn’t keep it.”

“Why not?”

“Anything we find belongs to the group,” Reneeke explained. Jaikus made a rude noise. Reneeke fixed his gaze upon his friend. “That is what we agreed to, and that is what we will *do*.”

Jaikus frowned, but finally nodded beneath Reneeke’s withering gaze. “I suppose.”

They spent some time going over the statues and testing the earthen wall of the dome, though not too intrusively. The last thing they wanted was for the dome to lose cohesion and crash down upon their heads. When they failed to turn up anything, they made their way back through the window.

“Sythal must have been a great place in its day,” Reneeke observed. Following Jaikus from the room, he allowed him to take the lead.

“You may be right.” Not really thinking about what his friend was saying, Jaikus instead had visions of hidden areas secreted in the building’s basement. “Wonder if we can find another stairway leading down?” he mused. A short time later, they did.

It was after coming across what had once been the entrance hall. Most of the large room was choked with dirt, having come through the massive opening that at one time held a pair of double doors. They followed one of the several passageways still opened to them from the hall and came to a fair sized room to which three other, smaller rooms were attached. It was in the middle room of the three that they discovered the stairwell; a flight of narrow, stone steps descending in a tight spiral.

Before they went down, Reneeke took a moment to study the floor area surrounding the stairwell entrance. When he saw the holes where hinges had once been attached, he nodded to himself. “I thought so.”

“You thought what?” questioned Jaikus.

“Oh, that there had been a trapdoor. Whether it was hidden at one time or not is hard to tell.” He flashed Jaikus a grin. “I like it when I’m right.”

“Aren’t you always?”

Reneeke laughed. “You know me better than that.”

Jaikus joined in with laughter of his own. “Even still, you *are* right more often than I am.”

“You simply need to take the time to see what’s before you. Why, just take a look...”

“Not again, *please*,” he interjected, cutting his friend off. Reneeke had for years tried to explain how and why he did things, explanations that did little to improve the way Jaikus saw the world. He simply figured Reneeke was smarter than he about such things and left it at that.

Jaikus took the lead as they headed down to what he hoped to be the dungeon, or basement. *What treasures could be waiting in the dark for a pair of intrepid adventurers to uncover? Jewels? Gold? Magic rings?* How he had always wished to have a magic ring all his own.

Spiraling around three times, they finally came out at a passageway extending straight ahead. As they made their way from the stairwell, Jaikus’ torch illuminated something they hadn’t seen before in all of Sythal: a door.

True, there wasn’t much left of it. Constructed entirely out of metal as it had been, the door sat skewed in a doorway with a covering of rust reminiscent of an animal’s fur coat. Jaikus drew his knife and tapped upon the door with the tip. The door disintegrated with the first blow to collapse in a cloud of rust.

Taken by surprise, Jaikus jumped backward as the cloud of rust spread throughout the passageway. “I guess that’s why we haven’t come across any other doors,” he surmised.

“Yeah,” Reneeke agreed.

Once the rust cloud settled, Jaikus moved to the doorway and extended his torch to the room beyond. As he made to enter, Reneeke grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him back. “We need to be extra careful from here on out.”

“Why?”

“I don’t think Charka and the others ever made it down here,” he explained. When confusion appeared on his friend’s face, he explained. “The door, Jaik. If they had come this way, they would have been the ones to have caused its collapse, not you. I seriously doubt if Charka would have forwent taking a look at this room because he didn’t want to ruin a door.”

“You mean, there could be treasure down here?” he asked excitedly.

Reneeke nodded. “Treasure, *and* traps. Keep in mind, Jaik, that we don’t have any healing scrolls or potions should things go badly for us. And it’s a long way back to the surface.”

Jaikus took a moment to digest that. When he was done, he said, “Let’s go until we find something. Then we’ll head back to the surface.”

“Okay. It’s probably getting late anyway. Just be careful.”

“You worry too much.”

Reneeke’s eyebrows creased in a frown as he asked, “After what we’ve been through today...?”

Turning back to the doorway, Jaikus stepped over the remains of the door and into the room. He could feel tension on the rope as Reneeke kept a firm hold on it in the event Jaikus ran into trouble.

Evenly spaced recesses dotted the wall across from the doorway as well as the walls to the right and left. Each wall held four, two rows of two, one atop the other. In the dim torchlight, they discerned that each recess contained something. Eager to discover what awaited them, Jaikus crossed to the *quad* in the wall opposite the doorway.

Three held mounds of red powder, the remains of metal having long succumbed to rust. The fourth held a crude black stone. As it was almost an exact duplicate of the stone Lady Kate's spell had indicated was cursed back in the underground room, Jaikus decided to play it safe and pass it by. After all, there were still eight more recesses to check.

Next he headed over to the right side and found only disappointment. Each of those four recesses held nothing but mounds of powder. One mound still retained the shape of the object it had once been: a small, curved-bladed knife. Jaikus blew on the knife's shape and caused a small cloud of rust to fill the recess.

On his way over to the left side of the room, he glanced to where Reneeke waited in the doorway. "Nothing," he announced. "Not one thing has survived intact except one of those black, lumpy stones like what that golden naked-man statue had held in the palm of his hand."

"The cursed stone?"

Jaikus nodded. "I thought it best not to touch it."

"Good thinking. We'll have to let Charka know it's down here so maybe he could recover it on his next trip."

The remaining four recesses held but four more piles of rust as well. Jaikus was not happy. He had figured to come away with at least something after all this.

"Are you ready to head back up to the surface?" Reneeke inquired.

"Not yet, no," he replied as he made his way from the room and re-entered the passageway. "Let's first see what's at the end." Taking the lead once more, Jaikus proceeded down the passageway.

The next room yielded nothing of interest, and the one after that was just as lacking in treasure. Hoping the third to hold something of interest, he hurried along, a little too fast as it turned out. For just before reaching the doorway, the floor fell away beneath him.

Screaming, his arms and legs flailed wildly before the rope snapped taut. The suddenness of the halt brought his outcry to an end with an, "*Oof.*" As he crashed against the side of the shaft, the torch slipped from his grip.

"Are you okay?" Reneeke's voice came from above.

It took a second or two before he could get his wind back. "A bit sore around the middle from the rope, but I would rather have that, than hitting the bottom." Glancing downward, he saw where the torch struck the bottom some forty feet below. *This was a deep one!*

"Do you want me to pull you up?"

Jaikus searched the floor at the bottom before answering. He could see the barbed spikes protruding upward to snare the unlucky that ran afoul of the trap. In the flickering torchlight, it looked as if there might be something down there, but it was hard to tell. The shadows kept shifting as the torch's flame flickered wildly.

Maybe it was his turn to be observant, or perhaps it was simply the years spent with Reneeke that caused a thought to cross his mind. "Rene? Should a torch be burning quietly, or wildly when it sits at the bottom of a hole?"

"It should burn fairly steady. Why?"

“The torch slipped from my hand and is now lying down there. The flame is whipping around pretty good.”

“The only thing that would cause such an occurrence is a breeze, and you don’t get those at the bottom of a hole,” Reneeke explained.

“Unless there is some sort of access at the bottom, like a tunnel?”

There was quiet for a moment before Reneeke, replied, “I take it you want me to lower you down?”

“Is there enough rope? It’s still forty feet to the bottom.”

Another silence, then, “I think so. It will be close.”

“Then lower me down.”

Chapter 12

At the bottom he found a narrow opening, barely wide enough for him to pass. The breeze was coming from there.

His torch lay among dust, dirt, and naught else. Unlike the pit Reneeke had earlier investigated, during which he had found his sword, this pit was lacking in victims. Either it had yet to claim any, or they had been removed.

After retrieving his torch, he crossed the spike-covered floor to peer into the opening. A narrow passageway extended barely eight feet before turning sharply to the right.

Turning his attention to the rope tied about his waist, he gauged there to be roughly three feet of slack. “Can you lower down any more rope?” he hollered. “I need at least another ten feet.”

“Sorry, Jaik. I’m at the end as it is.”

Jaikus was beginning to contemplate removing the rope when Reneeke said, “Don’t you have a rope too? You could tie the two together. That should give you all the play you need.”

Good ole, Reneeke. He could always count on him to come up with a solution. “Yes, I do.”

“Once you tie them together, I’ll pull up the slack then let it out as needed.”

“Good idea.”

Quickly removing the rope from around his waist, he pulled his rope from out of his pack and secured an end to Reneeke’s. “It’s done. Pull it up.” While the rope began to be drawn to the passageway above, Jaikus secured the other end around his waist. He didn’t have long to wait before Reneeke had taken up all the slack.

Two quick tugs on the rope signaled that Reneeke was ready.

“Don’t let go!” He waited long enough to hear Reneeke’s “*I won’t*” before entering the passageway. From above, Reneeke played out the rope just enough to keep it semi-taut.

Jaikus felt truly alone for the first time as he entered that passageway. Even though Reneeke stood above with rope in hand to pull him out should the situation warrant, he felt isolated.

Perhaps it was the confined feeling the narrow passageway produced, or maybe the fact that he was in a dark, unknown place with no other human in sight that played upon his nerves. But whatever it was, he felt decidedly uncomfortable.

Upon reaching where the passageway crooked to the right, he saw something white lying along the floor just around the bend. It was a leg bone, one of two attached to a complete, human skeleton.

Both legs showed multiple breakages, as did the right arm. The left was stretched above the head, almost as if this person had crawled along and died in the process. Jaikus figured the long dead human to be one who had succumbed to the trap. Having survived the fall, the person had tried to make it out, only to die in the attempt.

Lying next to the skeleton was a sword whose metal had only begun to be ravaged by rust. Stepping upon it with his foot, Jaikus discovered the blade still retained its strength. He found that curious, as every other blade in this long forgotten city had been reduced to rust. This person, like himself, had to have come along at a later time. Interesting.

Aside from the sword, there were metal snaps from what used to be clothing, the material being no longer present. Also, intermixed with the pelvic bones were three small gems, a score of coins varying from copper to gold, and a silver ring. Jaikus gasped when he saw the ring and immediately picked it up.

"I wonder what you do?" he asked as he held it close. There was a single strip of a red metal running along the outer side which was the ring's sole marking. He slipped the ring, gems, and coins into his pouch and thought about continuing down the passage to see what else there may be, when, for a fleeting moment, he caught sight of movement in the shadows ahead.

He froze. His sense of isolation increased tenfold. Sweat broke out on his forehead as he stood still and tried to pierce the darkness for another glimpse of what had moved. Could it have been his imagination? Deciding not to tempt fate any further, he began backing up.

"Yes," he said quietly to himself, "I think it may be time to return to the surface."

Backing away, he held his torch aloft as he kept constant vigil upon the darkness. There was no scent other than that of the earth being borne upon the breeze coming from farther down the passageway. So it couldn't be an animal. Then he came up with the thought: *whatever it was, it couldn't be alive!*

Visions of ghouls, specters, and other nefarious spirits generated an increase in his backward momentum. Imagination running wild, he turned and raced around the corner back toward the shaft.

"*Rene!*" he shouted. "*Get me out of here!*"

He tossed the torch in amongst the floor spikes, and then gripped the rope with both hands as Reneeke hauled him out.

Terror filled him as he slowly began to rise. Images of ghastly hands reaching for his dangling feet prompted him to shout, "*Hurry!*" From above he heard Reneeke holler back, "I'm going as fast as I can, Jaik," as he continued his steady, upward ascent.

It was with great relief when he reached the top and Reneeke gripped him by his pack to haul him the rest of the way.

“What happened?” his friend asked, concern and worry etched upon his brow.

“I...I thought I saw something.”

“*Something?*”

Jaikus nodded. “In the darkness. Something moved!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Rene, I wouldn’t make up something like this.”

“All right, calm down.” Moving to the side of the shaft, he looked down to the torch burning far below. “I don’t see anything moving now.”

Coming to stand next to his friend, Jaikus gazed down to see for himself.

Seconds ticked by and nothing appeared. Jaikus was beginning to think it had been nothing more than an overactive imagination when they saw the torch move. It jerked back and forth, paused a moment, then slid across the floor to disappear into the narrow opening.

“...and me and Rene got out of there as fast as we could,” Jaikus concluded.

After returning to camp, they had spent the last hour regaling the others as to their adventure and what they had found. This last episode produced a guffaw from Seward.

“Probably a mole-rat,” he explained. “We’ve seen them a time or two while exploring the lower recesses of Sythal.”

“Would a mole-rat grab hold of a burning torch?” Jaikus asked. “None that I’ve ever heard of.”

“Hmmm, possibly,” Charka replied. “Though I agree with you that it is unlikely. But it is even more unlikely that you came across a member of the spirit world. If you had, it wouldn’t have been content to merely allow you to catch a glimpse of it. It would have come and introduced itself in unpleasant ways.”

“You got that right,” Seward agreed. “The dead hate the living and will seek to destroy those that still retain life whenever possible.”

Charka nodded. “Now, let’s see those coins and gems.”

Jaikus emptied the items onto the ground between them. All that was, but the ring. Not even Reneeke knew about it, and he intended to keep it that way. Reneeke would make him hand it over.

“Not bad,” Lady Kate said, “for your first solo adventure.” Glancing to Charka, she asked, “Don’t you think we can allow them to keep this?”

A frown creased their leader’s brow. “I suppose so. It isn’t worth that much anyway.”

Jaikus’ eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Yes, lad. Go ahead and keep it.”

“All right!” Scooping up the coins and gems, he slipped them in his pouch, an act which caused Charka’s frown to deepen.

Jaikus caught the change in expression and glanced to the others who wore similar expressions of disapproval. “What?”

“Look, boy,” Seward began, “you didn’t find those all by your lonesome. Shouldn’t you share them with your friend?” His nod toward Reneeke left no doubt as to what he and the others thought.

“What? Of course I am going to share with Reneeke. I wouldn’t think of doing otherwise.”

“Jaik wouldn’t hold out on me,” Reneeke stated. “He and I share everything, right Jaik? No secrets between us.”

“Uh, yeah. Right.” His hand unconsciously went into his pocket where he was keeping the silver ring. He almost pulled it out and announced that he had it. Almost. He simply could not take the chance of Charka demanding that he hand it over. So with feelings of guilt, he divvied up the coins and gems, giving the lion’s share to Reneeke.

After a brief session of going over in greater detail their time spent with the golden statues, and Charka making sure he understood enough about how they reached that area so he could find it on a subsequent venture, they turned in. Everyone was tired, especially Seward who had already nodded off.

Jaikus volunteered for the first watch, with Reneeke taking the second, and Charka finishing out the watch schedule at the end. Lady Kate and Seward would be allowed to get a full measure of rest in anticipation for the return journey in the morning.

While everyone settled into their bedrolls and drifted off to sleep, Jaikus pulled out his ring and almost slipped it onto his finger. Memories of the curse that befell Seward stopped him before completing the maneuver. He intended to find out what properties it held, for good or bad, before putting it on.

All in all, this had been a good Adventure, much better than even his wildest dreams could have come up with. And they had survived! Grinning, he slipped the ring back into his pocket and began pacing the perimeter. When it was time for Reneeke’s turn, he woke his friend and then turned in.

The first rays of morning crept across the land until finally falling upon five, sleeping forms. A sixth sat before the campfire watching a pot of stew as it grew warm for breakfast. Charka added a few more trail rations and half a flask of water so there would be enough for all once the others awoke.

Nearby, Master Hymal lay beneath a blanket, three full packs lying on the ground beside him. He had wandered into camp not long after Charka had taken over the watch and promptly went to sleep without a word.

From past trips to Sythal, Charka knew a little of what the bags contained, but not in any great detail. There were some things Hymal avoided speaking of, and the reagents he harvested was one.

His two Springers, after a rocky beginning, had turned out to be a boon. Having been responsible for the majority of treasure they would be returning with, he couldn’t see himself denying even the smaller one a chance to join the Guild. Of course, just because he put them forward for membership, it didn’t necessarily follow that their acceptance was assured. There were other considerations to be taken into account. Still, he would do what he could.

Not long after the stew bubbled and was ready to eat, the rest of the sleepers began to awaken. True to form, Hymal was the last to shake sleep's grasp.

"Ready for the return trip, Master Hymal?"

The apothecary nodded. "Yes. I was most fortunate in the reagents I found." Which is what he always said, never expounding on what he meant.

The two Springers joined them for stew. During which, Charka filled Hymal in on the highlights of the adventure, spending an extra long time detailing Seward's brush with the cursed gems. "I have half a mind to bring a cleric along next time to see if we can't lift the curse."

Shrugging, the apothecary replied, "Up to you. Just so long as you deliver me here and bring me back in one piece."

"Can we come?" Jaikus asked.

"Sorry, lad. I won't have need of you."

Jaikus was seriously disappointed. Despite his time as a Springer, he had rather enjoyed adventuring with *Charka's Troupe*.

"I'm sure we can find something equally exciting to do," Reneeke added. "Perhaps an adventure with less risk to life, limb..." then with a glance to Seward, added, "and health."

"There are plenty out there, that's for sure," their leader agreed.

Once the meal was over and the pots cleaned for travel, they began their return through Sythal's ruins. When they drew close to the fringe area, Charka had them pause and secure themselves with rope.

Jaikus hated this part. Passing through Sythal's fringe was disorienting and frustrating. And the return trip proved to be just as bad as going in had been. He kept count, and by the time Charka announced that they had cleared the fringe area, Jaikus had been brought up short by the rope a total of nine times when the protective properties of the fringe caused him to wander off on a tangent. Reneeke claimed a solid baker's dozen.

Three nights in the Swamp, and they would be back at Reakla. Jaikus couldn't wait to return and have Charka fulfill his vow to see they became members of the Guild. But first, they had to make it out of the Swamp. And if the inbound trip had been any indication, they should have very little trouble.

Their first day back through the Swamp was stressful as trolls seemed to be in greater abundance than their inbound trip. Each time one was spotted, they remained still and quiet until the beast had wandered off. Jaikus endured stares promising retribution during each encounter, but he had learned his lesson and no longer sought to incur an attack.

The second day was less stressful as troll encounters fell off dramatically. There were but two sightings, one they were forced to fight as their scent had been detected. But since it was but a single beast, they readily dispatched it.

It was during the late afternoon of the third day, about an hour or so before they would have planned to make camp, when things got interesting.

Jaikus and Reneeke brought up the rear. Reneeke led the mules while Jaikus regaled him with yet another rehashing of their adventure in the bowels of Sythal.

"I tell you, Reneeke, we need to find a way back there somehow." Ever since leaving the ancient city, Jaikus has been hot to return. "There's no telling what we could find if we but had the time."

"First of all, Jaik, you would have to discover a way to even find the place. I for one couldn't even begin to retrace our steps. Secondly, a way must be found to bypass the misdirecting wards that seek to lead travelers astray. You figure out how to do those two things, and I'll return with you."

Jaikus rolled his eyes. "I'm not saying we are going to return next week, or even this year. But *someday* we will, Rene. Someday."

Reneeke couldn't help but crack a smile at his friend's enthusiasm.

The others were some distance ahead. As the *Troupe* was beginning to leave behind the worst of the bogs, muck, and mire of the Swamp, things had grown lax. Jaikus and Reneeke had gradually fallen behind so they could talk without fear of being overheard by the others.

Currently, they were making their way along a fairly wide expanse of dry, level ground that ran alongside a small, stagnant pond. The mirror-glass smoothness of the water reflected the thinning forest of moss-covered trees. It was really quite a peaceful locale. At least it was, until a roar heralded the descent of a young mossback from out of a tree to land upon Master Hymal's horse.

Razor-sharp teeth and curved, dagger-like claws raked into the horse's flanks. Master Hymal was thrown free as his horse reared and bucked in an attempt to dislodge the beast. But, before anyone could react, the mossback had completely eviscerated the poor horse.

"**No!**" the apothecary cried as the severely injured horse managed to win its freedom only to bolt away with unbelievable speed. With entrails trailing along behind, Hymal's horse didn't get far before collapsing, but it did progress far enough for it to no longer be the focus of the mossback's attention. With the horse having fled the attack, the mossback turned its attention upon the next closest victim: Master Hymal.

"Stay with the mules," Reneeke shouted as soon as the horse bolted. He handed the mules' reins to Jaikus. Then drawing his sword, he rushed forward to join the melee.

"Rene, no!" Jaikus cried, but it was too late. His friend was already on his way.

Lady Kate's fire bolts impacted along the creature's side in an attempt to draw its attention from the apothecary, but had little effect. The mossback's hide was much too tough and it simply ignored the attack. Snarling, it continued its forward charge.

"To me!" cried a much revitalized Seward. The last two days of travel had done much to return his strength to normal. Wielding sword and shield, he interposed his body between the apothecary and the charging beast. Seward struck the beast a resounding blow along the side of the head, but all his efforts did was elicit a swipe by one of its massive claws. Striking dead center on his shield, the blow knocked him back a step.

Master Hymal was in full flight; the mossback hot on his tail.

Before Reneeke could reach the battle, Charka pulled forth an oil bladder from his pack. "**Kate!**" he shouted, then threw, aiming so the bladder would land in front of the mossback.

His aim was true and the bladder fell between the mossback and its prey. Just prior to it striking the ground, Lady Kate cast a fireball which detonated with the bladder, igniting the oil mere feet before the mossback's snout.

The sudden conflagration caused the beast to halt its forward charge, rear back, and then race off to the side.

Reneeke was now closing fast on the creature. He saw how it turned from the flames with fear maddened eyes. "You didn't like that, did you?" he mumbled to himself.

"Get back, boy," Seward shouted as he and Reneeke came abreast of each other.

The mossback had maneuvered around the burning area and was still closing on the apothecary.

"I can help."

"You'll just get yourself killed."

Ignoring him, Reneeke sprinted ahead to leave Seward struggling to keep up.

"Charka!" Hymal screamed. "*Do something!*" Fleeing for his life, he darted around dead and dying trees. From not very far behind him, he could hear the mossback crashing through the underbrush in pursuit.

Lady Kate cast her *Webs of Binding* around the rear legs of the mossback, causing the creature to slow, but did not stop it. Its powerful hindquarters were strong enough to work against the potency of the webbing, enabling the creature to continue the attack.

"*Hyah!*" Reneeke shouted in an attempt to draw the creature's attention from the apothecary. Seeing it slowed by the webbing, he raised his sword and quickly closed the distance.

"Reneeke!" Charka shouted as he rounded the other side of the conflagration. "Fall back!"

Ignoring his cries, the farm boy from Running Brook hollered at the top of his lungs. Having come within striking distance, he leapt forward to land a fell blow with his sword. Using both hands, he brought it down on an area a little up from where the tail merged with the back.

The creature screamed in pain as the blade parted its hide. To Reneeke's disbelief, the blade sank in deeply, far deeper than he would have thought possible. Flesh and bone parted until the mossback's hind legs collapsed when the blade severed the lower end of the spinal column. His sword was yanked from his grasp when the powerful forelegs twisted its body about so its head was now facing Reneeke.

It seemed for a moment as if the passage of time was suspended; Reneeke stood weaponless facing off against the mossback whose forelegs were readying to lurch forward. Then, time resumed with Seward's appearance at Reneeke's side.

"Get out of the way!" he cried, shoving Reneeke to the side with the front of his shield. In that moment, when his shield was busy knocking aside Reneeke, the mossback sprang.

Leaping forward with incredible speed, it slammed into Seward. The force of the impact knocked him back a foot, and together, he and the beast crashed to the ground. Claws raked across Seward's armor. The creature's first blow created furrows in the leather, the second peeled it off.

Seward tried to interpose his shield between his body and deadly claws, but they were too close for that to work. Then there was pain.

“Die!”

Coming up behind the creature, Charka leapt into the air with sword gripped in both hands. Bringing the weapon down with both hands, he impaled the creature through the opening Reneeke’s strike had created. Angling the blade so it would progress toward the chest cavity, he was rewarded by a piercing squeal. A shudder ran through the creature and its forward body convulsed.

Reneeke moved to grab Seward’s hand and pull him from beneath the creature while it was distracted. The sight almost made him retch. Blood was everywhere. When he pulled, Seward screamed in pain. Unwilling to stop as the creature’s thrashing posed a greater risk than what he may be doing, Reneeke pulled all the harder and slid him free.

“Gods,” he exclaimed when he saw how the front portion of his armor had been ripped asunder. Flayed skin was intermixed with the shredded leather, and he could even see the white of bone underneath.

“Kate!” In the heat of the moment, he neglected to add the honorific. He dragged Seward until the injured man was completely free of any danger posed by the death-throes of the mossback.

She appeared beside him. “Remove his armor. *Quickly!*”

While Reneeke worked to get the gory mess off the man, she upended her pack. Potion flasks, scrolls, and a sundry of other items spilled upon the ground. “Is he still alive?” she asked. A loud groan of pain answered her question.

She grabbed one scroll, and as soon as Reneeke removed the remains of Seward’s armor, she laid it across his chest and spoke the word of activation. Even before the scroll finished flaring and vanished, she had a second scroll in position. Once its power was activated too, she poured half a healing potion onto the wound, and the other into the unconscious man’s mouth.

By this time, the thrashing of the mossback had subsided. Charka, Master Hymal, and Jaikus had gathered around where she worked to keep Seward from expiring.

“Will he live?” Jaikus asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied. Then glancing to Charka she said, “He needs a priest. There is so much damage, I...I don’t know if he’ll be able to recover.”

Charka gauged what remained of the sunlight. “Still two hours until dark, and I figure another six to Reakla. Can we keep him alive that long?”

She nodded. “I think so.”

He turned to his two Springers. “Put him on a mule and let’s go.”

“Bind his chest, first,” Lady Kate said. “Or the ride will more than likely kill him.” She paused then turned and added, “It may anyway.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Reneeke replied.

Master Hymal came and laid a hand on Charka’s shoulder. “I hope your man lives.”

“So do I.” Seward looked none too good. Now unconscious, the pallor of his face was very pasty.

Reneeke had just set Jaikus to tearing one of their bedrolls into strips to be used in binding Seward’s chest when a curse from Master Hymal drew everyone’s attention.

Standing near the spot where his horse had collapsed after being disemboweled, the apothecary was swearing a blue streak. He turned toward Charka, face filled with rage. “My reagents! *They’re gone!*”

Not only were his reagents gone, but the entire horse to which they had been attached was gone as well. A bloody trail was evident. Starting from where the horse had collapsed, it then traveled all the way to the water’s edge. From there, it worked its way around the shoreline until disappearing into the trees farther down. Something dragged it away while they had been distracted by the rampaging mossback.

Turning to Charka, Master Hymal said, “I demand you retrieve them.”

“My man needs a priest or he’s going to die,” he replied. “We dare not spend the time to hunt for something that may never be found.”

“We have a contract!”

“Yes, to escort you safely to and from Sythal. We do *not* have one to chase after what looks to be an adult mossback, on the *off chance* it *hasn’t* dragged its dinner, carcass and all, to the bottom of some pond.” Scanning the area from where the horse had been dragged, he nodded. “From the tracks, I’d say it’s a rather *large* mossback. It would have to be considering it was able to drag away your horse.”

Reneeke listened to the exchange while binding Seward’s chest. Once he and Jaikus had the man up and secured to the back of a mule, he left Seward in the care of Lady Kate, then walked over to where the two men were standing toe to toe.

“Seward’s ready,” he announced.

Charka glanced to him and nodded. “My thanks, lad.”

“Are you going after my reagents?” Hymal asked.

“No.”

“Then I consider this a breach of contract.”

“Take it up with the Guild,” Charka replied. “I have a life to save.” Then turning his back on the apothecary, he stalked away.

“What does it mean when there is a breach of contract?” Reneeke asked Master Hymal.

“It means that he failed to live up to his side of our agreement.”

“But if your reagents were recovered, then there wouldn’t be a problem, right?”

The apothecary glanced to the young man before him. “True.”

“Rene, what are you thinking?” Jaikus asked, though he already knew the answer. Before he could stop his friend, Reneeke said, “Jaik and I will recover them for you.”

Charka paused in mid-stride and spun about. “Are you out of your mind? The two of you, against a fully grown mossback?”

Master Hymal ignored him. “Do you mean it?”

Reneeke nodded. “If it is possible, we shall recover your reagents.” Jaikus didn’t look thrilled at the prospect of going off into the Swamp on their own.

Stalking back, Charka rounded on Reneeke and demanded, “How do you expect to make it back? Can you even find your way to Reakla?”

Pointing off through the Swamp, Reneeke asked, “It’s that way, right?”

“Correct,” Master Hymal answered.

Charka scowled. “Boy, you’ve lost your senses.”

“I do not plan on engaging the mossback,” he explained. “Merely track it and recover Master Hymal’s packs from the carcass.”

Lady Kate came forward leading the two mules. Seward was slumped across the neck of one. “If we wish Seward to live, we best leave now.”

“Right you are.” Then to Master Hymal, Charka asked, “Do you plan to accompany us back to Reakla, or would you rather remain with our two, completely inexperienced and most likely soon-to-be-dead, Springers?”

To Reneeke, Master Hymal asked, “*Can* you recover my reagents?”

“Unless the carcass has been taken somewhere we can’t follow, then yes.”

“Like at the bottom of a bog or something,” Jaikus added, just on the off-chance they failed to retrieve the aforementioned packs.

“There are three packs that contain reagents,” the apothecary said. “Return with them and I’ll give you lads a bonus.”

“Bonus?” Jaikus queried. The prospect of trailing a mossback lost a great deal of its terror at the mention of a bonus.

“Indeed.” Then he turned to Charka. “I would be of little help to these lads. I shall return with you.”

“As you wish.” Then to his Springers he said, “You two be careful. It’s better to come back empty handed, than not come back at all.”

“Don’t worry about us. We won’t take any unnecessary chances,” Reneeke assured him.

Lady Kate opened her pack and handed him two flasks. “These are our last two healing potions. Take them.”

Reneeke hesitated. “Won’t Seward need them?”

She shook her head. “We still have three scrolls. That will be sufficient to see him to Reakla.”

Jaikus quickly snatched the flasks from her hand and slipped them into his pack. “Thank you.”

“If you make it back, stop by the Guild,” Charka said. “I’ll leave word where we can be located.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And good luck, boys. You two have more brass than any Springer I ever had.”

“Thank you,” Jaikus replied with a smile.

And with that, Charka took the reins of the second mule and turned to resume the trek back to Reakla.

Lady Kate gave them both a quick embrace. “May the gods be with you.”

“And with you, Lady.”

She smiled and nodded as she hurried to catch up with Charka and the apothecary. Setting a quick pace, they soon vanished into the trees.

Chapter 13

Standing next to the blood-soaked ground where the horse had collapsed, they saw how the creature had dragged the carcass toward the water, but then had altered course and skirted the water's edge.

"I wonder why it didn't drag it into the water?" queried Jaikus.

To illustrate, Reneeke grabbed a stick from off the ground. Then, stabbing an end into one of the many pieces of horseflesh that had been ripped from Master Hymal's steed, flung it into the water. The roiling of the water as the flesh-hungry little fishes tore into it was explanation enough.

"It didn't want to share."

The bank of the stagnant pond was soft, and the mossback's tread had been heavy. Tracking it wasn't going to be an issue. Reneeke shouldered his pack and made sure it rested comfortably.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Jaikus asked. "Charka didn't seem to think we had much of a chance."

Pack now situated comfortably, he replied, "He didn't think we had much of a chance as Springers either. Yet here we are."

Slinging his own pack into position, Jaikus said, "This is different, Rene. You saw what that other mossback did to Seward, and that was even *after* you had rendered its back half useless." After a quick, nervous glance toward the trees wherein the mossback they were about to hunt had gone, he added, "Charka said the one that took off with Master Hymal's reagents was much larger, too."

Reneeke flashed a serious look toward his friend. "Jaik, if we do this and survive, there's no way anyone would bar our admittance into the Guild." Reneeke could see his friend was having some serious reservations about following after the mossback. "I promise that we will not fight anything. We'll simply find out where it took the carcass, wait for it to leave, then retrieve Master Hymal's reagents." Slapping Jaikus on the back, he added, "Piece of cake!"

"I hope so."

"This is what adventuring is all about, right? Risking life and limb for glory?" But then he grew serious. "Unless of course, you have changed your mind about pursuing a life of adventuring? Returning to the farm would be no disgrace."

Jaikus knew that his friend would be more than happy to do just that. Farm life, though, was something Jaikus simply abhorred. "No, I still wish to join the Guild."

Putting hand to hilt, his face twisted into a wry grin. "Alright then. On to adventure?"

"On to adventure."

Reneeke took the lead as they followed the trail left behind by the thieving mossback. Tracking was simple as there were not only the mossback's tracks, but a wide swath of blood-streaked ground courtesy of the eviscerated equine with which the mossback had absconded.

Upon reaching where the trail left the water's edge and moved into the surrounding trees, Reneeke came to a halt. "We need to be extra careful from here on. Coming up on an animal with a fresh kill can often cause it to attack if it thinks its meal is in any way threatened."

"Not to mention the possibility that the scent of fresh blood could draw other creatures in to investigate," Jaikus added.

"Right. So like my father always said when we were on the hunt: '*Keep your eyes open and mouth shut.*'"

Jaikus merely nodded.

The trees they passed through were by no means closely packed together, yet it still took them some time before the mossback and its dinner came into view. Upon a knoll rising from a point slightly off-center within another pond, the mossback was in the process of greedily tearing into the horse's flesh. Half of the equine carcass still lay within the water. Reneeke was quick to note the lack of any tell-tale roiling which would indicate the presence of the voracious little fish. He deduced that this must be the lair of the mossback. For with the pond being free of the parasitic little flesh eaters, it could take its ill-gotten bounty through the water to the knoll where it could eat in peace. Also, from atop the knoll, it would have a commanding view of anything en route that might make an attempt to abscond with its supply of horseflesh.

Halting some distance from the water, the pair crouched down behind the roots of a toppled tree where they could observe the mossback without fear of being seen. "Look there," Reneeke said, pointing to the packs and saddle which were miraculously still attached to the horse.

Jaikus nodded. "But how are we to get them, Rene? That mossback will hear us in the water long before we reach it."

"Could be it will wander off once it's eaten its fill."

Annoyed by the insects buzzing about, not to mention the slight fact that night was rapidly approaching, Jaikus said, "Light's going to be gone soon." Already, the shadows were beginning to deepen. They had an hour before the last traces of daylight would be gone altogether. Maybe not even that long.

Reneeke didn't answer right away. He kept his eyes directed toward the feeding mossback. "You may be right," he finally replied. "But we dare do nothing until it's eaten its fill."

"But, night is almost upon us."

Shrugging, Reneeke said, "So? Night is going to catch us in the Swamp no matter what we do."

"Then, what *are* we to do?"

He gazed at his friend for a moment before realizing no answer was forthcoming.

Sometime after the sun had set, and before night had a chance to completely take over, the mossback moved off. Sliding from the knoll and into the water, it left the remains of the horse at the water's edge as it disappeared beneath the surface.

Reneeke could sense Jaikus was about to speak, so held up his hand for silence. Eyes scanned the surface of the water. The deepening shadows created a concealing patchwork that shrouded the pond almost to the point where details were lost. Almost.

Accustomed to the ways of animals, especially those inhabiting the mountains near Running Brook, Reneeke knew the mossback probably had a favored resting place that would most likely be both sheltered and secluded. Patience was the key.

A minute ticked by as the shadows continued their descent into full night. Then he saw it, a tell-tale ripple spreading across the pond's surface. It was easy to determine from the ripple's movement where the mossback had settled. Far to their left was a thick patch of moss drooping down from overhanging branches. It was thick enough to hide whatever might be on the other side. It was within that mass of sheltering moss that the creature had gone, he'd bet his life on it.

Pointing toward the moss, he whispered, "It went over there."

Predators, son, are mean and nasty when hungry. But if you wait until their bellies are full, they are prone to be slow and lethargic.

His father's words flitted across his mind as he considered their next course of action. What did he know of mossbacks?

Rene, always know what it is you're hunting. Know what its habits are, what it likes, and what it hates. With his father's words guiding him, he began to recall snippets of previous conversations.

...a mossback's habits were to kill and eat, preferably near water...

...young ones liked to drop out of trees...

...fire....

What did Charka say about mossbacks and fire? *They don't care much for fire and tend to avoid it whenever possible.* He remembered very well how the previous mossback reacted to Lady Kate's fireball.

Turning to Jaikus, he grinned.

"What?"

"I have an idea."

"Is it a good one?"

Reneeke chuckled as he shrugged. "If we survive, yes. If not, no." In the fading light, he could see his friend frown. With a sweeping gesture to indicate the area about them, Reneeke said, "Help me gather some of this dead brush and I'll explain."

Ten minutes later, they stood at the water's edge. Jaikus wasn't any more enthusiastic for this undertaking than when it first had been explained to him. "We're not going to make it. You know that, Rene." They both were able swimmers. It wasn't the fear of the water that had him concerned. Rather, it was the creature lurking beneath the overhanging moss that terrified him to the verge of calling this off and going home.

In his hands he held four branches. The ends of each had had their combustibility augmented with interwoven bundles containing as much of the dead and dried-out material that could be found.

The plan was simple. They would ignite one branch's bundle of combustible material, then slip into the water and cross to the knoll where they would then get the bags containing Master Hymal's reagents. It was hoped that having just gorged, coupled with the mossback's natural aversion to fire, the creature wouldn't sally forth to investigate what was going on in its pond. Should the first branch burn itself out, the next would be lit, and so forth, until they had returned back across the water and reached the shore.

Reneeke ignored Jaikus' prophecy of doom. Taking one of the four, make-shift super-torches from Jaikus, Reneeke used flint to strike sparks until the material caught. In no time, the fire spread throughout the bundle.

Standing up, he glanced to Jaikus. "Ready?" Chuckling when Jaikus shook his head, he stepped toward the water. "Come on." As Jaikus followed, he gestured to the remaining three branches his friend held. "Keep those dry."

Nodding, Jaikus entered the pond. He gasped at the icy water's first touch. "It's cold, Renee."

"So? Can't be any worse than the mid-week baths your mother gave you."

He was, of course, referring to the fact that Jaikus' mother had been a firm believer in a regular regimen of *cold* baths. Once a week, his mother would make him haul buckets of water from the nearby creek for his bathwater. The coldness was supposed to '*purge*' the evil out of him, as everyone *knew* that evil spirits came from a place of fire. Therefore, a good dousing in cold should scare them off. Jaikus' family was a bit stricter than most when it came to such things.

"Don't remind me." Gritting his teeth, he stayed as close to Reneeke as he could while making their way toward the knoll.

They kept constant vigil toward the moss-shroud wherein the mossback lay hidden. Jaikus felt very exposed and vulnerable, feelings that only increased the more submerged his body became. When the water reached his chest, he was forced to hold the branches high above his head to keep them from becoming wet.

"It's still there," Reneeke commented in the quietest of whispers.

In the light from the burning brand, he watched the hanging moss and adjacent water for tell-tale signs that the mossback had taken an interest in what they were doing. Thus far, that area of the pond remained still and quiet, but he figured such a state would not last for long. They were even now crossing the halfway point and drawing near to the knoll.

Chin now raised high due to the water's depth, Jaikus worked his way along the bottom of the stagnant pond. The foulness of the water occasionally found its way into his mouth, nearly causing him to gag. What stopped the reflex was his fear that the mossback would take a greater notice of their presence in its territory.

"Jaik," Reneeke whispered.

So quiet was his voice, that Jaikus almost didn't hear him.

“Hand me another branch.” The flames of the one he held had begun to die. Shadows started regaining lost ground, including that of the mossback’s hideaway.

Already precariously balanced on what he hoped was the branch of a submerged log, Jaikus tried passing one of the branches to Reneeke. The slight movement toward his friend caused a foot to slip off the branch, and under he went.

He didn’t panic, as both he and Reneeke were fair swimmers, having during their youth frolicked in the ponds and lakes near Running Brook. Reflexes quickly took over, and after locating the bottom, used his foot to propel himself back toward the surface. Just before breaking through, he felt Reneeke take hold of the branch he had been in the middle of handing over, providing some much needed leverage with which to regain the surface and stay afloat.

“Shhh!” Reneeke urged when Jaikus broke through and began sputtering.

Pond scum coated his hair, eyes, mouth, and every other nook and cranny from the neck up. Nasty was a mild description for the way he felt. Once his balance had been restored, he began treading water since the bottom was no longer within reach.

“Are you okay?” Reneeke took the branch from Jaikus and set it against the almost burned out one. Instantly, the tinder of the second flared to life.

“Yeah,” Jaikus replied.

Now with only two branches in his left hand, he moved closer to Reneeke in order to lay a hand on his friend’s shoulder to aid in his effort to keep afloat. Supported as he was with his new-found grip, Jaikus was able to wipe the scum from his face on a relatively dry patch of Reneeke’s shirt.

“Uh-oh.”

“What?” Looking up, Jaikus’ panic returned anew as he glanced back and forth across the water for signs of danger.

Reneeke directed Jaikus’ attention to the mossback’s hideaway with a nod of his head. There was a gap in a section of the overhanging moss touching the water that hadn’t been there before. In a voice as silent as he could make it, Reneeke said, “The mossback...it’s out.” He felt Jaikus’ grip tighten on his shoulder.

“Let’s get out of here,” Jaikus urged.

Not moving, Reneeke held the torch up as he scanned the surface of the water. When he saw no signs of the mossback, or the tell-tale ripples indicating its passage, he shook his head.

“We’re close, Jaik.” A short silence, then, “Hang on.”

He began moving toward the knoll. Jaik held onto his shoulder and kept his eyes peeled for the mossback as Reneeke worked to bring them through the water.

They could see very clearly the remains of the horse where it lay half in, half out of the water. Of the three saddlebags Master Hymal had mentioned, two were clearly visible. The third could very well be hidden beneath the carcass.

A slow minute passed. Reneeke was moving as quickly as he dared. Footing was treacherous, but at no point had the water grown so deep that it prevented him from reaching the bottom. Then his foot sank into a depression, causing his head to momentarily dip beneath the surface.

Terror shot through Jaikus as his friend suddenly went under, frightened that the mossback had attacked.

An instant later, Reneeke passed beyond the depression and his head once again broke the surface.

“You scared the life out of me,” Jaikus exclaimed in a hushed whisper.

“I’m okay,” he replied. “Hole.”

From there on, the depth of the water gradually diminished. Jaikus was soon able to let go of Reneeke’s shoulder and walk on his own. When the water was once again at mid-chest level, Reneeke brought them to a halt.

Mere yards away from their objective, he held up his hand, then pointed off to the right of the knoll. A small wave was making its way across the surface. It wasn’t making directly for their position, but then, it wasn’t moving away from them either. The wave’s trajectory would bring it to within three feet of where they now stood.

“I think we have finally got its attention,” Reneeke announced. Glancing to Jaikus, he could see the fear in his eyes. “Be ready with the last two branches.”

Nodding, Jaikus tightened his grip upon them.

“Stay close.”

Jaikus didn’t need Reneeke’s warning to practically tread on his heels; fear of being ripped apart was doing an ample job all on its own.

Two pairs of eyes tracked the wave’s movement. Now that they knew they were discovered, they quickened their pace toward the carcass of Master Hymal’s horse.

Reneeke turned to face the bow of the wave, all the while continuing to progress closer to the knoll. He put both burning branches in his left hand, then held out his right. “Give them to me.” Once he held all four branches; two burning brightly in one hand, the other two awaiting their turn to be lit in the other, he said, “Get the packs.”

As Jaikus hurriedly splashed across the last few yards to the carcass, he heard Reneeke add, “*And hurry!*” There was a definite edge to Reneeke’s voice. Afraid to waste even the brief time glancing over his shoulder would take, he raced forward.

Drawing near the carcass, he saw the two blood-soaked packs, bulging with Master Hymal’s reagents. In an instant, his knife was in hand as he fell to his knees in the bloody froth. Grabbing a strap, he put blade to leather and easily severed its hold.

Whoosh!

Light blazed forth as Reneeke ignited the last two branches.

“Back!”

Jaikus pulled the first pack free then glanced over his shoulder. There, not more than fifteen feet away, stood Reneeke with twin blazes now raging from both hands. In the water before him, the mossback recoiled from the sudden conflagration of the remaining branches.

“Hyah! Back!”

Sidestepping to match the creature’s movements, Reneeke interposed himself between it and Jaikus. Waving the branches to and fro, he shouted again as the mossback tried to outflank him. Leaping forward, he scored a direct hit on the creature’s face with an intensely burning brand.

Roaring, it twisted about and vanished beneath the surface.

“Where did it go?” Jaikus shouted.

Reneeke kept eyes on the water as he said, “You let me worry about that. *Get those packs!*”

Pack two took another second to free, and now that he was close, could readily see where the third was pinned between the ground and the ribcage.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Reneeke moving closer as he scanned the surface for signs of the mossback’s return. But he couldn’t worry about that now. He had to get the third pack free.

The ravaging of the mossback had left ample opportunities for him to acquire a good grip on the horse’s remains. By grasping two protruding ribs, he pulled with all his might. Fortunately, the mossback had consumed most of the meat, and thus had reduced the weight sufficiently to enable Jaikus to drag the carcass from atop the pack. Once it was free, he quickly cut the strap and gathered it up along with the other two.

“I got them!” he shouted just as a shadow leapt toward him from further up the knoll. The mossback had doubled back.

“Renee!”

Panic lent strength to his leap as he sought to escape the creature’s attack. Easily clearing four feet of the knoll’s surface, he landed awkwardly upon a pile of rocks and immediately crashed to the ground.

“*Hyah!*” Reneeke shouted as fiery brands rushed forward to Jaikus’ aid. “*To me, creature!*”

Arcs of fire danced in the air and the mossback paused at their approach.

Jaikus scrambled back to his feet.

“Get to the water, Jaik.” Holding the fiery brands as a mighty swordsman would his trusty blade, Reneeke jerked his head toward the water. “Get going.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be right behind you.” Then he saw the rear legs of the mossback bunch, readying for a leap. “*Hyah!*” he shouted as he stepped forward, wielding the brands before him. The mossback snarled, but remained where it was. His bravado had squelched the creature’s impulse to attack.

When he heard the sound of Jaikus entering the water, Reneeke began backing up to follow. Never taking his eyes from the mossback, he stepped from the knoll and into the water. Brands of fire still held before him, he watched the mossback as it moved to place itself next to the carcass of the dead horse. Snarling a couple more times, it seemed, for the moment, quite content to allow them to leave. Reneeke was more than happy to oblige.

Step by step he entered the water. Further behind him, he heard Jaikus swimming with all speed toward the far shore. But such an act he could not afford to emulate, for to take his eyes from the mossback would be the worst sort of folly.

Knee-deep, he waved the brands back and forth. Their fuel now all but spent, the fire was beginning to subside. He hoped that with the threat to its food moving off, the mossback would no longer wish to pursue. After all, it had just eaten its fill, and that was normally the time when predators were the most passive. Though the way it continued snarling and pacing back and forth along the edge of the knoll, passive this creature definitely was not.

As soon as he reached the point where the water was to his upper chest, he tossed two of the brands aside. Having been the first ones lit, they were now little more than charred remains. With one hand free, he was able to increase his departure by using it to swim while still retaining the two burning brands in his other.

Stroke, stroke, glance back to the knoll. When he saw the mossback still near the carcass, he would continue on. It took six repetitions of that cycle before reaching shallower water where he could dispense with the swimming and resume walking along the bottom.

“We did it!” Jaikus cried. Grinning broadly, he held up the three packs.

Reneeke returned his grin. “Yes we did, Jaik.” Moving through the last of the water, he once again glanced back to the knoll. But with the withdrawal of the torches, the area had returned to darkness. Of the mossback, there was no sign.

He held the burning brands before him and saw how they were all but spent. “We better get out of here.”

Jaikus nodded vigorously. After handing Reneeke one of Master Hymal’s packs, and taking a burning brand in return, he turned toward the trees.

A god-awful roar split the night as a troll’s nightmarish visage entered the radius of the brand’s waning light. In the blink of an eye, the memory of something Charka once said flashed across his mind...

Where fire keeps mossbacks away, there are other creatures that it will attract.

Roaring once again, the troll attacked.

Chapter 14

The sheer unexpectedness of the appearance and subsequent attack of the troll froze Jaikus into immobility. However, such paralysis was short lived. Darting back, he escaped certain death as razor sharp claws raked the space he had occupied only a split-second before. And the creature kept coming.

He tried to draw his sword as he fled backward, but the terror produced by staring into the merciless eyes of the troll kept him from succeeding. Even though his hand was on the hilt, he couldn’t seem to draw it forth.

Then Reneeke was there.

Coming alongside his friend, sword drawn and shouting “*Hyah!*” to draw the creature’s attention, he allowed Jaikus time to back away unfettered. But in doing so, had become the focus of the troll’s attack.

Jaikus finally managed to free his sword as the creature’s claws shot forward in an attempt to ravage Reneeke’s flesh. But his friend had been too quick. Dodging backward, Reneeke simultaneously brought the blade down. To his surprise, the blow struck the thick, tough hide of the troll’s forearm and cleaved through to the bone. Yowling in pain and rage, the troll yanked its arm back, almost taking Reneeke’s sword with it in the process.

Spine now somewhat firmly back in place, and feeling that perhaps his undergarments might need a thorough cleansing when all was said and done, Jaikus charged forward. He hit the troll with a resounding blow to the side as it moved to attack Reneeke yet again. But for all the strength he put into it, the blade barely left a mark.

Jaikus’ lack of success was not lost upon Reneeke. “Get out of here, Jaik!” he shouted, as claws again shot forward bringing terrible, ripping pain. Unable to react swiftly enough, he was left with a shredded jerkin and furrows oozing blood from mid-breast to collarbone.

Though woefully outclassed, he wasn’t about to give up without a fight. Thrusting toward the creature’s face, he managed to score a hit dead center to the troll’s left eye. Four inches of blade sank into the optical cavity before the troll’s head jerked backward. A fraction of a second later, it let loose a scream so primal in its intensity, that it caused both lads to take a quick step backward.

Unwilling to disgrace the god of luck by refusing to take advantage of such a fortuitous blow, Reneeke turned, grabbed Jaikus by the shoulder, and shouted “*Run!*” as he propelled him away from the pain-ravaged beast.

In the hand of Reneeke, their single remaining, burning brand lit the way. The one Jaikus had carried lay somewhere upon the ground near where the troll first appeared. From behind, the troll’s outcry quickly turned from one of pain, to that of sheer, unadulterated, rage. It wasn’t long before they heard it crashing through the undergrowth in pursuit.

“Rene...”

“Just keep running, Jaik.”

Keeping to the densest parts of the Swamp, they were gradually able to put distance between them and the troll. Its great bulk was hindered by the thick growth of trees and brush through which they ran.

Even in the shadowed landscape, Reneeke had a fairly good ‘bump of direction.’ He directed their progress toward where he was certain Charka had said Reakla lay, only diverging where the lay of the land required. When they came to an area the moonlight revealed to be one of open water or deep, sucking muck, he would circumvent such obstacles before returning to the proper heading.

“It’s not gaining,” Jaikus said.

Reneeke nodded, then paused as they came to the edge of yet another scum-covered pond. Behind them, the sound of the troll’s pursuit could still be heard. “Get a pair of torches.”

“But, it’ll see us!” Jaikus exclaimed.

It was one thing to have a solitary brand that barely gave out much light. But to have two torches burning at full capacity, they would be a beacon announcing to every nearby creature that dinner had arrived.

That's when Reneeke turned and revealed the deep scratches the troll's attack had opened across his chest. As Jaikus gasped at the sight, Reneeke said, "I don't think a little extra light is going to matter, Jaik. I'm sure he can track us by smell alone. At least with torches, we can find our way around these quagmires much more readily."

"Right." Quickly removing his pack, Jaikus produced two torches that he lit from the all but spent brand. Flaring to life, the torches brought their immediate area into full view.

"Perfect." Then tossing the nearly exhausted brand to the ground, Reneeke took charge of one of the torches and searched for the optimal route around the pond before them. By the time Jaikus had his pack back in place, he had found the route. "This way."

The short pause at the side of the pond had allowed the troll to gain ground. A cry from behind alerted them to its closer proximity.

Once around the pond, Reneeke led them forward along a span of dry ground between an all but dried up quagmire on their left, and a small pond to the right. The sound of the troll's pursuit kept them moving faster through this unfamiliar territory than Reneeke was comfortable with. But still, better the unknown ahead, than the flesh-ripping, life-ending *'known'* behind.

The strip of land soon turned into a full fledged expanse of dry, solid ground populated by a dense grove of trees having long since given up the ghost. Shadows danced ominously within the dead forest.

"We didn't come this way," Jaikus said. Glancing into the trees, then back toward the darkness concealing the approaching troll, he couldn't decide which one frightened him most.

"No, that's true, Jaik. But it looks like we're going this way now."

As he passed through the outer fringe of the treeline, Jaikus asked, "How's the chest?"

"Stings something awful."

"Use one of those healing potions Lady Kate gave us."

Reneeke shook his head. "Save it for when we really need it. I can deal with it."

Jaikus could hear the sound of pain in his friend's voice. He worried that the wounds would become angry, as such wounds often did, if they weren't taken care of soon. "Any idea how far we are from Reakla?"

"Not exactly. Hours, I would think. And that's if we aren't forced to double back."

"Let's hope not." Doubling back would surely cause them to encounter their persistent adversary. He couldn't understand why the troll was still pursuing them. Didn't they ever give up?

The trees were an off-brown color, almost as if their pigment had gradually been leached away. Not a leaf was left on any of the branches above, nor were any present upon the ground below. Farther up on the trunks, at a point where the torchlight faded away, the color looked to be bleached out altogether, not being much more than a pale white.

Nocturnal sounds that had accompanied them throughout their flight from the mossback's knoll, gradually began fading away. The deeper within the forest of dead trees they progressed,

the quieter the world around them became. Except, that was, for the intermittent roar of the troll, and the sound of its passage.

"I don't like this place," Jaikus said. Shadows produced by the torches created dark, ominous images amidst the trunks around them, fodder enough to fuel Jaikus' overactive imagination. Ten minutes hadn't passed before he began seeing fell beasts lurking to either side, beasts that only existed in his mind.

A demonic serpent turned out to be a fallen trunk. An ogre bearing a double-headed battle axe was revealed as nothing more than a misshapen tree. *Get a grip on yourself, Jaik*, he told himself. But such assurances had little effect in taming the wild thoughts that transformed shadows into fearful apparitions. He kept as close to Reneeke as he could.

Reneeke kept a furious pace. Alternating running with periods of walking, they were able to maintain their lead on the troll. When he unexpectedly came to an abrupt stop, Jaikus failed to notice in time and ran into his back.

As he rebounded off his friend, Jaikus gave a quick, "Sorry," before seeing why it was that Reneeke had stopped. Not six feet from where they stood, a rivulet cut its way across their path. Wide enough to prevent either of them from attempting to leap across, it effectively barred their way.

Then from out of the darkness behind them, came the sound of the troll's roar, which only served to amplify the direness of their situation. It wasn't close, but definitely closer than it had been.

Moving to the rivulet's edge, Reneeke gestured along the bank to the right. "See if there's a way across down that way," he said. "I'll check the other. Hurry."

Jaikus looked toward the ominous shadows, imagination once again working overtime. "Down...*there*? By myself?" he asked nervously, but Reneeke was already moving off and failed to reply.

As if he wasn't terrified enough, their ever present pursuer gave out with another roar. Their momentary pause along the water's edge had allowed it to narrow the gap still further. If they didn't ford this rivulet, and soon, the troll would soon be upon them.

Jaikus stiffened his resolve, and set forth along the bank of the rivulet. *Thirty paces*, he told himself. If a way hadn't presented itself in that time, he would return. Counting his steps, he raced forward as quickly as he could.

At no point along the thirty-pace dash did the rivulet narrow to such an extent as would allow them to leap across. If anything, it grew wider. At thirty paces, Jaikus paused and held his torch high as he gave the area one last look. No fording opportunities presented themselves. Turning about, Jaikus began racing to rejoin Reneeke.

As he ran, Jaikus spotted the light from Reneeke's torch through the trees and altered his course to intercept. "Find anything?" he asked as he came up behind his friend.

Reneeke glanced over his shoulder and said, "Maybe. You?"

Jaikus shook his head. "It only grew wider." Sounds from deeper within the trees drew his fearful gaze. "What are we going to do?" Glancing back to Reneeke, he saw his friend pointing toward a sandbar some fifteen feet from shore.

"If we can get there, we can easily cross the rest of the way." The span of water on the far side of the sandbar was less than five feet across.

"But I can't leap from here to there."

"You don't have to," replied Reneeke. He then drew Jaikus' attention to a tree rising not far from the water's edge. It was slightly askew and leaned in the general direction of the rivulet. "All we have to do is knock this tree over and walk across."

Having grown up on a farm, Jaikus understood all too well the impossibility of what Reneeke was suggesting. "Can't be done."

"We have no choice."

Just then, they heard the grunting of the troll followed by the snapping of a dead branch. They turned and looked in the direction of the sound. The beast couldn't be more than a hundred feet away. "Then we fight."

Jaikus blanched at the prospect of trading blows with the troll. Returning his attention to the tree, he asked, "So, how are we to get this down?"

Maybe it was his friend's quick reversal on his stand for knocking over the tree, or maybe it was due to the tension and fatigue wracking his body, but Reneeke couldn't help but grin. Drawing his sword, he said, "Lady Kate said there was an aura on this blade. It has already proven itself against troll-hide." Then he stepped toward the askew tree. "Let's see how well it does now."

"You might break it."

Reneeke shrugged. He handed Jaikus his torch then gripped the hilt with both hands. Raising the sword over his head, he said, "With or without it, we stand little chance against the troll." Then, using every ounce of strength at his disposal, he swung the sword in a mighty slice.

The finely honed edge struck the trunk and bark went flying as it cleaved its way a solid six inches within the tree.

"*Yes!*" exclaimed Jaikus.

Reneeke worked the blade out and hacked again. This time, a wedge of wood fell away leaving a pie-shaped cavity. With a nod of his head, Reneeke directed Jaikus' toward a low hanging branch on the rivulet side. "Give me a hand," he said as he raised the sword.

The tree emitted a slight cracking noise as Jaikus took hold of the branch. When Reneeke struck the tree for the third time, he pulled downward on the branch with all his might. Loud popping and cracking noises came from the hacked area and the tree tilted even more precariously toward the water.

"Almost there," Reneeke said as he drew his sword back for what he hoped would be the final blow required to topple the tree. But the blow never came. It was preempted by a loud crash heralding the arrival of the troll.

Seeing the two friends with their backs to the river, the creature snarled, then charged.

"*Get that tree down!*" Reneeke shouted as he turned to face the troll. With sword held before him, he started sidestepping away. "*Come and get me!*" The troll fixated on him, and followed.

Claws shot forward only to pass through empty space. Reneeke had anticipated the beast's attack and moved accordingly. In his younger years, he had faced down his share of distempered

creatures; bulls and the like. This troll wasn't all that different. Sure it was bigger, stronger, and slightly more intelligent than animals found on a farm, but a beast, no matter how ferocious, was just a beast and would act accordingly.

After a second swipe that was just as ineffectual as the first, Reneeke glanced over toward where Jaikus was doing his utmost to bring that tree down. Grabbing the branch high up toward the trunk, Jaikus leaped up, tucked in his legs, and allowed his entire weight to drag on the branch.

There was a snap, and the branch broke.

Pain flared as his momentary, visual diversion cost him dearly. Talons ripped along the forearm wielding the sword. Simultaneously, the powerful hind legs of the troll launched the beast forward in a mighty leap.

Reneeke spun to the side to avoid the attack and struck out as the creature sailed past. The blade connected with the side of the troll's head, leaving a deep, blood-spurting, furrow. He dodged back as the troll twisted in midair, coming to land facing him. It sprang again.

Unable to dart to safety, he instead dropped to the ground and allowed the beast to pass harmlessly over him. Once it was past, he quickly regained his feet and ran for all he was worth. A second later, the troll came to land and raced in pursuit.

Rising from where the snapping of the branch had left him, Jaikus glanced over to see Reneeke racing off into the dark of the forest with the troll in hot pursuit. "*Get the tree!*" he heard his friend shout as Reneeke disappeared from sight. Returning his gaze back to the tree, he saw where Reneeke had all but cut his way through.

One more cut! One more and the tree would have fallen. Wracked with indecision as to the best course of action, he heard Reneeke's voice shout from out of the darkness, "*Hurry!*"

He considered using the rope in his pack to pull the tree down. And that would have been a viable solution had there been more shore between the tree and the water. But as it was, with the tree mere feet from the waterline, there wouldn't be sufficient leverage to make a difference.

Then, another thought occurred to him, one that he was loath to attempt. Although, when an inarticulate cry from Reneeke split the silence, he knew the attempt must be made despite the risks. Jaikus knew that should he climb up the trunk far enough, his weight, coupled with the degree of the tree's slant, would increase the pressure on the area hacked by Reneeke, and thus, bring it down. He dropped the two torches at the base of the slanted tree, steeled his resolve, and began to climb.

The climb was relatively easy as there were many limbs available for handholds. When he reached five feet from the ground, he felt the tree start to bow beneath his weight. At ten, the trunk below gave off popping and cracking sounds.

Almost there...

Moving another two feet along the trunk, he hopped. Driving his weight forcibly down upon the tree, he felt, as well as heard, the final crack as the tree gave way. Jaikus held onto the branches for dear life as the tree toppled. When it struck the rivulet, he was jarred loose and one

hand inadvertently slipped into the water. At the same time, the upper reaches of the tree seemed to explode in a cloud of white when it came to land upon the sandbar.

Instantly, the water roiled, and pain flared as tiny teeth sought to rip and tear away his flesh. Jerking his hand from the water, he discovered four of the little, meat-eating fish had their teeth firmly attached to three of his fingers. It was painful removing them as their jaws refused to relinquish their bits of flesh. Once the last had been removed, Jaikus turned back toward the forest and yelled, "Now, Reneeke! The tree is down!"

Jaikus began making his way back along the trunk toward the shore, and the two torches still burning upon the ground. When he reached the end and hopped down, Reneeke still hadn't appeared. Worried for his friend, he thought that perhaps Reneeke may have become turned around among the trees and couldn't find his way back. He reclaimed the torches and climbed back up onto the trunk of the fallen tree where he began waving them about.

"*Reneeke!*" he shouted. "*This way!*"

Torches moved furiously for half a minute before Reneeke broke free from the trees. Jaikus jumped in elation at seeing his friend, but was cut short as Reneeke drew close and he got a good look at him. Streaks of blood created a grisly patchwork along the left side of his face, and his clothes were shredded in three places, testament to having endured the troll's tender caresses.

Five paces behind him, came the troll.

"Get going, Jaik!" he yelled.

Jaikus turned about and was brought to a halt by the sight of glow-moths, hundreds of them, fluttering in and around the upper branches of the tree. *The white cloud created when the tree struck the sandbar. It had been the glow-moths!* The sandbar side of their tree-bridge was completely infested. And not only that, those closest to him were drawing nearer.

There wasn't sufficient time to cover himself in the protective mesh that had worked so superbly in the past. What with death nipping at Reneeke's heels, they had to press forward, and fast.

Jaikus held both torches in his left hand and began thrashing them about. He had just begun moving forward when small flares of flame erupted in midair as the business end of the torches set fire to fluttering glow-moths.

Then all of a sudden, the tree beneath him shuddered as Reneeke leapt aboard and began following. It shuddered still further when the troll sought to follow, the branches proving to be a serious hindrance for it. Thrashing to and fro, the troll began snapping them away to clear a path.

"Ware the water!" Jaikus shouted as more of the glow-moths became ready fodder for the flame. "It's full of those fishes. And in case you hadn't noticed, there's a glow-moth infestation up ahead."

"Less talk, more walk."

The route through the branches was anything but simple, wending his way around branches, even having to precariously lean out over the water in order to bypass an exceptionally obstinate one. And all the time, there were the moths.

His twin torches moved rapidly to halt the forward progression of the barbed critters. More than once, he had to singe the outer area of a limb in order to clear a space that was covered in glow-moths so it could be used as a handhold.

He was a mere ten feet from the sandbar when the first glow-moth struck. As he was waving his torch to clear the air before him, he felt a piercing jab of fire in his left forearm. Crying out in shock at the unexpected severity of the pain, he quickly brought his right hand over to pull the stinger out. The barb at the end was reticent to release its grip, but a quick jerk pulled it free along with a small bit of skin.

“One got me!” he hollered back to Reneeke.

“Keep going!” urged his friend. The troll was still very much in pursuit.

Jaikus tried to disregard the pain as he continued torching glow-moths and moving forward.

Reneeke had moved to just behind him and wished his friend would move faster. Glancing back, he saw how the troll worked to clear a path not five feet farther back. The creature was gaining faster than Jaikus was progressing. Working on removing a rather thick and gnarled branch that the two humans had readily maneuvered around, the troll was for the moment, stalled. Retuning his attention to Jaikus and the dancing torchlight, he thought...*If it wasn't for the need to clear a path through the...*

“Hang on a minute, Jaik.”

Jaikus came to a halt and felt Reneeke tug on his pack.

“I’m getting the mesh netting,” he explained.

Nodding, Jaikus continued weaving a fiery display in the air before him, torching moth after moth that then plummeted to the water below.

“Here.” Reneeke said as he draped Jaikus’ protective net over his friend’s head. “Keep it close or the limbs are going to snag it.” He paused a moment. Then as Jaikus was adjusting the mesh, said, “Hand me the torches.”

“Thanks.” Once the twin, burning brands were handed off to Reneeke, he was able to move the mesh into its proper, protective, position. That was when he saw twin streaks of fire sail over his head toward the sandbar.

“*Are you mad?*”

“They are drawn to the light, right?”

The two torches landed upon the surface of the sand some fifteen feet from the end of the tree. Almost immediately, glow-moths nearest the torches began moving toward the burning brands.

Jaikus nodded. “Yes.”

“Okay, then. Now, *get moving!*”

With the mesh netting pulled tightly about his upper extremities, Jaikus started moving forward. It was much easier to traverse the limbs with hands free of the torches. The netting, however, snagged on the limbs, but such inconvenience was a small price to pay for increased speed.

Reneeke took his own netting from his pack and settled it into place. The time taken to thus protect themselves allowed the troll to tear the limb from the tree and proceed forward. It was

now almost within striking distance. Nimbly wending his way through the branches, Reneeke narrowly avoided the troll's lethal claws and began widening the distance once again. Behind, the troll roared in frustrated anger as its larger girth prevented it from following with similar agility. Claws ripping into the limbs, it continued at a much slower pace.

The glow-moths were dispersing. Fluttering about, they seemed to be completely oblivious to the two net-shrouded humans as they winged along in their roundabout way toward the torches lying on the sandbar. No longer having to worry about imminent attack, Jaikus was able to increase his rate of progression through the limbs and quickly reached the sandbar. Reneeke hopped from the tree a moment later.

The troll continued to be mired in the more thickly woven branches of what had once been the treetop. Its strength and tenacity filled the air with sounds of snapping wood and sundered limbs.

Glow-moths filled the air about them. The greatest congregation was concentrated in the area illuminated by the torches' glow.

"Leave them," Reneeke said when Jaikus moved toward the burning brands. "Let's get out of here while we can."

Jaikus nodded.

Reneeke took the lead as they crossed the narrow strip of the sandbar toward the far side. There, he took a running jump and easily cleared the narrow off-shoot of the rivulet. Jaikus followed with similar ease.

They paused but a moment to glance back at the troll. It had reached the end of the tree. Surrounding it was a cloud of glow-moths; and from the way its arms were flailing back and forth, the glow-moths were quite happy to make its acquaintance.

In the dim shadows produced by the torchlight, they saw where a dozen or more had embedded their barbs within the creature. From its howls, it couldn't have been a pleasurable experience.

"Come on."

Breaking into a run, the two boys from Running Brook disappeared into the shadows, using what time the glow-moths may have provided to put as much distance between themselves and the troll as they could.

Chapter 15

Once the light from the torches vanished in the darkness behind them, Jaikus called for a halt. "Hold up a second, Renee."

Panting hard, Reneeke asked, "Why?"

"You took a beating back there and I want to make sure you're all right."

Reneeke didn't reply. He merely found the trunk of an accommodating tree and leaned wearily against it. From the darkness he heard Jaikus rummaging around in his pack, then the familiar sound of striking flint. In a matter of moments, Jaikus had lit another of their torches.

"Now, let me take a look at you."

Moving the torch close, he examined the various wounds of Reneeke. Deep furrows lined his side, neck, face and chest. Hardly an inch of him had escaped unscathed.

He then peered into Reneeke's eyes. Not really knowing what to look for, he only knew that priests did it when examining the injured. "How do you feel?"

"Sore, exhausted."

"Ready to collapse?"

Reneeke shrugged.

"Here." Producing one of the two flasks containing healing elixir Lady Kate had given them, he held it forward. "Drink it all."

Reneeke wasn't about to argue. Pulling the stopper, he placed the flask to his lips and upended it. He held it there until every last drop had crossed his tongue and slid down his throat. Immediately, warm sensations spread outward as the potion entered his bloodstream and carried it throughout his body. Strength returned, aches diminished, and his head cleared.

"Better?" Jaikus asked.

"Oh man, yes," he grinned. "I could get to like this."

Wounds closed as the elixir worked its magic. By the time the potion had run its course, all but the very worst had healed over completely, some to the point where it looked as if there had never even *been* an injury. The deeper ones were still red and tender to the touch, but much improved over the bloody furrows of a moment before. Jaikus concluded that magic potions were a wonderful thing, and vowed to always carry a supply on all subsequent adventures.

"It doesn't look as if there will be much scarring."

"That's a relief."

Very faintly, the troll's roar reached them from far away. "It must still be on the sandbar," Reneeke commented.

"Maybe it can't get off."

"I wouldn't count on that." Now reinvigorated by the healing properties of the potion, Reneeke pushed himself away from the tree. "Let's get going before it fords the water."

Jaik looked around the forest, confusion and uncertainty written across his face.

Reneeke pointed off toward a section of dark shadows. "Reakla's that way."

"Are you sure?"

"Fairly sure."

At that moment, the roar of the troll reached them again from a point almost directly opposite to that which Reneeke claimed Reakla laid. "Whether you are right or wrong, at least it will get us away from that." Jaikus took two of Master Hymal's packs to allow Reneeke less of a burden

with but one. The odors coming from within filled the air with aromas neither had encountered before. The combination was less than appealing.

Jaikus took the lead, his torch pushing back the darkness as they hurried toward Reakla.

Less than ten minutes had passed before Jaikus' left arm spasmed in pain. "*Gods!*" It had been throbbing ever since the glow-moth sank its barb into it. But now, the pain had suddenly spiked in its severity. The spasming caused the torch to slip from his grip.

"Damn," he groaned, hugging his throbbing arm to his chest. "It hurts."

Reneeke came to a stop and turned to his friend. Jaikus stood hunched over his arm, face twisted in agony.

"The glow-moth?"

Jaikus nodded. "Same spot. It hurts bad, Rene." Perspiration dotted his forehead.

Reneeke picked the torch up from off the ground and had Jaikus hold out his arm. As he pulled the sleeve back, Jaikus' arm began trembling.

"It's getting worse."

Red, inflamed and swollen, the site of the attack oozed a bloody discharge. A finger's length of dark purple extended from where the discharge emerged, then made its way up the forearm toward the elbow. Another swelling, about an inch in length and the width of a pea, marked the end of the dark-purple discoloration. It looked almost as if... Reneeke gasped when the swollen area moved.

"What?"

Reneeke ignored the question as he brought the torch closer. Something moved beneath the skin. "Uh, Jaik."

Turning his eyes upon the swollen area, Jaik felt a spike in pain that coincided with the movement of whatever was beneath his skin. *There was something alive in his flesh!* His voice took on a tinge of hysteria as he shouted, "*Get it out!*"

Knife appearing in his hand, Reneeke wrapped his arm around Jaikus' injured one to immobilize it, then pinched the area to either side of the internal intruder.

Jaikus cried out at the pain Reneeke was causing. When his friend looked questioningly at him, Jaikus gritted his teeth. "Just do it."

Reneeke nodded. Bringing the tip of his knife close, he made an incision. A pale, wormlike body writhed within the newly formed opening. Blood oozed forth as Reneeke dug the tip of the knife into the wound to draw forth the invader.

Jaikus moaned from the pain and clutched Reneeke's shirt. He buried his face in his friend's back as the knife dug deeper.

"Almost got it."

Fine, hair-like cilia covered the parasite's body, and wriggled under Reneeke's ministrations. The head had burrowed deeper within the forearm's muscle and thwarted every attempt at dislodging it. "Brace yourself," he told Jaikus, then dug deeper.

The pain was excruciating. Jaikus reflexively tried to withdraw his arm, but Reneeke had too firm a grip. Deeper the knife point went, and just when Jaik thought the pain would force him to heave all over Reneeke's back, it stopped.

"I got it."

Reneeke let go of the arm and pointed to a small, white, worm-like thing writhing on the ground. Jaikus shuddered.

"I think it might be a glow-moth larva of some kind." Reneeke then proceeded to grind the parasitic invader beneath the heel of his boot.

Jaikus' arm was a mess. Blood covered his forearm. The hole Reneeke had been forced to create in order to expel the parasite continuously oozed more. "There's another healing draught in my pack."

"Right." Reneeke quickly retrieved the flask and poured a small amount on the wound itself, just as he had observed Lady Kate do with Seward, then had Jaikus drink a quarter of what was left. Almost immediately, the wound cleared of blood, and began to knit together.

"Now I can see why Charka insisted that the mesh was so important."

Reneeke nodded. "I still don't understand why the glow-moths avoid it. Perhaps it's made of something they don't like."

"Or it possesses a magical enchantment?"

"Perhaps." Restoppering the flask, Reneeke replaced it within Jaikus' pack. "Either way, I think we should keep them handy in case we encounter more."

Both lads kept their mesh netting out, but had it rolled up and tucked beneath their arms. As Reneeke took the lead to resume their trek to Reakla, Jaikus fell in beside. He couldn't help but shudder anew at the thought of how the larva had been wriggling around beneath his skin. He couldn't wait to return to Reakla. How he could use a hefty mug of ale right about now.

Sunrise was imminent, and Charka paced impatiently before the Swamp Gate as he had for nearly the last hour. Nearby stood two Guild members who had volunteered to aid in the rescue of his two Springers. One was a bear of a man with twin axes strapped to his back, the other, an identical match except for the pair of swords in place of the axes. They were the twin brothers Khuodari, formidable fighters who had adventured with Charka a time or two. The promise of a night of debauchery upon their return had helped seal the deal.

Upon his *Troupe's* return to Reakla, Charka's first order of business had been getting Seward to a Temple. Once satisfied that his man would not only live, but make a full recovery through the ministrations of the priests, he left Lady Kate to keep an eye on him while he set about to gather a few cronies who wouldn't mind a quick jaunt into the Swamp to save a couple of lost pups. Now, he and the Khuodari brothers waited for the sun to strike the Gate, for it was law that the Gate would not open until that time.

Only two instances would permit the Gate to be opened. One, of course, would be the appearance of a returning band of adventurers. The other necessitated procuring a letter from the Town Council which would allow it to be opened. But since the eastern sky had already begun to brighten, Charka knew better than to try and round up that lazy band of miscreants. By the time

he succeeded in corralling enough councilors to make a majority, it would be dawn and their aid would no longer be required.

A glance to the ramparts above the Gate revealed Master Hymal pacing about in similar impatience. He'd been there since shortly after their return. Charka knew the reagents in the packs his Springer's had volunteered to recover constituted the bulk of his profits for the next few months. Without them, Master Hymal faced some lean times until the moon would once again rise in proper fullness to make another trip to Sythal worthwhile.

Charka caught sight of the Watch Leader, the man whose primary responsibility was to oversee the area in and around the Gate, and to ensure the safety of the populace the wall protected. Coming toward the man, he said with no small amount of impatience, "Surely you can open the Gate now. The sun is almost up."

Watch Leader Reggie understood all too well Charka's impatience. Having, in the last hour, suffered no less than three separate bartering attempts and one threat of mayhem, his patience had worn thin. "I'm through talking, Charka. When the sun hits the Gate, we'll open it. *Not one second before!*"

"But my Springers might be dying out there!"

Reggie was unmoved. "Adventurers are always '*dying out there*.' It goes with the territory. Besides, the law is the law."

Charka felt like smashing in his face, but knew such an action would not get the Gate opened any sooner.

"Hey!" cried a lookout atop the wall. "I see something!"

Charka hollered, "My Springers?"

"Can't tell for sure. But there is definitely movement in the deeper shadows along the fringe."

A second later, Master Hymal yelled, "It's them!"

"Open that demon-damned Gate!" Charka shouted.

Visual contact of approaching adventurers constituted one of the few instances whereby the Gate could be opened before the rising of the sun. "Open it up!" shouted Reggie. One of his men rushed to the gatehouse. Shortly thereafter, the sound of the massive, internal locking mechanism filled the courtyard as the man threw the lever releasing them.

"Looks like one is hurt," Hymal shouted down to Charka. "The big one is leaning on the smaller."

"Reneeke?"

"I think so."

Just as the final "*clank*" signaled the Gate to be unsecured, a guard from atop the wall shouted, "*Troll!*"

In the early dawn, a time of day when night began rolling back in deference to the morn, two lads made their way through the Swamp. One had suffered grievous injury and leaned heavily upon the other.

The effects of the potion had worn off an hour ago, reminding Reneeke that the worst of the injuries inflicted by the troll still had a ways to go before it could be said they were healed. He suffered no great amount of pain, merely a dull ache and weakness. The healing properties of the potion had used a great deal of his energy to do its work. Reneeke had already consumed the last of the second healing draught, its revitalizing effect no more than a pleasant memory.

Legs wobbly, head pounding, and body aching all over; it was all he could do to merely put one foot in front of the other. He desperately needed a hot meal, warm bed, and a lengthy stretch of uninterrupted sleep.

As the sky began to brighten with the dawn, the protective wall of Reakla appeared through the trees.

“Look, Rene,” Jaikus said. “We’re almost back.”

Weary eyes turned toward the towering walls. Nothing had ever looked so good. “We did it, Jaik.”

“Yes, we did.”

Three packs filled with reagents were slung over their shoulders, Master Hymal should be pleased. Jaikus could think of little else than the reward promised by the apothecary. Reneeke, on the other hand, was simply satisfied by a job well done. That, and the fact they had returned with their lives intact. Although considering the amount of discomfort inflicting him, he amended that sentiment with “almost intact.”

Clearing the tree line, they started across the final expanse of open area toward the Gate. It remained closed, but hopefully that would change once the guards atop the wall became aware of their presence.

“Come on, Rene. Not much farther.”

With Reakla’s wall now an immediate goal, a small measure of strength returned to him. Although, not so much as to enable the putting aside of Jaikus’ aid. He still required a supportive shoulder to remain upright.

The snapping of a branch prompted Jaikus to glance over his shoulder to the trees from which they had recently emerged. His eyes widened when he saw the troll. “*Gods!*” He increased their pace dramatically, but such fear-induced acceleration across uneven terrain only caused his weakened partner to take a misstep. Reneeke hit the ground with a groan, taking Jaikus with him.

Jaikus immediately sprang back to his feet. Grabbing Reneeke’s arm, he strove to get him up. “Come on, Rene!”

Reneeke saw the troll coming and knew that though he might be able to regain his feet, he would never sustain an effective flight. Pulling his arm from Jaikus’ grip, he said, “Get out of here, Jaik. I’ll never make it.” He tried drawing his sword, but the maneuver was beyond him. His strength was gone.

“*No!*”

“Go. There’s no point in both of us dying.”

Jaikus reached out once more to try and pull him to his feet, but Reneeke batted his hand away. “*Go!*”

“I’ll not!”

How could he leave? To abandon not only the best friend he ever had, but his *only* friend? Reneeke had always been there for him. When Jaikus left to join the Guild, he agreed to come along. He didn’t have to. Reneeke would have been much happier on the farm. But he did it, because Jaikus was his friend.

Drawing his sword, Jaikus placed himself between the oncoming troll and the single most important person in his life.

“Jaik.”

Glancing back, he saw that Reneeke had managed to draw his sword halfway from the scabbard. “Here,” he said, straining to move the hilt closer. “Yours won’t do any good.”

Jaikus didn’t even hesitate. Transferring his sword to his left hand, he drew Reneeke’s with his right. Wielding the two swords helped to drive back his fear to a more manageable level. It gave him a feeling that all was not lost. Then, the troll attacked.

“What’s going on?”

As the Gate began to open, a familiar voice drew Charka’s attention. It was Viruloxi, a Guild magic user of some power. “I got two Springers in trouble.”

“A troll’s after ‘em,” added the sword-bearing Khuodari brother.

“Need some help?”

Moving toward the opening Gate, Charka asked, “Cost?”

“Say, a third?”

“Done.”

Racing through the opening, he broke into an all-out run. Flanked to either side by the Khuodari brothers, with Viruloxi following on their heels, they raced across the open grassland. Charka saw Jaikus bearing double blades as he faced off against the troll, willing to defend Reneeke with his life.

“Your Springer’s got grit,” said the sword-wielding brother on his right.

“I guess he does,” Charka replied, with just a touch of surprise tingeing his voice.

From his other side, the axe-wielding Khuodari brother said, “May we be in time.”

There was something odd about the troll. Jaikus couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but it didn’t roar like before. Its mouth opened as if the troll wanted to, but naught more than a gurgling sound issued forth.

“*Back!*” he shouted in mimic of Reneeke’s earlier battle with the mossback. Much to his surprise, his voice was strong and sure. A remarkable feat considering that inside he was a quivering mass of nerves.

Charka’s words came back to him in the fleeting moments before the troll’s attack

...Keep your wrist in line with your elbow and the blade. Think of the area from your shoulder to the tip of your blade as one.

The sword moved into proper position.

I’m trying!

A dead man tries, an Adventurer does. Or don't you want to be an Adventurer? What if your buddy's life depended on you being able to take out your opponent? Is he going to want you to try and help him? Or would he want you to help him?

Jaikus was through with trying. *I am an Adventurer!* Firming his resolve, he braced for the attack.

The troll launched itself forward.

Bringing up Reneeke's sword, he struck with all his might. Before the blade could connect, the troll struck it aside with a mighty swipe.

Snap!

His wrist had twisted slightly out of position, and just as Charka had prophesized, the blow snapped the bone. Reneeke's sword, the one weapon with which Jaikus could have dealt damage to the troll, slipped from his non-responsive fingers.

An explosion of pain erupted from his broken wrist, followed a second later by even worse as talons ripped into him.

He tried bringing his other sword into play as the troll plowed another set of bloody furrows across his upper body, but it merely bounced off the beast's hide. His legs gave way, dropping him to the ground as deadly talons again penetrated his flesh.

Time seemed to slow as he gazed at talons stained with blood, *his blood*, that were being drawn back to rip into him again. Unable to look away, he braced himself for what he knew would be his end.

Thunk!

An axe appeared as if by magic to embed itself in the beast's skull. A split-second later, the crackle of electricity preceded the blinding explosion of a lightning bolt. The troll's blow never fell.

As his eyes recovered from the flash, Jaikus saw the charred and blackened section of the troll's chest. Through vision growing ever more obscured, Jaikus watched the troll yank the axe from its head and stepped forward to continue the attack, only to be hit by another bolt. The lightning strike knocked it from its feet and sent it reeling backward.

The last thing Jaikus saw before his vision failed completely, were *Webs of Binding* appearing to encase the troll from the neck down.

"See to the troll!"

Somewhere on the edge of consciousness, he heard Charka's voice.

"Jaik! Come on, lad!"

His mouth was forced open and a sweet liquid passed between his lips.

"We're too far from town. He's not going to..."

The last thing he knew before slipping away into oblivion, was being raised from the ground by many hands.

Chapter 16

Quiet conversation drew him from a realm rampant with valiant deeds and daring-do, to one of achy-weariness. He tried lifting his arm to minister relief upon a rather itchy span covering most of his chest, but found even such a meager effort beyond his current capabilities. He did manage to raise his hand an inch above the woolen blanket before weakness drew it back.

If he couldn't scratch, he'd just as soon sleep. Unfortunately, the voices continued unabated and kept him from descending past the final stage into the welcoming arms of slumber.

Jaikus cracked an eye open to find Reneeke conversing at the foot of his bed with a man in priestly robes. "Rene?" Voice cracking and hardly more audible than the squeak of a mouse he failed to draw his friend's attention. He mustered more effort. "Rene."

Two heads swiveled toward him. Reneeke broke into a wide grin and hurried to his side.

"Jaik, praise the gods."

The priest joined him at Jaikus' bedside. "I thought he might awaken today."

"Thank you, Father Balicci."

"You are welcome, my son." Stepping forward, he passed a hand over Jaikus' chest, then paused it momentarily above his head. "He still requires much sleep. Keep your visit brief."

"Yes, Father."

The priest gave Jaikus a grin. "I shall leave you in the hands of your friend."

As the priest departed, Reneeke sat on the edge of the bed. "Man, we didn't think you were going to survive."

"We?"

Reneeke nodded. "Charka, Lady Kate, and Father Balicci. Even Seward stopped by once he recovered, to see how you were doing."

"Seward?" he asked in disbelief.

Reneeke chuckled. "I know. Couldn't believe it myself when he appeared."

Three other cots shared the room with his. Two were empty, each having a single, neatly folded blanket perfectly situated at the end. The fourth looked to have been slept in as its blanket was rumpled with half dangling over the side to the floor.

"Where am I?"

"Fjerl's Temple in Reakla," Reneeke replied.

Fjerl, God of Earth, was one of the more popular and prolific faiths in the realm. The people knew that if they were ever in need, succor could be found within its walls, *and* at a reasonable price. The very poor rarely had to pay for the simpler healings. For care of a more serious nature, healings such as being brought back from the dead or the removal of a curse, payment of one kind or another had to be given.

Most temples accepted industry as well as gold. If a person could not meet the required sum, the temple offered them the chance to perform a needed service. Often, such services required nothing more than helping to keep the grounds clean or minor maintenance. The Priests of Fjerl turned no one away. Perhaps that explained Fjerl's position as the patron god of Adventurers.

"I'm not dead, then?"

"It was close, Jaik. If it hadn't been for Charka appearing with the Khuodari brothers and a magic user when he did, neither one of us would be here."

"Kh...Khuodari brothers?"

"They're friends of Charka, you'll get to meet them later. Nice fellows to have on your side in a tight situation."

A lad attired as a novice of Fjerl arrived bearing a cup of cool water. Their conversation took a brief hiatus while the lad aided Jaikus in rising so he could drink. Once the cup had been emptied, the novice laid him back down. Then the lad glanced to Reneeke.

"Father Balicci said your friend needs to rest."

Reneeke nodded. "I understand. I shall leave momentarily."

The lad nodded, then gave each a brief bow before departing.

Jaikus gazed upon his friend. "How are you?"

"I'm fine." Indicating with a quick nod toward the rumpled cot next to Jaik's, he added, "Two days of rest have done me a world of good."

"Two days?"

"Yep, two days." His expression grew solemn. "You were hurt pretty bad, Jaik. Real bad."

"I feel like it." Every part of him ached in one manner or another. His chest was heavily bandaged, as was his head and arms. "I thought priests could do a better job than this."

Reneeke grinned again. "They can, if they must. But Father Balicci explained, '*a few aches and pains are good for the soul*'."

"I'd rather do without them if it's all the same."

Seeing the novice standing not far away giving him a disapproving glare, Reneeke rose from the cot. "I better let you sleep before that novice comes over here again."

Yawning, Jaikus nodded and closed his eyes. "I could use more anyway."

"I shall return later. I'm glad you are all right, Jaik." But Jaikus had already fallen asleep.

After another day of convalescing, Father Balicci announced Jaikus fit to leave. Though from Jaikus' point of view, he was anything but ready. It took Reneeke's help for him to get up off the cot, and every step produced pain. About the only place that didn't hurt was his left nostril... no... wait...that hurt too.

"Come on, Jaik." Reneeke said as they left the cot behind. "Charka wants to buy us an ale over at the Guild."

"The Guild?" He had forgotten all about that. "Are...are we...in?"

"Not yet. Apparently they are still considering it."

"Oh." Disappointment filled his voice.

"But hey, we get to go in since we will be Charka's guests."

Inside the Guild. He could settle for that, at least for now.

They made their way through the temple and out to the street.

“Oh, and we have some coins, too.”

“Your share of the trip to Sythal?”

“That, and Master Hymal’s bonus for recovering his reagents. He was very grateful.”

The news piqued Jaikus’ interest. “*How* grateful.”

“Sixty golds.”

Jaikus almost passed out right then and there. *Sixty!* That was twice the bonus he had originally offered. That was more money than his family could ever hope to earn in a decade, maybe two. “Sixty? Truly?”

“Yep. Apparently we brought back his reagents in such condition that all remained viable, or something like that. And there’s more.”

“More?”

“Remember that glow-moth larvae I removed from your arm?”

He shuddered. “How could I forget?” The band of newly grown skin over the area Reneeke had dug the larvae from was one of the more vocal of the voices in his chorus of aches.

“Well, as it turned out, the troll that almost killed you had been infested with them. The Guild has a standing order for larvae of the glow-moth, and since we were instrumental in leading it to capture, received a percentage of the take.”

“We’re rich!”

“Uh, not exactly.”

Casting a sidelong glance at Reneeke, Jaikus frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, there was the amount we owed to Charka for your, uh, indiscretion. The Khuodari brothers received a share since they helped bring the troll down. Also, that magic user I mentioned received a full third. I don’t know why, you’ll have to talk to Charka about that.

“Then, we had to pay the healers, time spent under their care, and...uh...” pausing a moment, he searched for the final item. “Oh, right, let’s not forget the supplies we got from Bella.”

“How much is left?” Jaikus’ hopes of being rich were quickly being dashed upon the rocks of fiscal reality.

“Together, we have ten golds, seven silver, and eleven copper.”

Sounding less than excited, he asked. “That’s it?”

Reneeke laughed. “That’s it? Back on the farm, such an amount would be considered a fortune, and you ask ‘*That’s it?*’.”

Up ahead, the walls of the Guild came into view. Out front stood the one-armed man who during their last encounter had kept them out.

“Think he’ll let us in?”

“Don’t worry, Jaik. Like I said, we’re Charka’s guests.”

Jaikus wasn’t convinced. But when they came to the door, Jeral, a.k.a. Booba, merely nodded and opened it for them.

Exhilarated beyond words, Jaikus leaned heavily upon Reneeke as they passed from the world of everyday life, to that of sagas and epics. His knees grew wobbly as they entered the foyer, itself a small room. To one side sat a counter, beyond which a rather scruffy looking man dug beneath his fingernails with the point of a knife. In the area behind the man stood shelves and hooks bearing all manner of items from simple cloaks to saddles, and before they passed from the foyer into the main meeting hall of the Guild, Jaikus thought he had observed three heads of a less than human nature.

Despite its size, the hall bore more of a tavern atmosphere than of a revered meeting place that had been the launching point for many a famous tale. Laughter, the clanking of flagons, a shout here and there all added to the cacophony.

Tables filled the hall, each packed with men and women dressed in armor, robes, and everything in between. Even a few non-human races were represented, races that Jaikus had heard about only in epics. Servants in the uniform of the Guild worked their way amongst the tables, delivering flagons of ale and trays of food.

No less than six, arched avenues gave egress to the rest of the Guild. Two sets of steps, one to either side of the hall, ascended to the floor above. Far to the right, at the head of the hall, sat a dais, stage really, whereupon bards and other performers would entertain.

What really drew his attention was the double-headed battle axe prominently displayed above the dais. *Reakla's axe!* Over a thousand years ago and yet...there it was.

"Greetings, friends."

Coming out of nowhere like it did, the salutation caused Jaikus to jump.

"It's just Chork."

"Chork?" Glancing around, he saw no one, only a bronze statue of a fully armored fighter situated just within the great hall. He received his second shock when the statue's eyes blinked.

"That's me," the statue clarified.

"What...?"

"Long story," Reneeke explained. "I'll tell you later."

"Welcome to the Adventurer's Guild, young Jaikus. Reneeke and I have shared many a tale concerning your exciting exploits."

"It talks?" Jaikus glanced to Reneeke, but his friend was busy scanning the faces of those seated at the many tables spaced throughout the hall.

"Talk? Of course I talk." Its eyes flitted to and fro, and the lips moved when it spoke, but that appeared to be the extent of Chork's mobility. "In fact, I would have you know that I speak over a dozen languages including that of the now extinct race of Tyllians, though for the most part they had very little in the way to say, as they did but drift along with the ocean currents. Did you know that they have, or I suppose we should say '*had*', seventeen separate and distinct ways in which to say hello?"

"Uh, no. I didn't."

"Well, now. Let me illuminate you."

As he began an ear-piercing series of shrieks, Reneeke spotted Charka at a table over against the far wall. "Sorry, Chork. Charka is expecting us."

Immediately, the shrieking ceased. “No problem at all, young Reneeke. I’m sure your friend and I can resume our conversation at a later date.”

“I suppose so...”

“Wonderful. I will count the minutes until I again have the pleasure of your company.”

Hurrying Jaikus toward where their friends sat, Reneeke said. “He’ll talk and talk and talk if you don’t walk away.”

About to question his friend further, he was forestalled when Charka noticed their approach and waved them over.

“Good to see you up and about, lad.”

“Thank you. I’m glad to be here.”

Few tables offered more than one vacant place. Even Charka’s held only the two empty seats that Jaikus and Reneeke soon occupied. Three others aside from Charka and his crew shared the table. Two were the Khuodari brothers, and the third was a wiry little fellow known as Slip. From the slightness of his build, and the lack of armor and magic user’s robe, Jaikus deduced that he must be one of the Guild’s thieves.

Slip eyed the two newcomers. “Heard about your fight.”

Kerl, the axe-wielding Khuodari brother, slapped the table. “Stood up to a troll, he did!”

“Impressive.” The wiry little guy nodded approvingly.

Lady Kate laid a hand on Jaikus’ arm. “How are you doing?”

He flashed her a grin. “I’m alive.”

“Ha!” Terl, the sword-wielding Khuodari twin, slapped the table then gave out with a loud and raucous laugh. “Then you met the first law of adventuring.”

“What is that?”

“You came back alive.” He and his brother Kerl repeatedly slapped the table as they broke into laughter.

Jaikus glanced to Reneeke, wondering if he might have understood the joke, but his friend looked just as confused. Returning his gaze to Charka, Jaikus said, “Thank you for inviting us. I’ve always wanted to see what it was like inside.”

Raising his mug of *kult* in salute, Charka silently grinned before downing half of it.

Movement upon the platform at the head of the hall caught Reneeke’s attention. Three men had mounted the four steps leading to it and were even now making their way to center stage.

They didn’t look like any performers Reneeke had ever seen. Two were heavily armored while the third, though he wore a simple suit of leather armor, had the bearing of command.

Charka took note of Reneeke’s interest in the stage. “Looks like old Ellantho plans on giving another speech.”

Both Khuodari brothers groaned. “That’s why I don’t like spending my time here. It’s more fun over at *The Dented Helm*.”

Taking on a sour expression, Seward said, “You got that right.”

Charka eyed the trio with annoyance. “Show some respect. He *is* the Guildmaster, and if he likes to make speeches, then we should at least do him the courtesy of listening. You just might learn something.”

Seward rolled his eyes before turning them on Reneeke. "His last speech was on the best way to take down a specter."

"Wouldn't that be worth knowing?" asked Reneeke.

"From the other side of the grave? According to him, the best way is to become one yourself."

"That's..." began Jaikus, then paused. He didn't want to run the risk of offending anyone by speaking ill of the highest ranking Guild member.

"...stupid?" finished Kerl.

Jaikus glanced at those around him, then nodded.

"Don't worry, lad. Few around here will think ill of you for knocking Ellantho's words of wisdom."

Over on the stage, the Guildmaster raised his hands. Conversations died, heads turned toward him, and the hall quieted.

Jaikus glanced to Charka only to have his one-time leader place a finger before his lips, indicating quiet.

"Greetings, my fellow adventurers." Ellantho's arms lowered as his gaze roved across the assembled faces.

"We have business here tonight..."

"No speech?" came a shout from the back.

The Guildmaster shook his head. "No, not tonight..." Thunderous applause drowned out the rest of his words. He flashed an annoyed look to those in the crowd, subduing their outburst and restoring a sense of propriety. Once the noise level diminished to a respectable level, he continued.

"As I said, we have business here tonight and I shall keep my comments brief."

Another round of applause and table thumping.

"Honor and bravery have ever been the hallmarks of our beloved Guild. Only those who exemplify these attributes can ever hope of joining our exalted ranks."

Slip glanced to Charka. "Sounds like a Vote's about to happen."

Charka shrugged. "Perhaps."

Transferring his gaze from Ellantho to Slip, Reneeke asked, "A Vote?"

"Whenever someone wishes to join the Guild, they put it to a Vote. At that time, those who object are allowed to come forth and state their case. Once everyone has had their say, we vote."

"Most times," added Kerl, "there are no objections and this is merely a formality."

Terl chuckled. "Remember when Kog tried to join? No less than forty-five members stood in objection, almost caused a riot."

"Did he get in?" queried Jaikus.

Kerl shook his head. "Not then. Later, though, he proved himself by slaying the Glenriver Raptor. Brought the beast's head back and chucked it at the Guildmaster. Such temerity demanded that he be allowed to join. None blocked his entry after such a display of courage."

"Wonder who's up for the Vote," Slip mused.

Very interested in the inner workings of the Guild, Jaikus returned his attention back to the Guildmaster. His eyes flicked to and fro in an attempt to discover who may be the one to join.

Reneeke, on the other hand, turned a knowing look toward Charka. The *Troupe* leader failed to meet his eye.

A growing murmur throughout the hall made Guildmaster Ellantho difficult to hear. Jaikus tried to listen, but the growing buzz of speculation proved too obstructive. He continued scanning the assemblage, he couldn't for the life of him see anyone that appeared more anxious than the rest.

Finally, the murmuring grew too loud and the Guildmaster once again signaled for quiet. Jaikus turned his attention from the crowd, back to the Guildmaster and found Ellantho staring in his direction. "Now, I believe Charka, leader of *Charka's Troupe*, a longtime and respected member of the Guild, would like to say a few words."

Every eye in the hall turned toward their table as Charka stood.

Jaikus listened in shocked surprise as Charka began to speak.

"You all know me. I've been around long enough to remember some of you as Springers." That elicited a murmuring chuckle. "A couple probably should still *be* Springers." More laughter and several guffaws followed. "During my last venture into the Swamp, I had the privilege to get to know a couple lads who may have had more desire than brains when it came to adventuring, but let me tell you, they acquitted themselves with great courage. And like you, courage is the attribute I admire most in any individual.

"Mistakes were made; for what Springer knows a troll from a hole in the ground. But they righted the wrongs, went forward into the unknown, and never backed down. When faced with death, they stood their ground. When faced with entombment, they found the way out. These lads may come from modest stock, but they have the spirit of adventurers.

"When my man, Seward, was grievously hurt and had to be rushed back to Reakla, they went alone into the Swamp to retrieve items stolen by a fully grown mossback." More intakes of breath. "Not only did they return to tell the tale, but they recovered that which I believed irretrievable."

Eyes that had gazed upon Charka, now turned toward Jaikus and Reneeke. Between their youthful appearance and Jaikus' nearly mummified appearance, all understood of whom Charka spoke.

"Over the last two days, you've heard the tale of their last heroic deed, facing the wrath of a maddened troll infested by glow-moth larvae." Many in the audience nodded while others who hadn't heard the tale, spouted expletives. "I am not the only one who can attest to the bravery these two lads exhibited. The Khuodari brothers, Viruloxi, Master Hymal the apothecary, and over half a dozen guards who watched the events as they unfolded from atop the wall, witnessed their heroic deed."

Terl and Kerl nodded in affirmation.

"If ever two individuals deserved to be accorded the honor of joining the Guild, assuredly, it must be them."

Jaikus was completely taken aback.

Charka glanced toward his former Springers. “Stand up, lads.”

Aches and pains melted away as Jaikus rose from his chair. Reneeke offered him a hand, but he shrugged it off with a shake of his head. Making it to his feet, he stared at the men and women looking his way. Many bore grins, others gave nods. Not one held a negative expression.

From the stage, Ellantho raised his voice and asked, “What say you? Do we welcome these brave lads to the Guild?”

Silence hung in the Guild hall for what seemed an interminable time. For a brief instant, fear and doubt sought to squelch the exhilaration of the moment. But it was thunderously thrust aside as a hundred voices shouted, “**Yes!**”

Here ends the first book of:

***The
Adventurer’s Guild.***

The Adventure continues in

***Caravan to Kittikin
The Adventurer’s Guild #2***

Chapter 1

Soaked with sweat, arm feeling like a lump of lead that threatened to cease functioning at any time, Jaikus raised his foil barely in time to avoid a nasty welt across his chest. But he had little time to enjoy his victory as a lightning fast thrust penetrated his guard and scraped along the leftmost side of his ribcage.

“Tired?” Master Swordsman Leari chided with a grin.

Gritting his teeth, Jaikus shook his head. “No!”

“Ha!”

His once flaming red hair now streaked with gray and tied in a ponytail that extended midway down his back, one-eyed Master Leari launched into a series of attacks. For the last two

weeks, he had drilled Jaikus and Reneeke in the basic swordsmanship they would need to survive. Those two weeks were gifted to all new members deemed unskilled as the Guild desired its members to comport themselves honorably, and skillfully; at least to a point.

Today was the last they would have to endure the epithets and painful instruction administered by Master Leari. Earlier, Jaikus had watched Reneeke face their instructor during his final sparring match, and enjoyed a twinge of jealousy. *Why couldn't he fight as well as Reneeke?* They both had received the same instruction, same equipment, everything! Yet Reneeke looked as if he had fenced his whole life while Jaikus still struggled merely to avoid the easiest of hits. *It wasn't fair!* But fairness failed to keep Master Leari's foil from leaving another welt parallel to the first.

When the master swordsman stepped back and signaled the bout over, Jaikus' sigh of relief could be heard by all.

Master Leari removed his fencing helm, tucked it under one arm and turned his one good eye upon his pupil. "Son, are you certain you want to be a fighter? There's no shame in realizing your skills may lie elsewhere."

Not for the first time had Master Leari said those words. Jaikus shook his head. "I'm a swordsman."

Allowing his gaze to remain upon Jaikus a moment longer, he shrugged. "Suit yourself." Then he motioned for Reneeke to come and join his friend.

"You both know the basics. Keep up with the exercises and stretching, and you will be fine against anyone but better swordsmen. Keep in mind that at the moment, that includes almost every swordsman in the world."

Jaikus bristled slightly at what he perceived to be an indirect insult while Reneeke merely nodded.

"Your two weeks of instruction are concluded. There is much I can still teach you, but it'll cost two golds a day." He saw the look in their eyes that they felt such a price beyond their means. "The Guild sets the price. You might look to others, but some are not worth even a copper for their so-called instruction."

Reneeke stretched out his hand. "We appreciate all that you have done for us."

Grinning, Master Leari took his hand and shook it. "You're welcome, son. Always remember, *take care of your sword and your sword will take care of you.*"

"We will, and thank you."

Nodding, Master Leari turned and walked off.

Jaikus watched him for a moment then turned to his lifelong friend. "Now we are full members of the Guild."

"It looks that way," Reneeke agreed. "What do you propose we should do to celebrate? Find a couple girls and make a memory?"

He throbbed from the solar plexus to just below his neck. Welts crisscrossed his chest, side, arms, and to his shame, even his backside. Frankly, he hadn't the strength to do much more than crawl into bed for a week.

“As tempting as that prospect may be, I want a meal, a bath, and a bed. Not necessarily in that order.”

Reneeke chuckled. “Sounds good to me.”

They kept a room at *The Inn of the Silver Spoons*. Not exactly the most economical of places at which they could be staying, but within its walls, they felt comfortable. And with the money received from the Sythal venture, they could well afford it; at least for a while.

Despite his earlier vow of needing an extended period of rest, restlessness found Jaikus and prompted him to join Reneeke in listening to a bard in the common room of the *Silver Spoons*.

After several rousing songs and one love ballad that placed a tear in every lady’s eye, Reneeke announced, “You know, Jaik, we’re going to have to think about where we plan to go from here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, our coins are not going to last forever. Now that we are part of the Guild, and our two-week training has come to an end, we should consider taking on another task that needs resolution.”

Jaikus nodded. “I’ve been thinking about that, too.”

“But *not* as Springers!” Reneeke stated with finality.

“Never again,” Jaikus agreed, chuckling. “But I’m sure there are many jobs out there for ones with our talents.”

Reneeke gave his friend a questioning look. “We don’t really have much in the way of talents, Jaik. Neither one of us can wield a sword with any degree of competency.”

“What do you mean? For two who brought down a troll, snuck goods from under the nose of a fully grown mossback, the world’s the limit.”

“Uh-huh.” Reneeke didn’t sound convinced. “You might remember we had some help with the troll.”

Jaikus waved his hand in the air, dismissing such a thought. “In the morning we’ll go to the Guild and see what they have to offer.” Nursing his ale, Jaikus returned his attention to the bard who had just begun a fun ditty about a boy chasing a dragon’s tail through the woods. The ditty brought back memories of home. Many a time during his youth other bards had performed it back in Running Brook.

Home. They really should make the trip back. If for no other reason than to show their parents what they had become. How Jaikus would love to make his father eat his words. When he had set out for Reakla to join the Guild, his father had prophesized nothing but doom and failure for his son’s “unrealistic” dream.

“You’re a farmer, boy. And that’s all you’re ever going to be.”

Those words still got his dander up whenever he thought of them. His father had never been supportive of anything. Always espoused reasons why his son would fail. Could it have hurt his father to offer him even one word of encouragement?

“I tell you this was a wasted trip.”

“They’ll help. They have to.”

“I doubt it. We have very little money to entice an adventurer to our cause.”

Jaikus’ inner musings ground to a halt as conversational words coming from the table next to theirs piqued his interest. Glancing surreptitiously from the corner of his eye, he saw two men, one slightly older than the other, having their evening repast.

“Fifty golds is quite a sum,” the older man stated.

The younger shook his head. “I’ve heard that any adventurer worth his salt wouldn’t roll out of bed for less than a hundred.”

“Perhaps for a long, difficult task such would be the case. But ours is a minor need, one that would be resolved quickly and without a lot of trouble.”

Jaikus’ interest was definitely piqued now. Turning toward the two men, he said, “Excuse me, gentlemen. I couldn’t help but overhear that you are in need of aid from the Guild?”

The younger man’s eyes narrowed. “Yes. That is correct.”

“My friend and I, as it turns out, are members of the Guild and would be interested to hear of your troubles.”

After giving the two young adventurers a once-over, the older man said, “Son, we appreciate your interest, but this might be better left to veterans.”

“I would have you know that my friend and I *are* veterans. We have tussled with trolls and braved the Swamp and lived to tell the tale.” Of course, he left out the small fact that they had done so in the company of other, much more seasoned adventurers, and that during the short timeframe spent adventuring on their own, they had nearly died if not for Charka’s timely rescue.

When the younger man glanced toward Reneeke, Reneeke nodded agreement, though he did so with an amused grin. Turning to the older man, the younger asked, “What do you think, Father?”

The father still didn’t look convinced.

“They may be our only chance.”

To Reneeke, the older man asked, “How soon would you be able to leave?”

“Tomorrow morning,” Jaikus blurted.

“Jaik,” Reneeke cautioned, “we don’t even know what it is they wish of us to do.”

“True enough,” the son replied. He glanced to his father and received a nod.

“My name is Rupert, and this is my father, Robert. Eight days ago, my mother’s grave was desecrated. We discovered the coffin removed from the family crypt, smashed and everything inside gone, including the body of my mother.”

Saddened, Reneeke said, “How terrible.”

Intrigued, Jaikus asked, “And you wish us to find those responsible?”

Robert nodded. “That, and to return her body so we may lay her back to rest. Her spirit will assuredly walk the earth if her body is not returned.”

“Have you spoken to the Guild?” Jaikus asked. The last thing he wanted for some veteran to steal this easy adventure out from under them.

Robert shook his head. “Not yet, no.”

“We just arrived this afternoon,” Rupert added.

“How much are you offering for our services?” Reneeke asked.

Jaikus shot him a glare warning him not to ruin this for them with bothering about such inconsequentials. *There was an Adventure waiting!*

“Oh, say, fifty golds?” Robert replied.

“We’ll do it,” Jaikus blurted in an attempt to forestall any further objections by Reneeke.

The son’s eyes gleamed. “That’s great. Isn’t it, Father?”

Nodding, Robert kept a serious look upon the two lads from Running Brook. “Are you certain you are up to this?”

“Absolutely,” replied Jaikus without any hesitation. “Consider Jaikus and Reneeke to be on the job.”

“Where did this happen?” Reneeke asked.

“Kith, a small village north of Hermit’s Pass.”

“Hermit’s Pass? Isn’t that in Kittikin country?”

The father nodded. “It is considered so. But they are rarely encountered so far south.”

There were tales aplenty regarding the Kittikin, a somewhat barbaric race of humans that barely tolerated their neighbors to the south. Kittikin raids, and subsequent rescuing of kidnapped maidens, had been the basis for many a tale spun by bards over the years.

“Does that give you cause to reconsider?”

Jaikus’ eyes flicked to the son. “Not in the least.”

“Good. How soon can you leave?”

“In the mor...” began Jaikus before Reneeke overrode him with, “The day after tomorrow.”

Jaikus flashed his friend an annoyed look.

“That will enable us to gather the supplies we need, and transport,” Reneeke explained, more for Jaikus’ benefit than their would-be patrons. “Where can we find you once we arrive?”

“Leave word at the inn,” Robert explained. “Tell them you are friends of Robert and Rupert, they’ll know how to contact us. Get a room and we’ll be in touch. Oh, we’d appreciate you not discussing this with anyone. The desecration of my wife is not something I want gossiped about.”

Jaikus nodded sagely. “I quite understand.”

The father eyed the two adventurers skeptically. “Very well then.” He returned his attention to his son. “The hour grows late and we must begin the journey home in the morning to prepare for your arrival.”

Coming to his feet, he gave the two adventurers a nod, then with his son in tow, left the inn.

“A job, Rene. Our second Adventure!”

“Jaik, I don’t mean to be the rainfall on your Harvest Festival, but now that we’ve taken on this venture, how do you propose we get there? We don’t have horses or sufficient coins with which to buy them. Do you plan for us to walk?”

“With the onset of winter in the air? Hardly.” He thought a moment. “Wait, we could probably get a couple of nags on the cheap.”

“What about supplies? Warm clothing? *Food*??? Or do you think we can dispense with those.”

Jaikus frowned. He could always count on Reneeke to find the mushy section in any apple. “We’ll figure something out.”

“Let’s hope so. We gave them our word we would help, so if we must walk, we will walk.”

Disliking such a possibility, Jaikus wracked his brain to come up with a solution, with little success.

Reneeke carefully watched his friend. “You know, there is one person whom we might ask.” Eyes alight, Jaikus asked, “Who?”

“Why, if it isn’t young Reneeke and his erstwhile companion, Jaikus.”

“Good Morning, Chork.”

Adventurer-turned-statue, Chork smiled as they entered the Guild Hall the following morning. Chork’s history had long been debated by Guild members. The theory most accepted inferred that during an adventure some centuries ago, he ran afoul of a trap that transformed him into a statue of gold. Of course, it could very well have been a curse, or maybe even a wish gone wrong that had made him the statue he was today. None knew for certain and he wouldn’t tell. He had been a fixture within the Guild for so long, none now lived who remembered.

When his comrades returned him to the Guild in what he claimed was an age long past, or so the story went, they had set him in a corner of the hall where he could be among friends. Over time, his friends either passed on, or moved off. At the time, he lacked the ability to manipulate his facial features. That ability hadn’t come until a century later when a magic user attempted to change him back into a human. One day, a magic user named Buga of the Red Hat, so named for the fancy red hat he always wore, arrived and announced that he planned to restore Chork to his former, fleshy self.

For a week, Buga put preparations into place, gathered the appropriate reagents and magical items. Word spread that Chork’s affliction would be lifted, and when the day arrived for him to make the attempt, the Guild Hall filled to capacity.

Needless to say, Buga’s efforts hadn’t turned out quite like he planned. Chork remained a statue, but Buga had at least given Chork the ability to communicate, a capability he quickly put to good use. Many were the times when members cursed Buga, for Chork rarely shut-up. They finally placed him near the Guild Hall’s entrance as a sort of watchdog. There, he stood far enough away that he couldn’t “bend the ears” of those at the tables, yet still serve a vital function. He never slept, remembered everything, and had foiled dozens of nefarious events through the years.

“Good morning, young sirs.”

Someone had tied an animal-hide cape about his shoulders, giving the golden guardian a comical appearance. He didn’t seem to mind. Seeing them coming to a stop before him, Chork immediately started in on where their last conversation had ended.

“As you know, cloud patterns are skittish at best, forever changing in their attempt to fool those of us below so we are unable to divulge their secrets. I made a poem about clouds once, do you want to hear?”

“Well...” began Jaikus but was cut off when Chork made the sound of clearing his throat.

*“Clouds float by,
High in the sky.”*

Silence hung in the air for a moment.

“Is that it?” Reneeke asked.

“Yes.”

Jaikus rolled his eyes and said, “Uh, that was very nice.”

“Isn’t it though? I worked on that particular verse for over a week before getting it just right.”

Reneeke grinned at his friend. “That’s great, Chork.”

“I have more. This next one I worked on during the rat infestation that nearly caused the Guild to shut down. Let me see...that was back when...uh...”

During the pause while Chork worked out the timeline, Jaikus quickly said, “We need your help.”

“Help? You need *my* help? How wonderful. In what way can this humble member of the Guild be of assistance?”

Reneeke laid out their dilemma, how they had a far distance to travel and lacked the means to get there.

“Have you tried the caravansary? If there is one heading north, you could hire out as guards. Of course, they do plod along at an agonizingly slow pace. Yet, I would hazard a guess that such a mode of travel would still be preferable to that of walking.”

Jaikus nodded. “Hadh’t thought of that.”

“Good idea,” Reneeke chimed in. “You wouldn’t know who to approach, would you?”

“As I am rooted to this one position, I am afraid I have limited information on the current availability of caravans needing guards. I would, however suggest speaking with Raynwar.”

“Raynwar?” Jaikus queried.

Chork’s eyes widened. “Have you not yet met Raynwar? He’s only the third most important member of the Guild here in Reakla, the first being the Guildmaster of course.”

“Who’s the second?” Reneeke asked.

“Me, silly.”

Reneeke grinned. “Why did I not see it?”

Sighing, Chork rocked his eyes back and forth. “My worth is seriously undervalued by so many.”

“So, who is this Raynwar person?”

Chork turned his eyes to Jaikus. “He’s the Master of Records. His duties include keeping abreast of all unresolved Adventures, both here and at the other Guild Houses, as well as being informed of various aspects of Reakla that would benefit our members.”

“And one of those aspects being caravans in need of guards?” Reneeke guessed.

“That is correct, young sir. I find it hard to believe you have spent two weeks as members without meeting him.”

Jaikus bristled. "We've been busy."

Chork turned his eyes upon the lad, blinked once, and remained silent. His golden eyes lingered upon Jaikus before turning back to Reneeke. "You can find him on the second floor. Look for the door with the knife."

"Knife?" Jaikus asked.

"Long story behind that, truly quite interesting. It happened quite some time ago..."

Seeing that Chork was winding up for one of his lengthy story-like explanations, the two friends made their excuses and quickly backed away.

"I'll be here should you wish to hear the rest..."

Taking the nearest stairwell, they ascended to the floor above and quick-timed it out of "Chork-range." The one-time adventurer's voice finally fell silent.

The stairwell opened onto a long corridor running the length of the second level. There was another level above this one, but they had been informed that their presence would not be welcomed on the uppermost tier. It was reserved for the higher-ups in the Guild hierarchy.

Jaikus paused a moment to scan the hallway for a door bearing an embedded knife. Not immediately spying one, he left the stairwell. The hallway spanned the entire building with doors standing closed every seven to ten paces.

Each door received a brief, cursory examination. When he failed to see a protruding knife, Jaikus continued on.

After they reached just past mid-way of the long corridor, Reneeke paused before a rather plain door, one which Jaikus had already dismissed. "Hey, Jaik. I think this is it."

Glancing back, Jaikus shook his head. "Can't be. There's no knife."

Reneeke's finger traced an outline in the grain of the wood that had all but faded. It was in the shape of a knife. Something had at one time been affixed to the door but had long since been removed. He chuckled at Jaikus exasperated expression. "Guess Chork's not up on the latest placement of door accouterments. You'd think someone would have told him by now."

"Whatever. Let's get this over with so we can be on our way." Reaching out to grab the handle with the intention of opening the door, he was forestalled when Reneeke placed a hand on his forearm.

"We better knock first."

Three raps were answered by a muffled, "Enter."

Jaikus pushed the door open and found a man of middling years with sword in hand. Sweat dripped down his face and the tunic he wore was soaked through. He slid the sword into its scabbard as he turned toward them.

"Just keeping limber."

"Wouldn't that be better done down in the sparring yard?" Jaikus asked.

"Depends on what you wish to accomplish," he glanced to the sword hanging at Jaikus' waist then added, "young fighter."

Reneeke nodded while Jaikus merely looked confused.

Raynwar took his seat behind a rather long desk devoid of anything that could remotely be construed as paperwork. There was a shield, two maces, and a yellow sack a little larger than a belt pouch containing something that moved.

“You are the two who brought in the troll, aren’t you?”

Jaikus puffed his chest up and nodded. “That we are.”

“Good job. I hear the magic users are putting it to good use.”

Turning thoughtful, Reneeke asked, “In what way?”

“Who knows? They’re a tight-lipped bunch who hates to share their secrets with each other let alone someone not of the craft. If you ever find out, let me know.”

“I’ll do that.”

Leaning back in his chair, the Master of the Records asked, “What can I do for you lads?”

“We’ve taken on an Adventure up Kittikin way and need to find a way to get there,” Reneeke explained. “Chork suggested we try to hire on as caravan guards. He said you might know of one heading that way that needed two?”

“The faster the better,” Jaikus added.

Raynwar glanced to Jaikus and chuckled. “There has never been a fast caravan, lad. They are slow as slugs. But they’ll get you there.”

“Do you know of one?” Jaikus asked somewhat impatiently.

“Two, actually. One is mastered by Stiven Thynn. He’s taking a load of dried peat moss through Hermit’s Pass to the city of Split Oak. The other is mastered by Isaac Tuppin. His caravan is but four wagons. I believe he plans to make a quick stop at Kith before continuing up to Split Oak.”

“Kith?” Jaikus asks. When Raynwar nodded, he cast Reneeke a grin. “That’s perfect.”

“Which one will depart first?”

“I believe Master Thynn leaves in the morning while Master Tuppin departs the day after.”

“And both are in need of two guards?” Reneeke questioned.

Raynwar nodded. “As of yesterday evening they needed at least that many.”

Jaikus turned for the door. “Then we better get down there before they go and hire someone else.”

“Good luck, boys.”

Reneeke gave the Master of Records a respectful bow then followed Jaikus from the room.

“C’m on, Rene.” Hurrying down the hallway, Jaikus hit the stairs at a run.

Reneeke grinned at his friend’s exuberance and followed at a more measured pace.

Chapter 2

Perhaps in its early days the caravansary had once stood beyond the edge of town; but now it was surrounded by a multitude of eateries, inns, and other businesses catering to the needs of the teamsters. Three avenues, each wide enough for three wagons to pass with room to spare, converged on a scene of bustling activity.

Porters were busy hauling goods to and from over a dozen different caravans; a team of farriers worked off to one side, their hammers rang as shoes were repaired and replaced; guards cursed; Masters yelled; kids raced; and two lads newly inducted into the Guild sought a caravan with but four wagons.

Jaikus' neck twisted back and forth as he searched for some order in the chaos. All wagons looked alike and there seemed no rhyme or reason as to their disposition. "Wonder which ones are Master Tuppin's?"

Reneeke shrugged. "Haven't a clue, Jaik."

Flagging down a porter, he inquired as to the location of Master Tuppin, and soon were navigating through the cacophony of noise and bustle toward the caravansary's south side. In this sea of anarchy, they came to a place of relative calm.

Four wagons sat in perfect, side-by-side unison. The wheels of each were exactly four inches from that of its neighbors. To the right of the wagons stood a picket line bearing fourteen horses. Two guards were the only ones in attendance; they eyed the approaching pair from where they sat upon the rear of the leftmost wagon.

Jaikus offered them an affable wave. "Is this the caravan of Master Tuppin?"

One guard was a rather slight man, with flaxen hair tied in a ponytail to just below his shoulders. He wore a leather breastplate and at his hip hung a longsword. The other was much more burly bearing loose dark hair cut to shoulder length. He wore a shirt of chainmail and across his back slung a lethal looking crossbow. The one with the ponytail hopped off the wagon and approached.

"Who wants to know?"

Jaikus gestured to Reneeke as he said, "My friend and I are in need of reaching Kith. We understand that Master Tuppin might need a pair of guards for his trip north?"

Eyes narrowing, Ponytail eyed Jaikus up and down. His expression indicated he found him lacking.

"That's interesting."

When nothing further was forthcoming, Jaikus' affable manner darkened, but he kept his tone civil. "Is this, or is this not, Master Tuppin's caravan?"

"Hmmm..." Ponytail glanced to the other, "Looks like a couple of lads out for a lark. Maybe we should give 'em a spankin' and send them on their way for bothering their betters."

"*Betters!*? I'll show you who..." as he reached for his sword hilt, he felt Reneeke place a hand on his wrist.

Reneeke gave his friend a quick shake of the head then turned toward Ponytail. "I am Reneeke, and this is Jaikus. We are Guild members and were directed here to satisfy Master Tuppin's need for guards on his trip north. Now, is this his caravan or shall we look elsewhere?"

At mention of the Guild, Ponytail's attitude quickly changed to one of accommodation. He gave Jaikus a good-natured grin. "Sorry about that, lad. Didn't mean nothing by it." Then to Reneeke he said, "Yes, these wagons do belong to Master Tuppin."

Reneeke let go of Jaikus' wrist. "Is he still looking for guards?"

"He's always looking for guards."

Jaikus scanned the area. "Where is he?"

Ponytail indicated an inn not far away. "He's staying there. Might not be there at the moment, though."

Taking in the inn for a moment, Jaikus turned back to the guard. His irritation at the earlier treatment faded away at a snail's pace. "Where might we find him?"

"He don't tell us his business. He'll be there at sundown."

Reneeke glanced to the inn, then back to Ponytail. "What is he hauling?"

"Goods."

"Goods?" Jaikus asked. "What kind?"

Burly guard came down from the wagon and joined them. "Does it matter?"

About to reply that it most certainly did, Jaikus was forestalled when Reneeke said, "Not really." Then to his friend he added, "Come on, Jaik. We'll come back tonight."

Still bristling, Jaikus allowed Reneeke to lead him away.

"Let Master Tuppin know we're looking for him," Reneeke said to Ponytail.

"We'll do that."

Not long afterward, the newly inducted Guild members were seated at a tavern not far off the caravansary. Reneeke used some of their last coins to buy them each an ale as he tried to mollify his friend.

"Look, Jaik. It doesn't matter what they haul. It isn't any of our business."

"I don't like it, Rene."

Reneeke merely shook his head with the abiding patience he's come to develop since first meeting Jaikus. "If Master Tuppin allows us to tag along to Kith, he could be hauling carnivorous leeches or the Cursed Soul of Toos for all I care."

"But, we're Guild members now. Shouldn't we be deserving of some respect?"

Snorting, Reneeke then let loose with a chuckle. "This is *Reakla*, Jaik. I bet half the people living here are either Guild members, related to one, or just hang out with them. I doubt if we will get anyone's respect merely because we say that we are from the Guild."

Looking like he just found half a worm floating in his cider, Jaikus remained silent.

"Respect has to be earned, Jaik. We haven't really done all that much thus far to deserve it."

"What do you mean? We've fought a troll, Rene! We entered the Swamp and came out alive. We delved the nether reaches of a long-lost city." His look said he dared Reneeke to find such deeds lacking. Unfortunately for Jaikus, Reneeke did just that.

“For two boys fresh off the farm, it’s not bad; but for someone in the Guild...? We’ve not led armies, fought powerful sorcerers, defeated the undead, or even recovered an item of power. Our fame is still in its fledgling state, a newborn chick if you will.”

Jaikus glowered. “But that will change.”

Nodding, Reneeke replied, “If we don’t die first.”

Rolling his eyes as if such a fate could never be theirs, Jaikus downed the rest of his ale. “After we take care of this business in Kith, we need to find an Adventure worthy of two stalwart heroes such as ourselves.”

Reneeke could only smile. He knew better than to argue the point. Jaikus hungered for the renown a successful career in Adventuring would bring. This was in no small part the reason he had agreed to accompany Jaikus on his bid to become part of the Guild. Without him to rein his at-times reckless friend in, Jaikus would in all likelihood already be dead; his body rotting in the Swamp.

Those they had earlier adventured with; Charka, Seward, and Lady Kate, came at adventuring as a job, not a bid for fame. They were practical about it and Reneeke had gleaned many kernels of wisdom during their first Adventure.

Finishing his ale, Reneeke got to his feet. “What do you say we get a few supplies for the trip to Kith? Still some time before we meet with Master Tuppin.”

Jaikus nodded and rose. “Like armor?”

“Hardly.” Patting his coin purse, Reneeke said, “A few scrolls and potions are about the most we can hope to afford.”

After Jaikus’ convalescence at the temple, not to mention their day to day expenses since, their fortune of ten golds, seven silvers and eleven coppers had shrunk to but six golds, eight silvers and ten coppers.

“What should we get?” Jaikus asked as they left the tavern. “In the *Saga of Rithern*, didn’t the hero have a scroll of levitation? Got him out of a tight spot; maybe that would be good to have.”

“I was thinking of at least a couple healing scrolls and one that cures poisons.”

Jaikus thought about it and nodded. Though not as exciting as a levitating one, he could at least see the necessity of having such in their possession.

“Didn’t Lady Kate say that a good place to get them was at a shop called, *Travel Scrolls*?”

“That’s right, Jaik. The proprietor is a man named Olaf. Lady Kate indicated we could get scrolls from him on the cheap.”

“How cheap?”

Reneeke shrugged. “Not sure. A couple golds I think.”

“A *couple*?” Jaikus asked incredulously. “We won’t have anything left!”

“Better to have no coins than die for lack of a healing scroll.”

Thinking back on their journey through the Swamp and the resultant injuries suffered, Jaikus could see his point. Seward would have perished for sure had he been left without a healing potion.

“Are scrolls better than potions?”

Reneeke glanced to his friend. “You can’t spill a scroll.”

“True. But should you need only a little healing, you can’t use part of a scroll.”

Cocking his head to one side, Reneeke considers it for a moment, then nodded. “You got a point there, Jaik.”

“Charka had healing potions, not healing scrolls.”

Chuckling, Reneeke slapped his friend on the back. “Okay, you win. Let’s find a seller of potions and see what we can afford.”

After following directions supplied by a local, they stood before a narrow doorway. According to the local, this was the shop of a local potion maker, Master Xyr. They had been told Master Xyr’s potions were the least expensive in town.

Hanging next to the door from a tarnished copper chain was a dead plant in a cracked, black pot. It swayed to and fro as if gently touched by a passing breeze. The curious thing about it, there was no wind.

Stepping closer to the dead plant, Reneeke inspected the trio of stunted, shriveled stalks that draped lifelessly over the side. Each stalk held an identical pair of two leaves. One was black with a jagged edge, easily the size of a gold coin. The second leaf was smaller. It too was black but bore ribbons of green, as if life somehow retained a tenuous hold. Where the first’s edge was uneven, this one was smooth with a slightly curl at the tip.

“You ever see anything like this?”

Jaik rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Rene, I grew up on a farm. I’ve seen all kinds of dead plants in a variety of shapes and sizes.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Curious, he reached tentatively toward the larger of the two leaves. He jerked his fingers back when the stalk whipped up and the large leaf made as if to grab his outstretched digits.

Stepping back, he turned a look full of surprise toward Jaikus. “Did you see that?”

“Yeah. What do you suppose it is?”

A gravely voice replied, “It is a Fly Catcher.”

They turned to find an odd little man standing in the now open doorway of the shop. Five foot six and dressed in dark red leathers, the man’s grey hair was combed over in an attempt to cover an all-too-obvious bald spot that began at the forehead and extended all the way to the rear of the scalp. In his left hand the man gripped a two-foot branch from an old oak; a single leaf of dark green extended from a small twig at the top.

“A Fly Catcher?”

The man nodded. “Hate the little buggers.” He then gestured toward the plant with the stick. “It eats them, you know.”

Reneeke returned his gaze to the plant and about that time, another of the stalks snapped upward. The larger of the two leaves deftly caught a flying insect. The leaf curled tightly around its captive as the stalk settled back to its former, limp position.

Turning back to the man, Reneeke began to say, “That’s pretty…” but the door was once again closed and the man, gone.

“Where’d he go?”

Jaikus shrugged. “Probably back inside.”

Eyeing his friend, Reneeke nodded then made for the door. He kept a good distance between himself and the plant. Though probably not fatal, it still might be wise to avoid coming into contact with that leaf.

Pushing open the door, his entrance was announced by a chorus of protesting hinges that sounded like cats being stripped of their skins. He paused only momentarily to wonder why the door hadn't made such a noise when it had opened and closed for the man, before dismissing it as irrelevant and entering the shop.

The room proved to be little more than a hallway only slightly larger than the doorway itself. Six windows covered in grime allowed barely enough light through to illuminate the interior. Two candle holders, one at either end bore burning candle nubs.

A two-tiered shelf of cracked and splintered wood ran the length of the wall to their right. Less than a score of bottles of varying size and color were spaced haphazardly along the two shelves; no two were the same. Reneeke nearly had to walk sideways to keep from brushing against the lower shelf.

An unidentifiable odor filled the air. It held traces of earth and plants, but there was much more to it than that. Reneeke couldn't decide if he liked it. Passing through the narrow hall-like room, he made for the far side. At the end sat a counter that affectively barred access to the rear of the establishment.

"Kind of a weird place, isn't it?"

Reneeke glanced back to Jaikus and nodded. "You could say that."

"Wonder where that man is?"

"Probably in the back."

The counter was of average height and shorter than the span of Reneeke's outstretched arms. A single black pot, similar to the one hanging by the front door sat upon the wooden surface beneath the lit candle. Glancing within revealed it to be empty.

Beyond the counter, the room faded into dark shadows, within which nothing appeared to move. The two lads reached the counter and came to a stop. Jaikus leaned over the counter but failed to discern anything beyond. The room could have extended another ten feet or fifty, there was no way to tell. Not even the candle burning overhead was able to pierce the darkness beyond.

"Hello."

Jaikus jumped at Reneeke's call.

Reneeke grinned at his friend. "Sorry."

It was his turn to jump when a voice behind them replied, "No reason to be sorry."

The same man as had been at the doorway stood before them now; oak branch and all.

"Where did you...?"

Reneeke held up his hand to forestall the rest Jaikus' question. "Are you Master Xyr, of *Xyr's Potent Elixirs*?"

"That I am, young sir. How may this humble potion maker be of service?"

"Do you have healing potions?" Jaikus blurted out.

“My friend and I are members of the Guild and are planning to tackle an Adventure up near Kittikin,” Reneeke explained. “We thought to procure a few potions as a precaution.”

“Very wise, young sir.” His gaze went from Reneeke, to Jaikus, then back to Reneeke and waited expectantly.

“How much are your healing potions?”

“Would you be interested in ones that heal minor wounds, or those that will repair more grievous injuries?”

“The grievous ones.” Jaikus replied.

“Three golds each.”

Reneeke glanced to Jaikus, they had less than seven golds. Two of those would leave them with very little in the way of coins.

“How about the lesser one?”

“My minor healing potions are but one gold piece.”

“That sounds better,” Reneeke said. “Do you have anything to cure poisons?”

“What kind of potion master would I be if I did not have something so basic?” He gave them a grin. “My basic cure-all covers most toxic animals as well as the lesser versions of those crafted by poisoners. Adventurers rarely have need of anything more potent.”

Jaikus nodded. “And how much are those?”

“A single gold piece, young master.”

“Could you give us a moment to decide?” Reneeke asked.

“Certainly. Let me know when you have made up your mind.”

Turning to Jaikus, Reneeke thought of something else to ask and turned back to Master Xyr only to find him no longer there.

“Where’d he go?” Glancing about the small room, he failed to locate the potion master.

“He sure gets around.”

Shaking his head, Reneeke chuckled. “Sure does. So, what should we get? We only have six golds and a few of the lesser.”

“I think one that cures poisons would be good to have.”

“Agreed. We could get one that heals grievous injuries, two of the lesser healings, and one that cures poison.”

“But that would take nearly all we have!”

“Not everything, Jaik. We’d still have eight silvers and ten coppers, and that should be sufficient until we depart with Master Tuppin.”

“What if he doesn’t take us on?”

“Then we’ll think of something else. But right now, we need to plan for the trip to Kith. Either with Master Tuppin or on our own, we may have need of these potions before we arrive.”

Jaikus liked the thought of possessing potions, he just didn’t care to spend all their coins to do it.

Reneeke looked at him questioningly. “Well? Shall we get them?”

Jaikus sighed and nodded.

“That will be six golds.”

Master Xyr's voice, coming unexpectedly as it did startled the pair. They found him standing behind the counter, upon which were arrayed four small vials. Two held a bright red liquid, one a dark red, and the last a darkish brown.

Indicating the bright ones, he said, "These are the minor healing potions," then moved his finger to the dark red, "major healing," and finally the darkish brown, "a curative."

Jaikus eyed them skeptically. "How do we know they do what he says they do?"

"Relax, Jaik. More than one person told us to get our potions here. If his elixirs weren't good, they'd have known."

Master Xyr favored them with a smile. "That is true, young sir. My elixirs are known far and wide for their potent quality. You'll not find their equal," he paused a moment before adding, "at such a cost."

Jaikus didn't look convinced.

Taking six golds from his coin purse, Reneeke laid them upon the table. "They will be fine, Master Xyr."

"Excellent. Do come back when you are in further need." Snatching up the coins, the potion master turned and took but a single step toward the back of the shop when the shadows appeared to deepen, and he was lost from sight.

"Gone again."

Reneeke glanced to Jaik and shrugged. "You take the curative and a minor. I'll hang onto the other minor and the major healing." He picked up one of the two bright red potions, then the dark red major healing and set them within his pack. Jaikus followed suit with his two.

Leaving Xyr's shop, the pair made their way to the inn where Master Tuppin's guards had indicated he would be. The common room was empty so they took seats at a table off to one side. A serving girl soon came and took their order for a couple ales.

Reneeke passed her two coppers. Once the ales arrived, he took a long drink and settled back to wait for the arrival of the caravan master.

Chapter 3

Several hours passed before the afternoon crowd began filtering in. At first there were only a few lone individuals looking for a quick meal, but then others arrived, filled the seats, and the common room grew bustling. By the time the boys had drained a sliver's worth of ale and had their evening meal, the sun was low on the horizon and Master Tuppin had yet to put in an appearance.

“What if he doesn’t show, Rene?”

As the hours passed, so too did Jaikus’ mood deteriorate.

Reneeke merely shrugged. “We’ll give him until we finish off this round. If he hasn’t made an appearance by then, we will return to his wagons.”

“Good.”

Downing the last of his, Jaikus burped, wiped his mouth and then said, “We can go now.”

Reneeke just gave his friend a grin as he sipped from a mug still over half full. “Never rush the pleasures of life, Jaik. They are far too few to be wasted.”

“Sipping ale is a pleasure?”

“It’s all how you look at it. By the time we reach Kith, the ability to relax while sipping ale will most definitely be a pleasure; don’t you think?”

Jaikus merely grimaced.

Reneeke didn’t protract his friend’s irritation any more than he had to. The rest he downed in three quick gulps. Rising, he grabbed his pack and said, “Let’s go.”

“About time.”

Right then, two men walked through the door and made for the common room. One was Ponytail, the guard they had met earlier at Master Tuppin’s wagons. The second was a dark haired, nondescript man of average height. The only thing about him that drew one’s attention was the manner in which he was dressed.

A garish red coat with silver buttons and a matching pair of pants contrasted with the somber browns and earth tones worn by the other patrons. A brown hat rested atop his head with a long peacock feather extended backward from the left side. With Ponytail for company, this had to be Master Tuppin.

“About time,” Jaikus mumbled.

Reneeke nodded and made his way toward the table where the pair had sat.

Ponytail noticed them coming. Leaning close to Master Tuppin, he whispered in the trader’s ear.

Master Tuppin glanced up just as the two lads drew near.

“These are the boys?”

“Yes,” Ponytail replied. “They claim they’re from the Guild.”

Jaikus stepped forward. “That is correct. I am Jaikus, and this here is my partner, Reneeke. We understand that you are in need of a couple extra guards on your trip north.”

The trader eyed them up and down, his face failed to give any indication as to how he found them.

“Hmmmm. I could always use another pair of blades. It’s dangerous country up north. I haven’t yet made it through unmolested. Are you sure you boys are up to it?”

“Up to it?” Jaikus asked as if such a question need not be spoken. “Why, we are veteran adventurers. Just last week my friend and I entered the Swamp, fought trolls, and retrieved items from an enraged mossback.”

“Anyone could make that boast,” Ponytail argued.

Master Tuppin nodded. "True. But we leave in the morning and it will be unlikely that anyone else will offer to accompany us."

"We would be most grateful," Reneeke added. "We have business in Kith and were hoping to accompany you until then?"

"We're not going to Kith, son," Master Tuppin said. When Reneeke's face pursed in a frown, he quickly added, "However, the road to Kith is along our way and north of the mountains. It is through the mountains where we need guards the most." He glanced to Ponytail who nodded. "We can take you that far."

"But I thought Raynwar said..." Jaikus began.

"Thank you," Reneeke replied quickly, cutting Jaikus off. "We won't let you down."

"HMMMMM," murmured the caravan master. He eyed the pair as one would a cow offered for sale. His gaze settled upon their swords.

"You know how to use those?"

"Yes, sir!"

Drawing his with a flourish, Jaikus nearly skewered the barmaid as she made to pass, which caused her to dart backwards and dump her load of mugs upon a rather large man boasting a wide variety of scars and a sour-disposition.

Coming out of his seat with a roar, the man used the back of his hand to wipe away an errant track of ale froth that now coated his face. "Idiot!"

Unaware that his action precipitated the outburst, Jaikus glanced over his shoulder, wondering who the idiot was.

Reneeke on the other hand, realized a situation was in the offing and moved to interpose himself between the ale-soaked man and his friend.

"Our apologies," he said. "We did not mean..."

The rest of his statement was cut short when a right cross connected with his jaw. Stumbling backward, he crashed into and through Master Tuppin's table.

Jaikus immediately sheathed his sword and took a swing at the man's middle. Expecting to encounter soft flesh, his blow instead met a washboard stomach of iron-hardness; pain erupted from knuckles to elbow. He had but a moment to register the ineffectiveness of his attack before a fist of steel scored a solid strike into his gut. As he doubled over, a second blow landed against the side of his head, sending him reeling into a nearby table.

Those seated at the table merely took charge of their mugs, leaned back in their seats, and watched as he crashed through the wooden tabletop and hit the floor.

"Need help, Ranthor?"

The big man snickered. "Naw. This won't take but a moment." Other calls and laughter erupted from several points throughout the common room.

A pain shrouded fog filled Jaikus' vision. He could barely make out the big man as he stepped toward him. His breathing came in gasps and all he could do was lay there and moan. Waiting for the next blow, he was relieved when Reneeke launched into action.

Reneeke, not small by any means, was still dwarfed by this giant of a man. Hitting him full force, Reneeke grasped Ranthor in a bear hug and the two went sailing into yet a third table.

“Rene,” Jaikus groaned.

He attempted to stand and come to his friend’s aid, but his knees gave way. Tilting to the side, he fell into the lap of a rather gorgeous, brown haired girl. On the other side of the table’s splintered remains, a man of medium size sporting a large ill-tempered disposition, leapt to his feet.

“Get off my woman!”

Grabbing Jaikus by the back of the shirt, he yanked him to his feet, spun him around and sent him flying backwards yet again with a well placed blow to the jaw.

Barely conscious, Jaikus was unable to avoid slamming into a man who had up until that moment been enjoying a bowl of stew. He hit the man’s back, who in turn was pushed into the table which upended the bowl causing the hot contents to soak his shirt front. Roaring with rage, the man turned on Jaikus who had already slumped to the floor in a semi-conscious stupor.

“I’ll kill you!”

A six inch knife materialized in the man’s hand. Raising the weapon, he plunged it downward. The blow never fell. Before it could connect with Jaikus’ chest, Reneeke bowled the man over. Twice he pummeled the man before they even hit the floor.

Other fights had broken out throughout the common room. Reneeke gave one final knee to the man’s midriff before getting to his feet.

He saw Ranthor moving toward the comatose Jaikus and surged forward.

A voice from across the room shouted, “Ranthor!”

The call alerted the big man. Turning, he met Reneeke’s assault and the two grappled, each seeking to unbalance the other. As Reneeke began tilting off-balance, he heard a man clear his throat. Both he and Ranthor looked to see Master Tuppin standing next to them.

The caravan master held up a finger to Ranthor and said, “Just one moment, please.”

“What?”

“Just one moment. “ Then turning to Reneeke, Master Tuppin said, “If you and your friend survive this, be at my wagons in the morning.”

“We’ll be there,” Reneeke assured him.

Ranthor laughed. “There won’t be much of them left.”

Master Tuppin took in the precarious position in which Ranthor held Reneeke and then glanced to where Jaikus lay unconscious on the floor. “You may be correct. In any event, we leave at sunrise.” He then turned upon his heels and walked from the common room with Ponytail in tow.

“Now,” Ranthor said as the struggle resumed, “shall we finish this?”

Reneeke didn’t answer; his attention was focused entirely on working to reverse his current situation. Despite his best effort, Ranthor continued moving him off-balance. About to be maneuvered into a position where maintaining equilibrium would prove impossible, a third individual crashed backward into them.

The impact knocked Reneeke and Ranthor apart. Ranthor and the third man went one direction and Reneeke in another. Two steps and the steady surface of a table brought Reneeke to a halt. A quick glance back revealed Ranthor was extricating himself from where he

lay beneath the body of the third man who appeared unconscious. In that instant, Reneeke realized the third man hadn't attacked but had either been hit or thrown into them.

Chaos ruled the common room. Fights raged from one end to the other. Women screamed as they tried extricating themselves from the fray; men yelled as fists found targets; chairs smashed; tables broke; and in the midst of it all, Jaikus began to stir.

Having only moments before Ranthor would be after them, Reneeke raced to his groggy friend. En route he ducked beneath a hurled chair, avoided a blow meant for another, and bodily thrust a man out of his way. Reaching his friend's side, he grabbed Jaikus by the arm and hauled him to his feet.

"Come on, Jaik. We've got to get out of here."

The left side of his face was red and puffy; the eye was all but closed. He looked to Reneeke then at the multiple melees swirling around them. "Did we win?" he asked, confused and uncertain.

"Yes, Jaik. Now let's go!"

Reneeke put Jaikus' arm over his shoulder and raced for the exit. Before they reached the door, a shout from Ranthor came from behind; the exact words were drowned out by the commotion filling the common room. A glance back revealed the big man standing with the neck of another clutched in his big hand. He gave Reneeke a grin and a nod then thrust the man backward as he waded into a neighboring battle that consisted of no less than four combatants.

Turning back to the matter at hand, namely getting out of there, Reneeke hurried a wobbly Jaikus forward. Motion and light drew his attention to a side window. Men bearing torches, cudgels and dressed in the uniform of Reakla's town guard were racing toward the inn.

The exit was packed with people, both those trying to escape the melee and others on their way in to join it. They *had* to leave before the Guard arrived. For if they failed to do so, their meeting with Master Tuppin in the morning would be seriously hindered. Reneeke grasped Jaikus tight, quickened his pace and barreled forward.

A few realized what they were about to do and sought to get out of the way, but most were not so lucky. Bodies exploded outward as Reneeke with Jaikus in tow slammed into the log jam of humanity.

Jaikus stumbled once but Reneeke kept him moving. He turned toward the alleyway opposite the approaching Guardsmen and practically carried his friend the last several feet into its sheltering darkness; curses and epithets following them the entire way.

Once inside, Reneeke spared only a moment to glance over his shoulder. Not seeing the guards coming their way, he turned his attention to Jaikus.

"Can you walk?"

A nod was the only answer forthcoming.

"Then let's put that ...," he said, jerking his thumb back toward the inn, "behind us."

Jaikus' step wasn't as sure as it usually was, but he did manage to keep one foot in front of the other as the pair followed the alley to its other end and quickly made their way back to their room.

“They ain’t comin’.”

Master Tuppin glanced to Ponytail and nodded. “You may be right, Rojer.” The sun had been above the horizon for nearly half an hour now and he would wait no more. Half of those in the caravansary had already departed and the rest were getting underway. “Let’s go.”

Along with him and his two guards, Master Tuppin had three teamsters, one for each of his other wagons. All had been with him for years.

Master Tuppin flicked the reins on the lead wagon and the pair of horses drawing it pulled against its weight. As the wheels turned and made to leave the caravansary, the other three wagons fell in line behind.

Rojer rode a roan stallion and took position just behind Master Tuppin’s wagon. His partner, the burly man with the crossbow Reneeke and Jaikus met earlier, brought up the rear.

They made their way through Reakla and had nearly reached its northern outskirts when Jaikus and Reneeke emerged at a run from a side street half a block behind the caravan.

“We’re here!” Jaikus yelled.

Burly Guard glanced over his shoulder and saw the pair racing toward him. “About time,” he mumbled as they ran past on their way to the lead wagon and Master Tuppin.

Not stopping, Master Tuppin looked to Reneeke and then gestured to the wagon right behind his. “Sit with Larko.” To Jaikus he said, “You ride with Midden at the rear.”

Reneeke bobbed his head while Jaikus replied, “Yes, sir.”

Reneeke tossed his pack up on the seat next to Larko and climbed aboard.

Larko was the youngest of the three teamsters at twenty-four years of age. Brown hair cut short, he gave Reneeke a jovial grin and a friendly “Howdy.”

“Howdy yourself, Larko. Name’s Reneeke.”

Taking his pack and setting it in the bed of the wagon behind the seat, he sat next to the young teamster.

“Have you been with Master Tuppin long?”

“About six years. It’s a good job.”

“Dangerous?”

Shrugging, Larko replied, “What isn’t these days.”

Chuckling, Reneeke nodded. “You have a point.”

“Have you taken the road to Kittikin before?”

“Twice.”

“Trouble?”

“Bandits once, but they were easily dealt with. Most don’t want to tussle with armed prey.”

“Lookin’ for easy pickings I take it.”

“Those traveling alone, mostly. Heard of a caravan two years back that was attacked in the hills. Only the master and a lone teamster survived. A party of Adventurers was sent out to find them.”

“Did they?”

Larko nodded. “Seventeen men were brought back, tried, and executed for murder.”

“Good to know.”

“Yep. Makes one feel safe to know those bandits aren’t out there anymore.” Then he glanced to Reneeke. “Always new ones cropping up though.”

“That’s why we’re here.”

“Glad to have you. With any luck, you two will be bored to tears.”

“Let’s hope so.”

Midden was pushing forty, had an air of competence, and merely gave Jaikus a grunt as the lad climbed aboard.

“Didn’t think we’d make it.”

Snorting, the elder teamster glanced to the young Guildsman, “Almost didn’t.”

Jaik put his pack on the floor of the wagon and kicked it under the seat with his foot. “We couldn’t very well let Master Tuppin down. *An agreement made is an agreement seen through* as my old granther used to say. Besides, if things are as rough up ahead as we hear, you’ll need our swords before too long.”

The look Midden cast him said he doubted how effective two such young lads would really be.

At first annoyed, Jaikus then laughed, slapped Midden on the back and said, “Rest assured, we can handle it. After all, my friend and I just returned from an Adventure where we faced down trolls and mossbacks. Maybe you’ve heard of us? *Jaikus* and Reneeke...?”

Midden shook his head.

“Really?” Jaik asked, surprised. “How the troll took down Reneeke and I stood over him and saved his life with naught but a length of steel and determination?” When again he received a shake of the head, Jaikus said, “It’s really all very exciting. Reneeke and I had just arrived in Reakla not that long ago...”

As the caravan rolled through the outskirts of Reakla, Jaikus launched into a complete and well-rehearsed exposition of their exploits all the while completely oblivious to Midden’s annoyed glances.

**That’s it, folks. Hope you enjoyed them.
Take care.**

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