

# **Dragon Slayer: Beginnings**

## Carey Green

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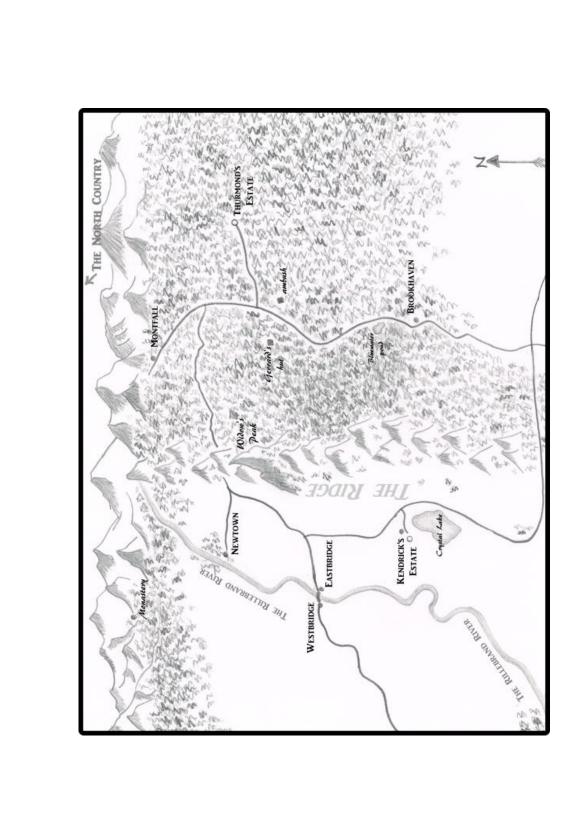
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To my children, who encouraged me to tell them these stories in the first place.

To my wife, who has encouraged me every step of the way.

To my Savior, who has encouraged me and carried me every one of those steps.

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## **PROLOGUE**

And the Lord said to Job.

"Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook or press down his tongue with a cord? Can you put a rope in his nose or pierce his jaw with a hook? Will he make many pleas to you? Will he speak to you soft words? Will he make a covenant with you to take him for your servant forever? Will you play with him as with a bird, or will you put him on a leash for your girls? Will traders bargain over him? Will they divide him up among the merchants? Can you fill his skin with harpoons or his head with fishing spears? Lay your hands on him; remember the battle – you will not do it again! Behold, the hope of a man is false; he is laid low even at the sight of him. No one is so fierce that he dares to stir him up.

Who then is he who can stand before me? Who has first given to me, that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine.

I will not keep silence concerning his limbs, or his mighty strength, or his goodly frame. Who can strip off his outer garment? Who would come near him with a bridle? Who can open the doors of his face? Around his teeth is terror. His back is made of rows of shields, shut up closely as with a seal. One is so near to another that no air can come between them. They are joined one to another; they clasp each other and cannot be separated. His sneezings flash forth light, and his eyes are like the eyelids of the dawn. Out of his mouth go flaming torches; sparks of fire leap forth. Out of his nostrils comes forth smoke, as from a boiling pot and burning rushes. His breath kindles coals,

and a flame comes forth from his mouth. In his neck abides strength, and terror dances before him. The folds of his flesh stick together, firmly cast on him and immovable. His heart is hard as a stone, hard as the lower millstone. When he raises himself up the mighty are afraid; at the crashing they are beside themselves. Though the sword reaches him, it does not avail, nor the spear, the dart, or the javelin. He counts iron as straw, and bronze as rotten wood. The arrow cannot make him flee; for him sling stones are turned to stubble. Clubs are counted as stubble; he laughs at the rattle of javelins. His underparts are like sharp potsherds; he spreads himself like a threshing sledge on the mire. He makes the deep boil like a pot; he makes the sea like a pot of ointment. Behind him he leaves a shining wake; one would think the deep to be white-haired. On earth there is not his like, a creature without fear. He sees everything that is high; he is king over all the sons of pride."

The book the book of JOB, Chapter 41

## CHAPTER ONE

As Hon awoke, the sky outside his window was dark, but the room was as bright and hot as if it were mid-day. His hair and night clothes were soaked with sweat.

His bleary eyes were drawn to the wall opposite his bed, where flames danced atop it, quickly consuming the thatched roof. The darkness of the night sky showed through the flames. He thrust himself backward into the corner of the room, only to feel the heat of rising flames as they came through the wall behind him. As he leapt over his pallet toward the closed door, he could hear his Mamma frantically screaming his name and the faraway shouts of the men of the village. The six-year-old boy began to cry.

He climbed over the smoking, thatch-strewn quilts of his parents' bed. Patches of burning straw dotted the floor. The room was growing brighter and hotter by the second. Gripping the door pull, he tugged, finding it unusually difficult to open. Trying again with all his strength, the door suddenly swung free.

It was in the midst of this chaos that he first heard the sound, a piercing screech that filled his heart with fear. It seemed to be right above him, but within the fire as well.

Without thinking, Hon began running for the front door of the cottage. Debris showered over him as he dodged his way through the blazing room. Fright drove him over the hot embers on the floor; he didn't feel the blisters that were rising on his feet. Suddenly, he was through the front door of the cottage, his face blackened and his bedclothes smoking. He ran like a frightened deer, away from the house and the terrifying sound above it. He came to a stop by the well in the center of the town square.

The pain of the burns on his feet awoke him to the reality of the chaos about him. Tears flowed again as he took in the scene. People were shouting, running, seeking cover. Most buildings were in varying degrees of flame. Wood popped and hissed, smoke filled the air. He picked out his Mamma's slight figure through the crowd. She was back across the square, turned away from him. She knelt in the dirt in front of their flaming cottage, her head hung low. In his terror, Hon had run right past her.

The sound pierced his ears again, coming from the dark sky above the square. A second sound accompanied it; a powerful, pulsing, whooshing sound that drew closer each second. His Mamma turned her head away from it, hands over her ears and eyes clenched shut. Hon's only thought was to be with her so he began another mad dash, straight toward her.

The sky erupted with fire and a building to his right burst into flames. The blast knocked him to the ground. He suddenly felt strong, rhythmic bursts of cool night air pulsing down onto his head. A chill overtook his small body as the black sky seemed to descend upon him. Down came a hulking, scaly, red beast, gracefully lighting on the dusty ground immediately in front of him.

The creature was huge, towering at least fifteen feet higher than his childish frame. Its muscular legs were like tree trunks, its body covered in impenetrable rows of rockhard scales. It was a legend come to life, a monster to strike fear into the bravest heart.

Hon could see his Mamma's cowering form as he looked through the widely spread legs of the dragon. Instinctively, he made his way toward her again, choosing a path directly through the legs of the beast. Just as he emerged from underneath the massive body, his Mamma's eyes met his.

"Hon! Hon, no!"

#### CHAPTER ONE

As he darted toward her a lightning fast thrust of the dragon's strong fore-claw plucked him from the ground, midstride. With a screech of triumph the beast rose to its full height, violently shaking its head from side to side as flames spewed from its mouth.

Though he could no longer see her, Hon heard his Mamma's voice again.

"No!"

Swinging around to face her, the dragon focused its attention on his Mamma. She screamed at the beast.

"Let him go, you devil!"

Reaching for stones and pieces of smoking wood, she pelted the dragon with one measly object after another, each one emphasizing a different word.

"Let... him... Go!"

Enraged at her pitiful assault the dragon advanced. In one stride it towered above her like a mountain. Mouth wide and teeth bared, it roared fiercely into her face. She turned to run, but found nowhere to go. Behind her was the burning remains of their home and in front of her was the dragon. Spinning around she glanced from Hon, to the dragon, and back again. Mother and son locked eyes and tears began to flow. The dragon swiped viciously at the woman and she flew limply through the air, landing in a heap 50 feet away, at the far side of the square.

As the beast turned, a shower of arrows and rocks peppered its rough hide. The men of the village had gathered themselves to make a defense. Hon saw his Papa in the front ranks, notching an arrow and letting it fly. Their missiles bounced from the monster's scaly hide, causing no harm at all. It roared in defiance and, with a quick twist of its mighty body, swept its tail across their small company, sending men flying like dust in a gale.

Suddenly, Hon was rising, high above the blazing village. The men below were picking themselves up from

the ground, and some did not move at all. His Papa was running toward the blacksmith's shop. Hon craned his neck to find his Mamma. Her still form lay motionless on the far side of the square. The beast rose higher, circling the town as if taunting the helpless villagers. The sound of its mighty roar echoed through the valley. Hon wept, helpless and afraid as he soared high above his home.

A quick gust of wind blew against his cheek and he heard a loud "thwap," just to his left. Something wet and sticky fell across his burnt arm and the dragon screamed, and lurched to one side. A short, thick shaft protruded from the base of the dragon's neck. Far below, his Papa was frantically trying to load a crossbow while two other men ran out of the blacksmith's shop with crossbows of their own. With a screech of pain, the dragon began to climb higher into the dark sky.

The wind violently whipped Hon's night clothes as the rhythm of the huge, bat-like wings grew faster. The pair rose higher, above the clouds, into the starlit night, the boy clutched tightly in the dragon's bony claw.

The compressing grip of the dragon's claw caused Hon's head to pound and his breath to become short. As the wind blew harder and colder against his face, he gasped for air, unable even to cry. His thoughts became a jumble, fading as he lost consciousness... flames... Mamma... the dragon... Papa... pain... the sound...

Then all was silent.

## CHAPTER TWO

"Stewart? Stewart!"

The hand on his shoulder roused Stewart from his stupor. He had no idea how long he had been staring at the dim outline of the rocky ridge to the north, where his son had disappeared into the night.

"Stewart, it's Ella. Come quickly!"

At the name of his wife, Stewart turned to see the face of Fulton, the town blacksmith and his life-long friend. He was covered with soot, dirt, and blood.

"Ella? Where is she? What has happened?"

"Stew, it's bad. Come!"

They set off across the square, hurrying past a group of men who were passing buckets from the well to douse the nearest fire. Others were trying to rope a terrified mare. There were only a few buildings in the village that had not been destroyed. Fulton led the way toward a small circle of women and children on the far side of the square. As they approached, Stewart heard his name whispered and the circle parted. There, in the middle of the small group, lay his wife; limp, pale, and struggling for life.

"Ella!" he cried, dropping to his knees next to her. The ground was sticky with her blood. One look into her eyes and Stewart knew his wife would soon be gone. The circle of onlookers was silent.

A faint whisper escaped her lips.

"Stew - art? Stew..."

"My love, do not speak," Stewart interrupted, as his tears fell onto her face. "You are weak, you must rest."

"I will soon rest, eternally," she whispered, forcing out a smile. "Hon? Did the beast... Hon?"

Stewart did not want to answer. He did not want her dying thoughts to be filled with anxiety over their son, but they had learned early in their marriage that truthful words are best, even when they are hard to hear. Though he dreaded how the terrible truth might affect her, he knew he must tell her.

"Gone. We tried. We fought the beast with all our..." his voice began to waver, "but all we could do was wound it, to make it flee." Tears began to flow and he paused to regain his voice. "It would not loosen its grip."

"Gone?" Ella struggled to one elbow until her eyes were within inches of his. "Gone?"

"Yes," he said grimly.

Every eye was on Ella. Stewart wondered if the news would be the final blow. To his surprise, she lay down again calmly, as with a supernatural peace. Her words came evenly, in deep breaths.

"No matter. You will find him, my love. You will search him out."

She closed her eyes and groped for Stewart's hand. He gently lifted her body into his lap and she nestled against him, like she had many times after a weary day of work. He held her close as the rise and fall of her chest diminished with each breath. Every manly instinct wanted to strike out, to defend her, but there was no defense to be made against death. Stewart was helpless, and languished under that knowledge.

With a long breath she turned her face up to his. As he looked into her eyes for the final time, Stewart saw all the things he had fallen in love with just seven years before; courage, strength, understanding, and her love. He would never forget her faithful, encouraging love.

She exhaled once more, slow and deliberate, and did not move again. Stewart held her limp body, crying silently. His mind was consumed in the fog of sorrow, like the black

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night that had swallowed his only son. He stayed there, holding her close as the stars passed overhead. When night begrudgingly gave way to morning, he once again felt the familiar hand of Fulton on his shoulder. He looked into the large brown eyes of his childhood friend.

"It's a tough blow," said Fulton. "All of us have been hurt, but none like you have, Stew. The pain will be with you a long while, but we will help you shoulder it, if you will let us."

Stewart lay Ella softly on the ground and rose to his full height.

"I will," he said, wiping his eyes. "I've sat here in the dust remembering. I remembered the many happy times Ella and I have shared with you and Ida. You are true friends, and I have no doubt that you will be with me," his voice trailed off. He resumed with a large breath, "and I have need of you now. There are two things I must do, quickly." Looking down at his wife's peaceful face, he said, "First, I must tend to Ella's body. She is in her Lord's care, but the care of her body is for me to do. Then I have to go after Hon."

Stewart could see at once that his friend believed it a lost cause. Nevertheless, Fulton spoke the words he needed to hear.

"I expected as much. I'm with you."

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By noon, Ella's body was prepared and ready for burial, along with six others from the village. Since most homes had been reduced to piles of smoldering rubble, arrangements were made to speak words over the dead and receive condolences at Fulton's blacksmith shop, which had been miraculously spared the night's destruction.

Following the funeral, friends and neighbors came to express their sympathy to the grieving families. Many kind words were spoken about Ella, and Stewart was truly grateful. He knew they loved her. She had been a friend to many. But each time Hon was mentioned, he insisted that his son was not lost. Every man in the village was invited to join him in the search. Some smiled, nodding their heads politely. Stewart knew that they believed his grief was muddling his thinking. But a few, for reasons of their own, shook his hand firmly, with determination in their eyes. They would join him in the search for his son, ready for the worst.

That evening the forge glowed with a blazing fire. Stewart gathered around it with five determined men. As they spoke about the task ahead, Stewart realized that most of them had rallied to his cause because it was their cause too. It was a way that they could fight the helplessness that gnawed at their gut.

Next to Stewart sat Fulton, his best friend. He was a man as strong and reliable as the metal he shaped. Fulton's wife, Ida, had lost her elderly mother and father to the dragon's attack. They were burned to death as they slept.

Next was Irwin, a kindly, talkative old farmer who, two winters earlier, had lost his wife of 40 years. He had weathered that loss well, but had lost his crops, his barn, and all the livestock in it, to the dragon's attack. Stewart didn't think the bent old man had much strength left, but was glad for his willingness and resolve. They would need every hand that could raise a weapon.

"I suppose I've a bit of life left in these old bones," Irwin said. "'It's not every day a coot my age can go sportin' off tuh hunt a dragon! It makes me feel a bit like life's not done for me yet. Puts some life in this old heart. It harkens to my younger days, long past days when I was a bit less wise and a bunch more reckless! Not to say that

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you're bein' reckless young Stewart, not at all, what with your youngun bein' taken. I understand that entirely. You're doin' what a father's got tuh do! I'm just sayin' that my younger days was surely reckless, surely so.

"My dear departed, God rest her blessed soul, used to remind me of them days so often. Lord knows I'm never to forget 'em. But never mind all that! I want you to know that what I'm sayin' is that I'm in, for as much good as these wrinkled old hands can do ya. Might as well go out of this life doin' somthin' that matters, and that there's a fact!"

Seated on a stool across the fire was North, a giant of a man. He stood half way past six feet tall, and so strong a build that he seemed just as wide. His wife and two children had escaped their cottage before it collapsed and were already on their way to an uncle's home in a neighboring village. North's stonemason shop, with all its tools, had been destroyed. In his simple, quiet way, the mason expressed his intentions.

"Were it my boy who was taken, I'd be grateful to any who lent a hand. So, I am obliged to come alongside you, Stewart. The way I look at it, if he's to be rescued, it'll be done by those who are determined and strong. The good Lord has made me both. That dragon will know he's been struck when I strike a blow, you can count on that."

Stewart didn't doubt it.

Next was Pierce, the local wine-seller. The entire village knew him to be a respectable, responsible man in every way. His youngest son, one of Hon's friends, had been struck by a falling beam. Thankfully, he had only a broken arm to show for it. But Pierce's business was a different matter. His vineyard was behind Irwin's barn, and the fire had easily spread to the field from the flaming building. He would have to begin again from scratch in the spring.

"I'm glad to help, but you need to know that when spring comes," he coughed nervously against the back of his hand, "I'll have to be about my work. None of you knows much about wine and vineyards, but it will take many years to get vines able to bear wine-worthy fruit again. I've got to start," he coughed again, "as soon as the frost clears."

"I understand," Stewart smiled. "Thank you for your help."

Finally, was the red-haired tradesman Reid, who did whatever he had to do to make a living; and he did many things well. He was the village baker and butcher, as well as a fine rope maker. Of the men present, his loss was one equal to Stewart's. His home was the first to be set aflame and his wife and three children had been unable to escape. Reid had been at the tavern when the tragedy struck. He sat sullenly as the flames cast streaks of light across his face. He wore his rage like an oversized cloak.

"I am here," he said, pausing to look every man in the eye, "to see that dragon pays for what it's done. Life for life, that's what I say. I only wish the damned lizard had three of them I could take." He stared hard into Stewart's eyes. "I know you feel the same, Stew."

Stewart nodded.

There was not a warrior among them, yet they were determined to find and destroy the mightiest of creatures, and to save Hon. Stewart watched each man walk away from the meeting, hoping they would be able to sleep before dawn. With all that had happened and what lay before them, he doubted any of them would rest easy. He stayed up late into the night gathering what food he could find to sustain them on their long journey. Not knowing how long they would be gone, Stewart packed extra tunics and outer cloaks. The north regions were known for their harsh climate, and winter would be upon them soon.

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Walking away from the glowing forge, he looked toward the north, barely able to make out the silhouette of the rugged mountains in the moonless night. He knew they embarked on a fool's errand, and resigned himself to being the biggest fool of them all. But he had to go. If there was any chance that Hon was still alive, he had to find him. Ella had labeled him "stubborn" on many occasions and as he looked into the black sky, he knew she was right. It was his way, and he was glad for it. Hon would not be rescued without it.

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Dawn broke dimly. A fog had blanketed the village overnight. Stewart rose from his bed on the blacksmith's floor, chilly and damp despite the nearby forge, and stretched his weary soul. The glowing fire revealed that he was not the first to wake. Fulton had been up to check on him. He was a true friend, trustworthy to the end. A cynical laugh escaped his lips.

The end may be exactly where we are headed.

Stewart's plans were set, and good men were joining with him. But in the dim light of the new day, he did not feel hopeful. He had been awake long into the night, restless and pained as he recounted the unthinkable events that had occurred. Over and over he had relived the surreal experience of watching his small son being carried into the sky, and he had tried to push away the vivid memories of kneeling in a pool of his beloved's blood. Despite his best efforts to empty his mind, he wound up immersed in those memories. Hope had abandoned him, he was sure of it. In its place was the sickly, suffocating weight of resignation.

Walking into the street, he was the only one stirring. No doubt the anxiety and panic of the last few days had taken its toll. Even the men venturing north with him were

nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they had reconsidered. Stewart made his way across the square toward what remained of his home. He had not been interested in seeing it until now, and standing before it in the first light of day he realized what had kept him away. There was nothing there but dreams of what might have been.

As he stood before the remains of his cottage, Stewart's eyes were drawn to a spot of bright blue peeking out from the blackened heap. He tiptoed his way to the spot and kicked aside a charred plank, and stared in disbelief. There, fluttering lightly in the morning breeze, was Ella's favorite shawl; a gift he had given her two Christmases past. It lay folded and unscorched, as if someone had carefully placed it for him to find. He gingerly took it in his trembling fingers, expecting it to crumble to ash in his hand, but it was as soft and beautiful as ever. Impulsively, he raised it to his face. Miraculously, it still held the womanly fragrance of its owner.

"Thank You," he stuttered aloud, as he lifted tearfilled eyes toward the hazy sky. "Thank You for this merciful gift."

He had never been a man of strong faith. That had been Ella's realm. It's not that he was opposed to it, he had simply never seen the need. But there, in the damp mists of the morning, two days after such destruction and loss, he found himself uttering his first awkward prayer.

"I know You could have stopped this senselessness," he stretched his arms to indicate the destruction that surrounded him. "I don't know why, but You didn't." He let out a long, heavy breath. "I should be angry at You. I should be furious," his jaw tensed and he shook his head. "But I'm not. It doesn't make sense, any of it."

He looked again toward the heavens, just as the sun broke through the fog.

"You don't make sense."

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The trees surrounding the village diffused the bright rays, scattering them across the weary town. He breathed deeply, feeling the warmth on his face, and knew that despite the rawness and unanswered questions in his soul, he would go on. Walking back to Fulton's shop, he held the shawl next to his cheek, remembering his Ella, and the last words he heard her say.

You will find him, my love. You will search him out. Yes, he would.

He quickened his pace. The men would be waiting.

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The small boy hung limp in the claw of the dragon as the northern mountains rose on the dark horizon. Though they still moved with great speed, the beast was wounded more seriously than anyone had known. The bolt from Stewart's crossbow had nicked a main artery. It was not a fatal wound, but the young firedrake was weakening with every flap of its leathery wings. As the miles wore on, the dragon's flight gradually dipped lower, each beat of its wings more unsteady than the one before. In time, it glided only slightly above the tops of the tall oaks.

It was the slapping of the uppermost leaves against Hon's bare feet that woke him. He was immediately aware of the rushing wind in his face, cold and strong. Disoriented, he tried to turn his body away from the cold, but was held too tightly to move. Then he remembered his burning village and his ascent into the sky.

The belabored, hot breath of the dragon wheezed far above Hon's head as the branches of another tree struck his feet and lower legs. Fear rose in his heart and quickly turned to panic. The only thing he could do was cry.

Without warning, a large branch caught him hard just below the knees, and the dragon's grip loosened. The next blow, coming immediately after the first, hit harder and he tumbled free into the darkness.

First his back, then his head were struck by branches. He cried out as his arms and torso were gouged repeatedly by the branches, as he tumbled down. Finally, after a hard blow against a thick lower branch, he seemed to hang almost weightless in midair, then hit the ground with a thud.

Hon lay flat on his back, gazing upward, gasping for each breath. His feet and legs stung and throbbed. With his wind gone, he panicked, scrambling to his knees in a desperate attempt to breathe. But the more he tried, the more impossible it seemed, until the lack of oxygen combined with his body's weariness caused him to fall unconscious to the ground.

He woke hours later, shivering from the cold. Silence reigned over the black woods. Dark, tall trunks, one after another loomed high overhead. The dense cover shadowed everything from the dim light of the stars and moon.

He was alone and frightened.

"Mamma? Papa?"

The stifling silence of the forest unnerved him. He cried again, even louder.

"Mamma! Papa!"

His small voice was smothered by the dense foliage surrounding him. As he cried in the darkness, he felt utterly helpless. Far from his home, in a strange, dark forest, he was helpless. Finally, he burrowed down into a pile of leaves and fell into an exhausted sleep.

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As the sun's rays began to pierce the veil-like trees, Hon awoke. In spite of the growing sunlight he was still very cold; his fingers and toes ached. His battered arms and back rebelled painfully as he tried to rise, and he noticed dried streaks of blood on his skin and nightshirt. He was afraid to do anything, but the cold in his bones drove him to rise from the pile of leaves and move into a patch of sunlight that had somehow penetrated the canopy above.

Hon carefully made his way toward the nearest bright spot, his burned feet stinging with each step. When he reached the patch of sunlight, he saw that it was falling on a

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narrow, dirt road. He was cheered a little, knowing that a road meant people. He wondered if any travelers would be by soon. The warm beams felt good on his numb cheeks, and soon his stiff limbs began to thaw. Though the cold left him, the many aches in his body remained.

He looked up and down the road. He wanted to go home, but did not know which way his home lay. Feeling suddenly exhausted again, he dropped to his seat in the dirt and sat numbly in the middle of the road. His feet burned, as did the lacerations on his arms and legs. His entire body throbbed. Delirious from all he had been through, he lay backward in the dusty road and closed his eyes. Fatigue, mingled with pain, overtook his childish mind. Soon, he was asleep.

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What did I do to deserve morning patrol for the third week in a row?

Thirteen years in the service of Lord Thurmond had taught Rowan one thing; nothing happened by accident. His master had a purpose behind everything. All he could figure was that he was being punished, or that a message was being sent to someone. Either way, he didn't like it. His horse trudged along listlessly, unhappy to be roused from its cozy stall and into the chill morning air. Rowan could tell that the three foot soldiers behind him felt the same way his horse did. Chuckling to himself, Rowan called to them over his shoulder,

"Rub the sleep from your eyes, men! You never know when the peasants might revolt against our lord. A morning such as this might prove the ideal time!"

He could hear the sarcastic moans behind him. They knew as well as he did that there was little likelihood of a peasant revolt, especially with winter coming on.

Though a stern and ambitious man, Rowan had always considered Lord Wynstan Thurmond to be one of the least oppressive of all the regional lords. The peasants under his protection had little reason to revolt. In fact, other than a small skirmish at his western outpost, there had been no armed conflicts in Thurmond's ever-expanding lands for over five years. Yet, for some reason Rowan didn't grasp, Thurmond continued to hire and train soldiers, always seeking to expand his holdings.

Rowan had become quite content in his position as a sergeant in Thurmond's home garrison. The compensation was good, and soldiering suited him. He had always enjoyed the feel of a good blade in his hand, and found that weaponry came to him naturally. Once signed on, advancement had come quickly. The only drawback was that his wife, Julia, did not like being the wife of a soldier. The dangers and risks inherent to the job tortured her feminine soul.

The road he traveled that morning was familiar. Rowan had trained along it many times. A month prior, he had overseen a field drill in a meadow just around the bend ahead. The area was as familiar to him as the country lanes he had traveled as a boy. The only thing that ever seemed to change was that the woods grew more dense every year. Rounding the bend he saw something ahead. From his present distance it appeared as nothing more than a strange lump in the center of the dusty trail.

Probably a tree branch that fell during the night. The men can clear it from the road, and we'll be on our way.

He reconsidered as he drew closer.

It could be the carcass of an animal. If the peasants have been poaching again, Lord Thurmond will not be pleased.

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But each step forward drove that idea from his mind. The shape and size of the object were all wrong. Rowan raised his hand and the patrol stopped.

"Eyes open, men. Something's not right here."

The metallic sound of swords being unsheathed was the only noise that pierced the still morning. Each man searched the woods for signs of movement, but saw nothing. Rowan's mind could not make sense of what his eyes saw. It was as still as a rock, yet not a rock. It appeared lifeless, yet there was something vital about it.

"What is it?" said one of the men in a hushed voice.

"Something in the road ahead," Rowan whispered.
"I'm not sure what, but it doesn't belong. Watch the woods on either side, and the road behind. It could be a ruse. Keep sharp; we move forward slowly, together."

Two men fanned out to either side of the road to face the enormous trees while the third turned his back to the rump of Rowan's horse, watching the approach from behind. Rowan spurred his horse and they moved ahead. Each step brought the object in the road more clearly into focus, but still he could not make it out. His mind struggled to apply what he knew of the woods to the thing that lay before him. Not until they were almost upon it did he realize what it was. There, in the road before him, lay a child.

Dismounting, Rowan stepped forward, disbelieving what he now clearly saw. The rags that covered the child were torn and soiled; his feet and arms caked with dirt and dried blood. Whatever had happened to him would likely remain a mystery. The child had to be dead.

Removing his heavy leather glove, Rowan knelt and, out of habit and training, felt for a pulse. There was warmth, and a heartbeat. Unbelievably, the boy was alive.

He called the men around, and they looked on the child with amazement.

"How did he get out here?" one said.

"Where did he come from?" said another.

"I know no more than you," Rowan answered. "But the boy needs help, if he is to live. I will get him to the estate as quickly as I can. You three finish the patrol, and keep your eyes open. Who knows what treachery may have brought him here. Whatever it was, it appears to have been violent, so be on guard." The men shifted uneasily. "As soon as you return, I want a full report. Dalton, your cloak!"

One of the men removed his outer cloak and handed it to Rowan. The sergeant spread it in the road, lifted the boy, and carefully wrapped him in it. Handing the child to the cloak-less man, Rowan mounted his horse and reached out to receive the bundled child.

"You have your orders."

Spinning his horse around, with the boy held close, Rowan galloped away.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The early snows of winter had already begun to fall on the higher elevations of the northern mountains. A solitary, hooded figure blazed a weary trail through the first inches of white. The man walked with purpose, clearly knowing the trail in spite of the newly fallen snow. He carried a large pack, slung across his back, and hanging low over his hips. Winding through trees, around boulders, and hopping over a rushing stream, he made his way higher. He paused to check his back trail. There was no sign of pursuit, yet he stood watching longer than seemed necessary. He had always been careful to ensure that his destination remained a secret.

Satisfied that he was quite alone, the man turned back to the snow-covered trail. Moving quickly, he approached a large outcropping of rock, took one last look downhill, and then slipped into a barely perceptible fissure in the side of the stone. The passageway was narrow, pulling at his thick robe and oversized pack. Six feet in, he removed the pack and placed it on the ground against the back wall. He knelt beside the wall and pushed the bundle through a hidden crack that ran along the floor. Once it was out of sight, he lay on his belly and inched himself through, head first.

After wiggling along on his stomach for five claustrophobic feet, he emerged; an impenetrable darkness stretching before him. He opened up the pack and lit a torch. With one hand on the rough wall, the man followed the slope down into blackness. He stopped and smiled, glad to be out of the cold. Everything was just as he expected.

The passageway ended abruptly, opening into an expansive cavern within the mountain. As always, a dim

light shone from the opposite side. Though unseen from his vantage point, he knew the light came from a wide tunnel entering on the opposite wall. It wound 400 feet through the granite mountain and ended as a yawning hole in its far northern slope. Once more he relieved himself of his load, and removed two large bundles wrapped in red-stained cloth. Opening them, he exposed 4 large sides of raw meat. The man looked toward the deepest and darkest corner of the cavern.

"Hestia, awake!"

There was no sound.

"Hestia. Come! Now!"

A large movement echoed in the darkness.

"Hestia? Hestia."

The man moved toward the corner of the cave A faint glimmer of light, small and undefined, momentarily burst into being in the farthest region of the shadows, then all was still.

The man stopped and cocked his head to one side, his eyes probing the blackness for a familiar shape. A huge rush of wind, like a monstrous sigh, came out of the darkness, blowing back his hair. A low rumble followed.

"Tsssssst!" the man hissed, extending his arm authoritatively toward the darkness. "Come!"

A heavy scraping began, deep in the shadows. In the dim light he could make out the massive shape of the beast he had hatched and nurtured. She rose like a mountain, then merged with the shadowed floor again.

"Hestia? Look to me. Look. I am coming."

The darkness gave way as he moved forward, revealing a large, lizard-like head lying flat, it's narrow nose pointing directly at him. The yellow, cat-like eyes glowed in the torch-light.

"You are injured. Or sick. Stay Hestia. I must know which it is."

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Following the curve of the dragon's long powerful neck, the man looked for signs of injury. In time, he found a crusty spot of blood underneath the beast's breast. He knew that a wound able to affect her in such a way was most likely on the dragon's underside.

He spoke a command as his extended hand made a circular motion.

"Hestia! Over!"

The yellow eyes glared at him and a low, rumbling growl vibrated through the floor.

The man spoke cautiously, but with authority as he made the motion again, "No! Hestia, over!"

With a guttural moan, the beast rolled to one side and exposed its belly. There, three feet up from its left front shoulder, was the wound. Whatever had caused it was either deeply embedded or had been dislodged already. He moved closer, maintaining eye-contact with the beast. She watched him warily, raising her head as a deep rumble came from her throat. The man stopped to stare down the beast.

"Hestia, Calm."

The dragon lay its head on the ground with a huff, but did not take its eyes from its master.

Holding the torch closer, a short stub of wood was visible, barely protruding from the wound. He recognized it immediately as the shaft of a crossbow bolt. Anger stirred in him as he considered what it meant.

Someone knows. You foolish beast. Just like your mother.

The dragon released a large, hot breath.

It must come out, and she will not like it. But there is no other way. She is my last hope.

He raised an exploring hand to the wound, and the massive head snapped around with an ear-splitting roar, knocking him to the ground. The torch went flying. Rising

quickly to his feet the man extended his hand toward the dragon.

"No Hestia! You do not interfere. You do not!"

The dragon lowered its head slightly, the deep rumble of its warning still audible. The man walked slowly toward the dragon, his arm extended.

"Tssssttt! Down! Down, Hestia!"

With a rebellious growl, the dragon lay its head down, still looking at the man with smoldering eyes. Moving directly toward the dragon's large snout, the man touched her scaly jaw. Looking squarely at the beast he gave a quick rap between her eyes.

"I am the master! You will obey!"

The dragon blinked, withdrawing its head instinctively. Their eyes remained locked for almost a minute, each testing the other's resolve. Finally, the dragon looked away with a huff. The master remained the master, for now.

He retrieved his barely burning torch and coaxed it back to life. Taking a rope from his cache, he walked back to the dragon. She recoiled into the shadows.

"Hestia, come!"

The scaly head reemerged.

Slowly and methodically, through threatening growls and displays of aggression, the man bound the dragon's mighty jaws. He was still concerned about her powerful claws and broad tail, but had learned that having her jaws bound made her more docile. Once he felt sure that her jaws were sufficiently bound, he went to work.

Many hours later, he held the bloody bolt in his equally bloody hand. Its removal had cost him the tip of the smallest finger on his left hand and a deep cut along the top of his right shoulder, but he had proved himself the master. He knew that should the day come when he lost such a

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battle, his ambitions would be lost, and his life along with them.

The dragon's wound was packed with a compound of herbs, and she slept. After caring for his own injuries, the man moved the raw venison near his beast. He walked to a cleft in the rock near the tunnel where he had entered, and burrowed himself deeply into the blankets he kept there.

She is restless; a predator who cannot remain cloistered away as she is. But wait she must, for now. I cannot coerce the march of time. Things have not transpired as the ancestors believed they would. But we move to arrange them as they must be all the same. When the time is right, our hidden council will materialize.

He could hear that the dragon had discovered the meat and was dining enthusiastically. He smiled.

The hope of all men is false. They will be laid low at the sight of our mighty beasts and will pay homage to us, their masters.

He laughed boisterously, his cackles echoing through the deep cavern. The dragon's feast stopped at the sound of it.

"Eat Hestia, eat! Soon, we will rise!"

# CHAPTER FIVE

Lord Wynstan Thurmond sat alone by the fire in his dark banquet hall, brooding. His voracious ambition to rule the entire region had cost him dearly, in troops and in reputation. The latest defeat, at the western outpost, had forced him to pull back to regain strength and build up his troops. Frustratingly, it had taken much longer than he had anticipated. Every day that passed was another irritation to his conquest-bent mind. He was a prideful, driven man; not one to remain in hiding or to allow circumstances to dictate his fate. He *must* rule; he *must* fight his way to superiority over the other regional lords. He could not allow others to believe him weak, yet he knew that gossip about his setbacks was already spreading across the region like wildfire. It drove him even more: made him even more obsessed. At the root of his obsession was grief turned to rage. His many personal losses had seethed under the surface for years until he finally succumbed to hatred for the one he felt was responsible. In his diseased mind, he blamed Lord Kendrick.

From the moment Kendrick had risen to power in the western regions of Ausland, after his father's death, Thurmond had seen him as an obstacle. Kendrick was young, strong, and just as ambitious as Thurmond; and he seemed to be everywhere. He was the one who had attacked Thurmond's western-most outpost. The nine months since had been busy ones, with Thurmond seeking far and wide for more brigands and mercenaries to bolster his own private troops.

He was determined not only to reclaim his outpost, but to topple Kendrick entirely. His pride would have it no

other way. But more than jealousy, more than his recent defeat, he desired revenge. Kendrick's rise had fatefully coincided with the loss of Thurmond's wife and son six years earlier. Rumors, combined with his own paranoia and suspicion, led him to the conclusion that Kendrick was responsible.

As he did most nights, Wynstan Thurmond sat by the fire, seething over the perceived wrong, the images of that horrid night haunting him. Through the fog of memory he saw it happen, again and again and again. He had been out for an evening stroll, surveying the grounds around the estate when it happened. The beast had appeared like an apparition out of the night sky. Lighting atop the west wall, a blaze had spewed from its mouth, consuming the men stationed there. Though a veteran of many battles, Thurmond had watched motionless, terror and disbelief paralyzing him. He cursed himself for his inaction, for the fear that had crippled him that night.

Unknown to him until that awful night, the mortar of the west wall had been weakened by a climbing vine. Its tendrils had made their way deep into the soft mortar between the stones. The larger the vine had grown, the more the wall had been compromised, and the weight of the beast was more than it could support. After only a few seconds perched atop the wall, the stones gave way. The wall fell inward, making a tomb of the very hall in which he now sat. Thurmond looked around the banquet hall.

It was right here, right here where it happened.

His sick mind again recalled his wife's tender, bloodied face staring out at him from the rubble, her eyes wide, horror etched in her features. He believed she looked into his soul and saw the cowardice that had left him immobile. He believed that she blamed him for her death. He saw his son, Horatio, scampering out of the remains of

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the wall, bloodied but alive. He relived the terror as the vile beast turned toward the movement.

Horatio, run!

The boy was devoured in an instant. His wife and son were gone. For the past six years he saw them each evening, alone by the fire, for only a brief moment before they were torn from him again. He rose hastily from his massive chair, seeking to put his thoughts anywhere but on that night.

Because Lord Kendrick had risen to prominence around the same time the dragon first made its appearance, many superstitious folk assumed that sorcery was on his side, enabling him to control the monster. That, combined with his string of successes in battle, was all it took. There were no facts to back up either claim, and Kendrick had done nothing to discourage the talk, so the commoners far and wide believed it to be true.

But it was not only the commoners who believed the tales. Joining with the years of mental anguish Lord Thurmond had endured, the coincidental facts and fanciful suppositions lodged together in his fragile mind. His nightly brooding always took him to the same bitter conclusion. Lord Kendrick was to blame for his losses, and he would have revenge.

The noise of the door latch being raised gave him a start. Light pierced the room, partially obscured by a bent figure.

"So sorry to disturb, Lord Thurmond."

Silence hung in the room as Thurmond worked to regain his composure. He was glad for the dark.

"Yes? What is it?"

"I had the notion you might be needing to see me," said the old man.

"Oh?" Lord Thurmond responded angrily.

"Yes, if you don't mind me saying," the voice paused.
"I've been watching you mope about this room after supper for some time now. Tonight, something in me said you'd be needing to see me."

The statement caught Lord Thurmond off guard. He had not realized that others in the household had noticed his evening ritual, and was even more taken aback that the old man had dared to mention it so openly.

"What do you mean, accusing me of moping! I'll have you..."

"So you're sayin' you've not been moping?" the old voice interrupted. "I've seen quite a lot of moping in my day and I could have sworn that's what you've been doing. But if you say it isn't so, my lord, I'll be on my way..."

The old man's no nonsense manner had always been disarming to Thurmond, and once again he found his prideful anger melting away.

"No, come. Sit by the fire. Warm your old bones. Perhaps I do need some counsel this evening."

The old man shut the door and moved toward him.

"Tell me all you know about... Kendrick."

The old man mumbled under his breath as he collapsed into the chair opposite Thurmond's. The flickering firelight revealed his deeply lined face. His hair was all but gone, a few gray wisps floating above his ears. Though the room was dark, his bright green eyes shone with interest and intelligence.

"Kendrick," said the old man. "Why would you be wanting to know about that rascal?"

"You must use discretion if I am to speak my mind on this matter." Thurmond insisted.

"As always, as always." the old man replied.

"I need to know all there is to know. He is responsible for the death of my wife and son. He must be made to pay."

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"Ohhhhh...." the old man chuckled, "you believe the marketplace gossip about that beast, do you?"

Lord Thurmond did not respond.

"My lord, I will not mock your pain by insisting, as some do, that the dragon itself is nothing more than a campfire tale. I know better. I've seen it myself, and I know you have too. It is for that very reason I find it difficult to believe that you truly think there is a man alive who could control such a thing as that monster. My lord, it is wildness itself! Cold, heartless, merciless. It knows nothing but the hunt, nothing but the kill. On earth it has no equal. It's a creature without a notion of fear. Do you really think a man could gain influence over such a fiend?"

"I don't know what I believe," said Thurmond curtly, rising to pace the room. "But if the rumors *are* true, then I know who is responsible. My wife and son must be avenged."

"My lord, there are times in this life where the cost that's already been paid for such losses is dear enough of its own accord..."

"Don't preach to me about costs!" Thurmond exploded, turning on the old man. "You have no idea the grief I've borne because of that night! My soul, my very mind have been pushed to the point of breaking." He stopped short, shocked at his own transparency.

"Nobody that's spent any time in this house could doubt it," said the old man.

Thurmond flashed him a cutting look. Silas continued.

"But don't you think you'd be better off to let that burden drop so it can be left behind? Better that than to carry it another six years."

Thurmond glared at the old man. He had never been able to discern what went on behind his wrinkled brow, and he seemed hesitant to give a straight answer. Was he giving

counsel he believed wise, or was he hiding what he knew about Kendrick and the beast?

"Tell me what you know of the beast. Does Kendrick control it?"

The old man replied with a heavy sigh.

"I've heard those rumors, same as you. People say that Kendrick is a sorcerer. But I've been near the man before; I saw him up close as he passed through a town. I heard him giving a speech to the crowds later that same day. He's no magician. A cold-blooded, calculating warrior perhaps, but no magician. He's not the kind of man who has time to study like a spell caster would have to study. He's too busy making himself into a great man."

"Magic or no, could it be possible that Kendrick has some hold on the beast?" Thurmond impatiently asked again.

"Possible? My years tell me anything is possible! Likely? Not a bit. You know better than most how cruel and hard that creature is. Can you truthfully imagine that scaly worm leashed by anyone? Even Kendrick? I know most folks think it's true, but that only proves they're all a bunch of fools."

Thurmond sat, silently pondering as the old man looked on. His insatiable desire for vengeance waged war with the old man's words. What the old one said made complete sense, but his wounded, vengeful heart could not accept such things. Kendrick had so long been the object of his rage, he could not displace its seething power with something as simple as logic. Raising his eyes to the old man, Lord Thurmond spoke again, in measured tones.

"I asked you about Kendrick."

"I could tell all sorts of things, but most you know. Powerful man. Unchallenged, really... except by you. He runs that land over The Ridge with an iron fist, and leaves little behind where once he's trod. As far as we are

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concerned, he is a sleeping giant. I say you let him keep right on with his snoozing."

"But sleepers can be more easily subverted," replied Thurmond. "They notice nothing. You old fool, I'm not suggesting an all out assault on the man! A slow poison, that is what I propose. I want him to suffer, slowly and painfully. But it requires knowledge of his vulnerabilities. Tell me what you know of them."

"Never heard of a giant that had much weakness..."

"You talk as if he's a god!" Thurmond exploded with contempt. "He is a *man*, nothing more, and all men have weaknesses. Fears, doubts, tender places..." Lord Thurmond paused, composing himself. "I want to know his sore spots, so that I can press on them, squeeze them until he is writhing. What - do - you - know?"

The old man sighed, shrugging his shoulders with resignation.

"Make no mistake my lord, Kendrick is all that I have said. But you are wise to say that he has a weakness. I see one, and only one. Ambition. He's always clamoring for more, plotting for more, seeking to make much of himself. Such vanity brings with it a singular focus, a narrowing of vision. The man gets so enamored with his one all-consuming desire for prominence, he doesn't notice other things coming at him from his blind side. That could be his undoing."

"Yes, yes, I see this to be true," Lord Thurmond responded slowly, with amusement. "What has his ambition been fueling as of late, I wonder? Do you hear anything?"

"Yes, I hear quite a lot, in fact. Of particular interest, I hear that he's been quietly raising an army to move on the southern lands. He believes he's got you well in hand, and will have no more trouble from this quarter. So, his eye is fixed upon the south. He's underestimated you, my lord. He thinks you're finished."

"He has indeed underestimated me," Thurmond said thoughtfully, "but is your information reliable?"

"I have it on good word. I've a cousin, Drusilla. She is a chamber maid within his estate."

Thurmond's mind was alive with possibilities.

"I must know more. Come dawn, I want you to send a scout to the southern lands, quietly mind you. Discover if the lords of the region suspect Kendrick's plans. Find if there are ways we may be able to subvert him, without him knowing. And I need you to continue good, regular communication with this cousin of yours. I must know all there is to know."

The old man nodded his head slowly, never breaking eye contact. A wry smile broke on his face.

"Yes, my lord, a prudent way of thinking," he laughed. "It will require me to be away more than usual, if I am to speak to her more often."

"As much, and as quietly as you already come and go, I'm sure I won't even notice. Now, leave me. I tire of you," Thurmond yawned.

The bent old man bowed his head slightly. Rising from his chair, Silas shuffled away, the darkness gradually consuming him. His stooped silhouette showed distinctly for a moment against the open doorway, and then he was gone.

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As the old man, known as Silas the Screw, made his way down the dark hall, his bright eyes revealed his busy mind. There could have been no better opportunity for his unique skills to exploit than what presented itself that night. Lord Thurmond and Lord Kendrick, at odds to the death! It was just the type of divisiveness he could exploit best. A

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game of manipulation, like he had played often with his own stupid mother and drunken father.

My idiotic mother and father, he laughed to himself. It's funny to think of Thurmond and Kendrick taking the place of those two. I wonder which is mother and which is father? I suppose it will depend on which I come to hate the most!

He laughed to himself as he silently shuffled down the torch-lit hall.

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"I think we should follow the main road north as long as we are able. That way, we can make the best of the daylight hours. We'll also be able to question people we meet. Surely, someone saw the beast fly overhead."

"Sounds like a good plan to me, Stew," said Fulton. "Fine." said Reid coldly.

"I hope you're right," said Irwin. "'It was dark as sin that night, I mean before the monster lit up everything in sight! There was nary a moon in the sky either. If there was a soul who seen that flyin' lizard shootin' off overhead in that kind of darkness, well, it'd be a miracle of the good Lord. Not to say I'm hopin' for such a terrible thing to be the case, mind you, just that we'd be truly blessed if such was the case. And never let it be said that I'm one fer neglecting givin' praise when blessin' comes my way."

"I understand Irwin. I didn't take it that way," Rowan answered.

"Glad to know it," Irwin interrupted, "last thing I want is for folks to think I'm one to doubt the power of the good Lord to do good for them who needs it. Lord knows I've seen my share of His goodness, especially in times when I ain't deserved it. I think they call that 'grace', or is it 'mercy?' I always get them two mixed around. I got really confused about them two one time when my dearest departed, God rest her soul..."

Stewart's thoughts wandered as Irwin continued to talk. He didn't mind the old man's ramblings. The personal history and anecdotes constantly spewing from his lips actually helped Stewart stay out of the deep hole of sorrow that threatened every day to swallow him. Yet, there were

times, when the pain was especially sharp, and even Irwin's chatter didn't distract him from it. It was one of those days.

Each man had lost much because of the dragon's attack. Though their losses compelled them, they were at the same time a heavy weight that threatened to undo every effort. In Stewart's own heart, the sadness served as fertile soil for doubt to grow. He doubted his actions on the night he had lost Ella and Hon. He doubted his ability to do what needed to be done at present. Stewart knew the others looked to him for leadership, but he didn't feel the least bit capable of taking them into what lay ahead. He was a common man, a huntsman. He could track game animals, but knew nothing about tracking a creature as cunning and stealthy as a dragon. The sky held no tracks he could follow. The dawning realization that they had little chance of success, was rising in his consciousness. Even if they did manage to locate the dragon, he feared they would not live to tell about it.

Stewart's mind strayed back to the chaos of the black night when his family was lost. The still evening had erupted in flame as the dragon swooped low over the houses. Shouts, the crackle of flames, and rushing footsteps filled the night with the sounds of panic. He had stepped outside to investigate the commotion when a sudden blast ignited the roof of his tanner's shop next door to their small home.

Ducking back inside, he had warned Ella.

"A dragon! Get Hon and get out the back, into the woods!"

Then he had darted out to help the men of the village mount a defense. That was the last time he saw her before the end, when she lay splayed across his lap in a pool of her own blood. He withdrew the blue shawl from his belt and held it to his nose.

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If I had only stayed with her, I could have gotten them to safety.

Regret and second-guessing plagued him as he saw the familiar rise in the road that approached Bluewater Pond. He had come this far before, but what lay beyond was a mystery.

I must be mad to think we can do this. Where am I leading these men? To the north country, that's all I know. Is Hon even alive? How could he be? Even if he is alive, how can I find him? I can't track a creature that roams the night skies. This cannot end well.

Arriving at the top of the rise, the water glistening before him, Stewart stopped at the bend in the road where it made its way around Bluewater pond. Fulton stopped alongside and looked sideways at his friend. The others drew up behind.

Turning to face them, Stewart spoke.

"In the silence of the road I've been able to think. I'm not sure there's much hope for this journey. I'd give my own soul to have Hon back, but it's most likely that he's already perished. I feel that I'm leading you men on a fruitless chase that will end in our deaths."

The group stood together in silence for a full minute, Stewart's unexpected, sobering words causing them all to reconsider. North's deep voice broke the uncomfortable silence.

"Not sure what to say Stewart, except that I always think best on a full belly. What do you say we find some shade and do our talking over food?"

Like a breath held too long, the awkwardness between them gushed out. Everyone was glad for the simple wisdom of North's words, and the diversion of food. Over dried fish, cheese, and bread, the men began to discuss the possibilities of their journey's outcome.

"Stewart," Pierce blurted out, "I can't stop thinking how I'd feel if it was my boy who was swooped up into the sky like that." He coughed nervously. "He is like a son to me, as much time as he spends with my Buck. I want to see you get your boy back, and I can't bring myself to believe that it's a lost cause."

"I'm grateful, Pierce. Truly, I am," Stewart replied.
"But I feel like we, like I, have to face reality. What is most likely? It's hard for me to even speak it, but the dragon will not simply let him go. And a boy of only six years would not be able to escape such a terror. My Hon," Stewart struggled to hold back his tears, "is probably already gone, and therefore every step we take is one taken in vain."

The men sat silent for a long while, Fulton putting his hand on his friend's shoulder, the others shifting nervously, not quite knowing what to say. Finally, Irwin broke the silence.

"Stewart, I have to tell ya', in all my livin' life I've seen but a few men brave enough to face such a fact as you just did. It's inspirin', that's what it is. When my dearest departed, God rest her soul, was finally gone after all them years of sickness, it took me a long, long time to admit to myself that I had to go on without her. It's hard as stone and twice as cold, but that's how truth is. It don't give way for none of us, and it don't care a morsel how much we're hurtin'. As it stands, I'd love to see the boy back in your arms, and truly do want it to be so. You gotta' know that's my heart. Bu-u-ut," he drawled, "though it's what I want, all my wantin' and wishin' can't make it so. I have to agree with you. It's an impossible hope to think the youngun's alive. Painful to say, and it gives me no joy to say it. But va' know it's true deep down, and I do too. Seems to me that the sooner we stop hoping for what can't happen, the sooner we can get past this whole terrible mess."

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"But how can we be satisfied with that?" Pierce interjected. "If we were to quit and later find out through some miracle that Hon had remained alive for a time, I don't know that I could live with myself." He coughed again and shuffled his feet in the dirt. "It just doesn't seem right to me."

Some of the men nodded in agreement, glancing up to see Stewart's reaction. Reid, who had been scratching in the dirt with a stick, spoke in a quiet, measured tone without raising his head.

"Since we're being honest here, I hope you won't mind if I am as well, Stew." He raised his head to look Stewart in the eye. "I'm sorry about your boy. I am. But your boy's secondary to me. I want that scaly worm dead. There's a hatred eating me from the inside-out, and I've got to do something to rid myself of it. The beast's taken my wife and kids and the only thing I've got worth living for is making sure that worm is dead! Once that's done, I'll figure some way to get back to living. But until then, its death is my life. I'm going to find the worm and put an end to him. If you men want to be a part, I'm glad for it. If not, no matter. I'll go on."

After a slight pause, North's deep voice entered the conversation.

"For some reason, I was spared the grief of most of you. Perhaps I'm able to see a mite clearer because of it. Reid has the right idea. As long as that dragon lives, none of us is safe. Not us, not our families, not anybody. What's to keep it from coming back again? Nothing at all. Though you're speaking from a heart of hate, Reid, which isn't the best, you're still speaking what's right. This is something that matters, not just for your boy Stewart, but for folks who might come across that dragon somewhere down the line. It's true, the odds are against us, but I don't care about 'em. It may look impossible, and it may be impossible. But

I believe the Lord above rules over the impossible. If we go wisely and in the strength He provides us, we'll do alright, even if suffering comes with it."

"Well bust me open!" Irwin exclaimed. "Those are inspiring words, North, inspiring. Land sakes! I didn't know such deep thoughts was rattlin' around in that big old head of yours. I see your point, and can't say I can argue with it much."

Stewart considered North's words. They made sense, and they reminded him of the simple faith of his Ella. She had always trusted to Providence and had encouraged him and Hon along the same line. Her faith had given her peace in life and confidence in death. Her faith was still there, in that moment, giving Stewart peace for the present. North was right, they would either trust to Providence or they wouldn't. The outcome wasn't really the issue. The big man's attitude about the dragon was right as well. It must be destroyed. More men would lose their wives and sons if it wasn't, and he didn't wish anyone to suffer as he had. If he could do anything to prevent it, he must. Fulton spoke up.

"Stew, I can see that you're pondering all that's been said, and well you should, there's been a lot of good points made. But I keep thinking about something nobody's mentioned, which probably nobody but you and me know. I keep thinking about Hon's name, Stew. Your papa raised you to believe that honor is what makes a man, so much so that you named your boy 'Honor.' Although I agree with Irwin that this may wind up to be an ill-fated trip, I don't think it would be honorable to forsake Hon like we're considering. How could it be? We don't know what state he's in. We can guess and figure, but we just don't know.

"What if something happened that enabled him to escape? I know it sounds mad, but what if it did happen? That means he's out there by himself, Stewart! Out there

## CHAPTER SIX

alone, a six year-old boy; helpless, defenseless, lost in the wild! I can't shake the feeling that we should stick with it."

Stewart looked up, obviously moved.

"Fulton, thank you, for reminding me who I am and what I believe in. I was lost in the grief, and you've set me on a true course again. North, I know what you say is true. My Ella would agree with you, and would be prodding me in that same direction, were she here. We must go on." He paused, clearly in pain. "We will slay the dragon whether we find Hon or not. How about the rest of you, are you willing?"

To a man they agreed.

Reid's eyes met Stewart's. Though their motives were polar opposites, they were united in the final goal. The dragon must be destroyed. Without a word, both of them rose and the others joined them. They put away their food, slung their packs over their shoulders, and followed the bend in the road, around the lake.

A cold, foreboding wind came down the mountain slopes far away, disturbing the pines and stirring the leaves alongside the road. Clouds were just cresting the distant peaks, headed their way. The chill breeze that reached the small band foretold what lie ahead; a cold, impartial wilderness where the weak fall to the strong and beasts like the dragon reign supreme.

Stewart feared for them, wondering if their strength would be enough. But more so, Fulton's words had lodged at the front of his thoughts. His son, Honor... Hon. He could be out there alone, and they must find him. Pulling his cloak high around his shoulders, he trudged on with new resolve. Honorable. That's what he must be.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

Though he was a seasoned soldier who had witnessed things too terrible to mention, Rowan had his soft side. Seeing the boy bloodied, helpless, and unconscious had pricked that tender place. He rode like a desperate man, thinking of his own son who was near the same age. He was determined that death would be cheated of his young passenger.

Barreling into the barracks yard he aimed for the bunkhouse where he knew the troop surgeon would be. Dust flew as he reigned in his horse and he was on the ground before it stopped sliding. Rowan sprinted toward the bunkhouse, the boy bundled in his strong arms.

Leechy is likely still sleeping, but not for long.

Charging through the doorway, he quickly pushed his way through the soldiers who were milling about. Most had just risen from the bunks that lined the walls. A few shouts and many curious looks came his way, but he hardly noticed. His eyes were on the heavy door in the rear of the room; the officer's mess.

Bursting into the room, he yelled, "Get the surgeon! I have wounded!"

The officers around the table hurriedly cleared their breakfast dishes, making a place for the injured. Instead of seeing one of their own, a bloodied, unconscious little boy was laid gently on the table's crumb-strewn surface.

"What's this?" said Eadric, commander of the garrison. "A boy?"

"Found him in middle of the forest road, just as you see him," Rowan puffed, still catching his breath.

"What? How could a boy get..."

Eadric was interrupted by the shouts of the surgeon who was pushing his way through the men gathered around the table.

"Make way! Make way you blood-thirsty no-necks! I can't heal a man if I can't get to him! See how much attention *you* get from the surgeon when you're the one splayed out on the... what in blazes is this?"

"It's a boy," said Eadric.

Slowly craning his neck around to look the commander in the eye, the surgeon scoffed, nodding his head crookedly.

"Oh, a boy is it? I couldn't have known that unless you told me commander. 'Preciate it. Of *course* he's a boy! But what's he doing here?"

Rowan interjected.

"I found him on the forest road Leechy, can you help him?"

"Forest road? How'd a little one like this get way out..."

"Can you *help* him?" Rowan insisted, the desperation in his voiced showing.

The surgeon stopped short.

"Of course I can. I'm troop surgeon ain't I? Get these fellas to clear out so I can see what I'm dealing with here."

Rowan and Eadric moved the soldiers back.

"Well, he's still breathing and he's still beating. That's the hardest part, so I'd say we're doing good so far, heh, heh. He's got a big mess of blood on his arms and feet." He broke off his analysis to bark an order, "One of you stinky no-goods get me some water so I can clean him up a bit!"

Rowan watched as Leechy gently removed the boy's ragged night clothes. Shaking his head, Leechy muttered under his breath, "I can't imagine what could have happened. He's a small little thing, and... hold on! What's this?"

#### CHAPTER SEVEN

Rowan moved closer and saw what had garnered the surgeon's attention. There was deep bruising on his torso. On his right side, it stretched from his armpit down to his waist, and on his left side it was isolated to the middle of his ribcage. The two sections were connected by a wide swath of purple across his back. The two men looked at each other in amazement.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say a giant had a death grip on this boy! My eyes have never beheld such a thing," Leechy explored the bruises with his fingers. The discoloration was deep and dark, becoming more pronounced before their eyes. "The blood's still spreading a bit inside there. The jostling of the ride might have restarted the flow. Where's my water!"

Rowan helped as Leechy rolled the boy onto his back again and a bowl of water was placed on the table. Using a bandage from his kit for a compress, Leechy soaked it in the cool water and had Rowan hold it firmly on the largest area of bruising. Using another bandage, the surgeon began cleaning the crusted blood from the boy's forearms and feet. All the while, the child remained unconscious.

As the dark hues of crusted blood gave way to the lighter shades of skin underneath, Leechy discovered the source; there were cuts and scrapes all along the boy's arms and shoulders. Gently rolling the boy onto his side, they discovered more and deeper gashes on his neck and all down his back.

"Whatever this little fella's been through, it was awful, plum awful," said Leechy. "I'll be whooped if I know what happened to him. He's been cut, bruised, *and* burned! I can't make heads nor tails of it. And the burns, Sergeant, it looks like he ran right through a campfire; almost like tar burns you'd see on a soldier that stormed a castle."

"What about it, Leechy? Is he going to live?" Rowan urged.

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Rowan's arrival had not gone unnoticed in the manor. The keen eye of Lord Wynstan Thurmond had seen the horse flying up the road and one of his soldiers fly from it with something in his arms. He was confident that news of the rider's purpose would reach him quickly. His were the best trained troops of any he knew. But after fifteen minutes, no word had come and his anger was rising.

Whoever is the cause of this delay will wish he'd never placed himself under the service of Lord Wynstan Thurmond!

After another five minutes, Thurmond was on his way to the barracks, furious that such incompetence existed in his ranks. Entering the bunkhouse he saw the men crowded around a door at the back of the room. There were muffled voices beyond. Letting the door slam behind him, he watched the men squirm as they realized who had entered. Each one snapped to attention, some still in bed clothes, others half-dressed. Lord Thurmond slowly walked to the back of the room, his eyes moving from face to unexpressive face as he passed. He intentionally allowed the awkward tension of his presence to fill the room. Upon reaching the back of the room, a barely clad soldier opened the door for him and he entered.

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"Would it be too much trouble if someone told their lord what is so devilishly interesting?" he asked sarcastically.

At the unmistakable sound of his master's voice, Rowan snapped to attention along with every other man in the room. Commander Eadric answered quickly with a barely perceptible tremor in his voice.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"My lord... deepest apologies. I was about to send a man to inform you. It's a boy, found in the middle of the forest road. He's injured and Lee.. uh, the surgeon has been tending his wounds."

Thurmond looked toward the table and saw a small, bloodied leg showing between two of the men. The crowd parted as he moved closer. Looking at Hon's bloodied, bruised body, he winced as an unexpected memory flashed before him. He was thrust six years into the past, and was looking into the bloodied, terror-stricken face of his son Horatio as the wretched beast snatched him from the ground.

"Surgeon, continue your work," he mumbled.

Leechy quickly returned to the boy's side. Lord Thurmond watched the surgeon work, trying to avoid the eyes of the men. He did not want them to see that he was flustered. It was not the memory of his son that had caught him off guard, but the intensity of the emotion that came with it. The power of the complex and confusing feelings surging inside him was formidable. His eyes watered as he felt himself teetering at the brink of losing his self-control. He clenched his teeth and forced himself to breathe slowly, deeply, and quietly. He pushed down the unruly emotions. After regaining composure, he slowly turned to the men.

"Who found this boy?" he said calmly.

Rowan stepped forward.

"I did, Lord Thurmond."

"You are Sergeant Rowan, correct?" said Thurmond, not waiting for an answer, "I thought it was you, riding so furiously into the stable." He paused, looking back toward the boy. "Let's hear it."

Rowan recounted the entire story, from the time he first saw the boy in the road until he arrived at the stable less than thirty minutes earlier. Lord Thurmond listened intently, absorbing every detail. His sharp mind searched

Rowan's account for possible explanations of the boy's origin.

"Your men; have they returned?"

"They have not my lord. I expect them soon," said Rowan.

Thurmond stood silent, his mind and emotions spinning.

"You are to personally bring me the report the moment they return... and news of the boy's condition."

Rowan nodded.

"Yes, my lord."

Lord Thurmond glanced at the table where Leechy was busily tending to his small patient. His eyes stayed there a long while. Prying them away he looked around the room, studying the face of every man. His gaze settled on Rowan.

"How old do you think he is?" Lord Thurmond asked.

"I'd say six, perhaps seven. He's close to my son's age," Rowan replied.

"Yes. Yes. That is what I thought."

Lord Thurmond took a last, long look at the table where the surgeon continued with his work, then turned quickly and left the room.

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After a few seconds of silence, Eadric barked out orders.

"All right now, get to your business! You'll be at your posts on time, no matter the strangeness of the morning!" He turned on Rowan. "Until your men return, stay here with Leechy to lend a hand with the boy. You found him, so he's your responsibility 'til we're told what to do with him."

Turning back to the table Rowan looked with concern at Leechy.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"He'll live," said the surgeon. "I'll have to watch the bruising to make sure the bleeding is under control, but I believe it's manageable. The bigger cuts can be stitched, and should heal fairly well. Maybe even without scarring. But he's going to have a time getting past the burns. Burns are some of the worst injuries... painful, and almost always leave scars. It is truly a miracle this boy is in as good a shape as he is."

"Thank the heavens," Rowan said, with a sigh.

Leechy glanced over at him, a twinkle in his eye.

"You're not getting all watery on me are you,

Sergeant?"

"I'm not ashamed of heartfelt compassion," said Rowan. "If a soldier doesn't have concern for others, his ego will stretch his authority too far. He'll wind up bullying the very ones he's supposed to be protecting. I do feel for this boy, because of what he's been through and because of what he will have to face once he wakes. He's been dealt a bewildering hand, one most adults would not handle well."

"Ohhhh... a philosopher as well as a soldier?" joked Leechy. "So in your mind a soldier should be fierce as a dragon and as tender as a lamb, all at the same time? I've not seen a man yet who can pull that one off!"

"Then with the help of Providence, I hope to give you something new to gawk at, you old varmint!"

Leechy laughed as he turned back to the boy. Looking down at him, Rowan's mind was full of questions.

Who is he? Where did he come from? Where is his family? Will we ever know?

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As he walked across the courtyard toward the manor, Thurmond's mind worked feverishly. Once back inside he instructed his steward to have the boy brought to the spare

room in the east wing, once his wounds were treated. He wanted to have him near.

There is a reason my heart stirred when I saw him. There is something about this boy; something unusual. He is a mystery, an omen. Fate has brought him to me for a reason I have yet to grasp. But I will find out in time. I will find out.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

Lord Thurmond sat alone in the dark room where the mysterious boy lay sleeping in the bed, against the far wall. His eyes were drawn to the fire blazing in the hearth, but were unfocused and far away. In his hand he held a poker, which he tapped on the cold stones in a steady rhythm.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

The room was familiar to him although he had not entered it since the terrible night his son was killed. It was Horatio's room, a tomb of memories he had avoided. As he had feared, mocking reminders of his losses were everywhere. Horatio's small sword still hung in its sheath on the bedpost. The lad's favorite tunic was still draped over the chair. Nothing had changed in the room, but the one who had filled it with life was forever absent.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

Thurmond's painful memories slowly shifted, melding the present with the past to include the wounded boy, asleep across the room. Where once he saw the foggy image of Horatio's face, the injured child's face emerged. The two became strangely intertwined, confused in the mix of a mind going mad.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

The insidious power of unresolved grief and bitterness were twisting Lord Thurmond, making rational thought a stranger. Up rose every resentment, every regret, every superstitious belief, suspicion, and feeling of avarice or revenge that had ever lurked in the shadows of his tormented soul. He began to create his own twisted reality. Objectivity was being eaten away by obsession.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

There is purpose in this boy's arrival. Fate has come full circle and here is the recompense for my losses. It is as if he fell from the heavens, a substitute for my own son. The boy is a gift to me.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

The timing is no mistake, that I know for certain. His appearance here, now, the same week as my boy's death; there is purpose there that I dare not deny! He is my heir. He will carry on my legacy, carry on my cause, and see justice done. This boy, my boy, will see wrongs made right.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

Kendrick thought to make me suffer, but his plans are coming to naught. Fate will not allow such treachery to triumph.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

Lord Thurmond smiled sickly.

It is delightfully ironic. Kendrick does not know that the spark he struck that night will grow into a raging fire that will destroy him! My son will be the consuming fire of justice! The signs are clear! Kendrick's wicked plans are being undone at every point.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

My son is such a hardy lad and has endured much. He is strong of body and will. He is perfect.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

Lord Thurmond sat back in his chair with a sense of satisfaction. He laughed aloud to himself.

I will groom him to be that instrument of fiery wrath, wielded against the house of Kendrick!

Tink. Tink.

Hearing a noise from across the room, Lord Thurmond turned to see the boy trying to sit up in the bed. A sudden, nervous excitement gripped him and the poker dropped to the floor. The boy's face showed his fright, and the pain of his wounded body. Thurmond rose and moved toward him

## CHAPTER EIGHT

cautiously, being careful to apply the charm he had learned could turn many to his side.

"Well my boy, you are awake! Please, please... don't be frightened, you are safe. And take care, you are injured, lad!"

Hon's eyes were wide in wonder as the finely dressed man approached him. The sumptuous room was like none he'd ever seen. Ornate tapestries covered the walls, thick, rich curtains hung over the windows. The bed was high, large, and carved from dark wood.

"You had us all worried my boy! I most of all,"
Thurmond laughed. "But you don't know me... how rude that I did not introduce myself. I am Lord Wynstan
Thurmond. You are in my house. You are safe my boy, safe indeed. Nothing shall harm you here! My personal physician has been caring for you and he assures me you will be fully restored soon. May I ask my boy, what are you called?"

The boy hesitated.

"Honor," he answered, looking down at the backs of his scraped hands that gripped the bed sheets draped over his lap, "but people call me Hon."

"Honor. How appropriate," Thurmond said, more to himself than to Hon. "It's a manly name if ever I heard one! I'm pleased to know you, my boy. You are very welcome here!"

"Thank you," Hon said quietly. "Why am I here, sir?" Lord Thurmond leaned toward him curiously.

"Do you recall anything of what happened to you? We found you unconscious in a roadway far out in the woods, my boy. You are quite a mystery to us."

Hon looked up from his lap timidly.

"Yeah, I mean, yes sir. I remember some."

"Would you tell me? I am very curious to know. But I forget myself, you must be starving! You've been asleep

for almost three days. Can I get you something to eat, perhaps?"

"I am hungry," said Hon as he examined his battered hands and arms.

Reaching for the ornate bell on the bedside table, Lord Thurmond rang. Soon a plump, middle-aged woman came into the room.

"Yes, my lord?"

"Bring my boy something to eat! Would venison suit you my boy? And cheese?"

Hon nodded his head, his eyes wide.

"And inform the physician that the lad is awake! I'm certain he will want to have a look at our brave little hero."

"Yes, my lord." she said civilly, with a parting bow of the head.

"Now my boy, you appear to have had a very rough time of it. Please tell me, how do you feel?"

Looking up slowly, his voice barely audible, Hon replied.

"I'm sore all over, and it hurts to breathe."

"I don't doubt it my boy. It is clear that you have been through a great ordeal. There are cuts and scrapes all over your body. Why, even the soles of your feet, they are terribly burned. Please, do tell me what you remember."

Hon began slowly, his eyes fixed on his lap.

"When I woke up, the room was burning. I ran into the front room and it was burning too. So I kept running out the front door. It was dark outside and the village was on fire."

He looked up and his eyes came alive as his memories were resurrected.

"There was a big monster! It stood right in front of me and screamed really loud! Then," his voice grew quiet, "then it hit my mamma." Tears filled his eyes. "I think she was hurt bad."

# CHAPTER EIGHT

Lord Thurmond placed a hand on the edge of the bed near Hon's leg.

"I am so sorry to hear it, lad. We will inquire about her, right away. I'm sure she will be alright. But you say it was a monster that struck her? That's quite a tale! What kind of monster was it my boy?"

"A big one. It was so big I ran right under its legs! And it could fly! It grabbed me and flew up high in the sky."

Lord Thurmond's eyes narrowed and he leaned close to Hon, not forgetting to maintain a soft expression.

"Can you remember what color it was?"

"It was really dark, so it was hard to see. But I think it was red."

Kendrick's beast. It could be nothing else. Somehow the same beast that took my family has brought this boy to me. As I suspected, fate is on my side.

"How do you suppose you came to be in the woods, since this monster flew away with you?" asked Lord Thurmond.

Hon thought for a moment.

"I fell asleep while it was flying, but I woke up because the trees were hitting my feet. Then something hard hit my legs and it dropped me. I fell into the trees, and it really hurt."

"Owww... I'm sure it did, my boy," Thurmond empathized, as his mind raced.

Why would the beast fly so close to the treetops? And why would its grip on the boy be so weak? Kendrick's strength is waning.

"Well, it's a good thing the monster dropped you, or else you never would have come here, and I would be much the sadder for it!" said Lord Thurmond.

Hon smiled at him for the first time.

The servant woman returned, carrying a tray of food. The smell of roast venison filled the air. Taking the tray, Lord Thurmond placed it carefully on Hon's lap. He winced slightly but Lord Thurmond didn't notice.

Hon sat awkwardly, looking painfully at Lord Thurmond.

"What's the matter my boy? You must eat. You need to regain your strength."

"My legs hurt."

"Oh my dear boy, I am so sorry!" Thurmond replied, taking the tray and placing it on the bedside table. Filling a plate with food he carefully handed it to Hon. Hon took a small chunk of the savory meat. Lord Thurmond watched as he ate, pleased with the conversation so far.

"One last thing, my boy, then I'll let you finish your food and rest. What is the name of your village?"

"Brookhaven," said Hon.

That is far to the south, thought Lord Thurmond, three or four days' journey.

He feigned ignorance.

"I've not heard of it, but I will make inquiries so that we can find it and get you home! How does that sound?"

Hon nodded his head excitedly, smiling bigger. Lord Thurmond smiled warmly in return as he rose.

"Well then, you eat and rest. The physician will soon be in to see that you are healing as you should. And I warn you, he may look a bit rough, but you can trust him."

Hon nodded, looking Thurmond directly in the eye for the first time.

"Yes sir, Lord Thurmond."

"Good," said Lord Thurmond as he reached out to gently touch Hon's head. He was a rugged lad with long, dark hair and a strong look about him. Hon looked up at him, clearly taken in by his kindness.

"I'll check on you later. Rest well, my boy."

# CHAPTER EIGHT

Thurmond strode across the room, already working out a plan in his mind. As he opened the door, Hon called to him.

"Lord Thurmond?"

He turned, smiling warmly.

"Yes, my boy?"

"I'm scared for my Mamma. She might be hurt, and I want to go home."

"I will do everything I can to find out about your mother, and get you home."

Hon smiled, nodded his head, and returned to his meal. Moving out the door and down the stairs, Lord Thurmond's mind raced.

Honor. His very name is a sign to me that he will restore honor to my house. I am sure of it. I must keep him here; but how?

Lord Thurmond stopped in the middle of the hallway. Silas.

Coming slowly down the hall was Lord Thurmond's chief steward, Hampton. He was a portly, hunched man with tired, but intelligent, eyes. Perched atop his head was a mop of wild, graying hair. He wore a tunic two sizes too large and his head hung low, as if the volume of hair that sprouted from it was more than his neck could properly support. Under his arm was a messy bundle of dog-eared papers.

"Hampton, to me!"

The steward looked up and continued his steady shuffle toward Lord Thurmond. He peered from under his messy locks.

"Yes, my lord?"

"I need you to quickly and quietly summon Silas. Tell him I have a task that requires his particular skills. And mention this to no one."

"I would do so my lord," droned the steward,
"absolutely, in short order to be sure, were it not for the fact
that Silas, the one you mention, well, he parted from us just
yesterday morning, accompanied by two of the men from
the barracks, sir."

Thurmond recalled his conversation with Silas a few nights past.

"Curses! Yes, I sent him on an errand. Well, the moment you hear of his return, send him to me."

"Very good, my lord, indeed, as you like it," Hampton droned, already resuming his trip down the corridor. His shuffling feet sounded like a broom on a stone floor as he rambled along.

As Lord Thurmond walked out the wide double doors at the front of Thurmond Hall, the sun was just dipping behind the treetops, casting long, thin shadows across the well manicured green.

What must be done is unsavory, but necessary, and Silas is the man. He's accustomed to this sort of thing, and there is no one else I can trust with it.

As he schemed, Wynstan Thurmond's eyes were drawn to the far end of the green. There, at the rise on the edge of the green was the place he had long ago convinced himself Lord Kendrick had sat, watching as the dragon destroyed his estate and took the lives of his wife and son. He spoke aloud, seeing Kendrick there, in his mind.

"Your own devices have become the means of your destruction, Kendrick. Your very own beast has brought my son back to me. He is a strong, keen boy, and I will raise him to one purpose alone: he will bring your house crashing down around you, just as you intended to do to mine."

Fate has brought this boy to me. He is a gift, and I shall not send him away.

# CHAPTER NINE

Red dragons emblazoned on a forest green banner flapped briskly in the strong wind. The standard flew high and proud atop the gatehouse turrets of Lord James Kendrick's castle. Silas laughed to himself as he noticed the new design. It told him he was having just the kind of influence he wanted to have on Kendrick.

Silas rode his small horse through the main gate in the east tower, unmolested. The guards had become accustomed to his coming and going. As he rode past, the sentry nodded.

"Simon." the guard spoke, casting a scornful look Silas's way. The old man chuckled to himself.

Simon. The false name makes me laugh every time I hear it! When the day comes that they discover I'm not really "Simon," but rather "Silas," and that I've been playing both sides against the middle, they'll truly know scorn, and they'll be embarrassed they were so easily fooled. The smart ones are never quite as smart as they think.

Dismounting inside the stable, Silas hobbled to the nearby door. A smartly dressed soldier, clad with a tunic matching the new flag opened the door and served as his escort down the broad hallway that led to the Great Room. There, behind a massive table Lord Kendrick, his wife Patrice, and their 8 year old daughter Camille were enjoying their noon meal; roast duck with herbs. The smell of the bird danced in Silas's nostrils, causing him to quicken his pace. It had been a long, hard ride across The Ridge and he was hungry.

Looking up from his meal, Kendrick's strong voice rang out.

"Come. Eat, my friend! You have been away too long! We have missed your company at our table."

Kendrick was just as Silas had described him to Lord Thurmond; lean and strong, a force to be reckoned with. His golden, neatly trimmed beard covered his handsome face like a thick carpet, making him at once appear both warm and intimidating. His manner and bearing showed that he was clearly a leader of men and a capable warrior.

"My aching bones say the same," the old man responded, in an accent fitting one of the locals.

He took a seat across the table from Lady Patrice, who eyed him cautiously.

"My long journey brings me back with news for my lord that will prove most beneficial."

"In time I shall hear all," said Kendrick. "But first sit, and eat. You must be famished after your journey."

"You are generous," Silas replied.

"Tell us of your journey across The Ridge!" Camille eagerly inquired. She was a bold child, and Silas enjoyed her inquisitive and perceptive mind.

"A bit of snow has fallen already up there," he said, jabbing his thumb over his shoulder toward the east. "It's already white on the tree tops, like dustings of flour. I give it a week, and then the cold will undoubtedly prevail up there. I must be sure to be on my way before it happens."

"Less than a week?" cried Camille. "But I've been waiting for you to tell me more of the story! You didn't forget did you, Simon?"

"No my little mouse, I did not forget. I will tell you more. Perhaps tonight by the fire?" he said, glancing to her mother, who did not return his gaze.

Kendrick laughed in his strong, manly way.

## CHAPTER NINE

"That is one of the reasons I hold so much stock in you, Simon. If my Camille has taken to you, then I know you must be a good soul."

Silas smiled, genuinely happy as the girl looked proudly from her father to him. He did like her, but his happiness came more from the fact that his calculated appeal to the daughter had lured in the father as well. The two of them had been easy. It was the mother he was concerned about.

Lady Patrice was one of the only truly regal women Silas had ever met. She was thin and shapely with a soft, unblemished face that radiated natural beauty. She was arresting, like the first wildflower of spring. But behind her beauty lay a discerning, clear mind. She had said little to him since the day he first arrived over a year before, watching him carefully anytime he was near her daughter. He knew she did not trust him, and he knew that she was prudent not to. Patrice would be an especially difficult one to win over. He took pleasure in such a challenge.

"And what of you, my lady? Do you trust me?" he asked in a playful tone, as he bit into a piece of bread.

Kendrick turned to her, an amused smile on his face. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye then turned to look directly at Silas.

"No, Simon. I do not."

Kendrick erupted with laughter. Silas couldn't help but smile at her frankness. Clearly flustered by her husband's laughter she stammered an explanation.

"I have told my husband, at length, that I do not trust you," she said, glaring at Kendrick. "But he thinks me over cautious. But I have learned to *be* cautious, and it has served me well. My husband is too easily persuaded by a few choice tidbits of good information, served up juicy, by a calculating cook."

She met Silas's eyes with a knowing look. He chuckled softly in return.

"A cook? My lady, I've been called many things, but never a cook!"

Lord Kendrick roared.

"You may laugh the day away!" she exclaimed, as she motioned toward Silas. "I hope you are right! I hope this old man is nothing more than a well-intentioned, helpful old grandfather. I would like nothing better. But my heart bids me be cautious," she said, turning to look directly at Silas again, "and I will be, until it says otherwise."

Silas smiled back, unflustered by her honest appraisal of him.

She sees clearly, and speaks what she sees. I can respect that, and I am in no hurry.

"I thank you for your honesty," Silas responded. "I'd rather know where I stand than to be guessing. That way I know what I'm up against!"

"Come now my love," Kendrick said, stifling another laugh as he turned to his wife, "you know that I value your insights. More than once they have saved me from troubles I could not see. But I assure you, Simon is little more than a seasoned old resident of the region who desires to see a good and fair lord rise, to the benefit of all. Come, let us put away our daggers for now. Simon and I have much to discuss."

Lady Patrice rose, bowing her head to her husband stiffly, but hardly acknowledging Silas. Taking Camille's hand she glided across the room, her red velvet gown flowing behind her. Camille craned her neck to see Silas waving to her, his lower lip stuck out and his eyebrows raised. The girl giggled behind her hand and disappeared around the corner.

"I apologize for her bluntness," Kendrick said to Silas.
"It is one of the many things I love about her."

## CHAPTER NINE

"No need, no need," said Silas, waving him off. "She's only doing her job as your wife and as a mother. No lord would be well-served by a do-nothing ornament of a lady, and you are blessed that yours isn't one."

"Well said! I am glad that you see it that way. Now, you mentioned news, Simon?"

Silas tossed the thick cloth napkin on his empty plate.

"Yes, I did. The short and thick of it is this: Thurmond is amassing troops; brigands, mercenaries, even some savages from the southern realms. Word has it that he is preparing an all-out retribution for your attack on his western garrison. At least 5,000 foot soldiers have been recruited already."

Kendrick responded sullenly.

"If Thurmond had not invaded my land in order to build that outpost, I would have left him alone. He's a power-hungry fool and it is driving him to activity that will only lead to trouble, no doubt. But so much effort for such a small, non-strategic outpost? It makes no sense."

Silas replied with a smile.

"You see more than the common man, my lord. 'Word' has it that's what Thurmond's doing, but I have found there is something more."

"Which is another reason why I have come to see that you are more than my wife believes, Simon. What more do you know?"

"I have a cousin, Drusilla, who serves in Thurmond's household. We were enjoying a late meal a few weeks back and she mentioned that she was serving tea to Thurmond as he was meeting with his war council. She happened to overhear them speaking of the south country, and the opportunities that exist there. He is planning an assault, but not on you. He's headed south."

"It is good that you have told me," said Kendrick. "I have allies to the south who must be warned."

"I thought as much," said the old man. "Will they be able to repel a mob that size?"

"I believe they will make a grand show of it, especially with a warning to help them prepare," pondered Kendrick, rubbing his chin. "But in the end, they may have to call on me for aid. I must send a message at once."

"Very wise, my lord. Very wise."

"Have you learned anything more?" asked Lord Kendrick.

"There are some other things I suspect, but haven't been able to ferret out for certain yet. But my lord can rest easy. I will speak freely once I am sure." He changed the subject, "I did notice as I rode in that you have a new banner..."

Kendrick laughed.

"Yes, at your suggestion, I recall. After much thought, I decided that even though I've never even seen a dragon in reality, there was no reason not to make the most of the sentiments and superstitions of the people. Such things can be allies as well. They are able to turn the hearts of people and influence their actions without a sword being lifted."

"Exactly, my lord."

Lord Kendrick pushed away from the table.

"Thank you for the news, Simon. It will prove life saving for my allies. I am sure of it. You look tired, my friend. A room is prepared for you, so please, take your leave and regain your strength."

Kendrick lifted a bell from the table and rang. A girl only a few years older than Camille entered.

"Rachel, see that my guest finds his room, in the north wing."

"Gladly, my lord," she replied cheerfully.

"Join us this evening for dinner, Simon. We would enjoy your company," Kendrick continued.

"Yes," Silas said, "I believe at least some might."

## CHAPTER NINE

Kendrick smiled.

"I will speak to Patrice. She is headstrong, but I will bring her around."

The old man rose slowly, bowed his head, and hobbled after the young maid.

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Lady Patrice returned an hour later to find her husband deep in thought, still sitting over what remained of the meal. She entered quietly and sat next to him. Roused from his thoughts by her arrival, Kendrick turned to see her sitting with her head down and turned slightly away.

"What is it my love?" he asked.

She glanced at him quickly then looked away again.

"Oh, nothing of importance. I was just wondering about your conversation with Simon."

"It was fruitful. He warns of an invasion Thurmond is planning on the south. I would appreciate your thoughts about..." He noticed she was still turned away. "But wait, there is something more, isn't there?"

She hesitated.

"Come Patrice, I know you. There is something weighing on your heart and I want to know it. Please, tell me."

Fiddling with the front of her gown, she sat, silently searching for the words, until her emotions came out in a flood.

"James, I don't like this. I can't do it anymore. I feel like I'm losing track of what is real in all of this deception. What I mean is, well, I don't know. I want to help you keep the realm secure, you know I do. But I feel like this charade is putting me in a place where I'm not certain of myself; not certain about us. All this trickery is..."

"Wait, wait a moment," Kendrick said, stopping her.
"Not certain about us? What do you mean?"

Lady Patrice sat in silence, fidgeting with her dress all the more.

"Well, for one thing... your laughter, James. It is... well, you were laughing at me, laughing at the things I was saying and the concerns I have. You know what I truly feel about that old trickster. He's evil, James, pure evil! It makes me so angry to think that Camille has been taken by him so, and that I can't instruct her about it! Her mind is filled with joy at the thought of him when she should be repulsed! I have a mind to rush upstairs right now and burst into his room..."

"Patrice," Kendrick soothed, moving closer to her. "I do know all that, but you said you're feeling uncertain about *us*. What do you mean?"

"Well," she hesitated, then turned on him, with fire in her eyes. "Your laughter made it sound like you think I'm a silly girl who is overcautious and fearful about nothing! It's like you were mocking me!"

Lord Kendrick glanced toward the door before answering in a lower tone.

"Patrice. My dear. You know this is all a game, a deception to keep him off balance. You know that I don't mean any of it."

"But I know your laugh, James," she interrupted. "It was *not* fake. You were laughing *at* me, and it hurt, James."

He took her smooth hand, though it was begrudgingly given, and smiled gently.

"It pains me to know that I hurt you. I am so very sorry. But you misunderstood completely! The reason I was laughing was because you were so convincing, my love! I've never seen such a believable mother bear in all my life! The way you were so direct... my dear, it was disarming!

# CHAPTER NINE

You set him back on his heels! He doesn't know what to do with you. That is what I found so funny!"

She glanced up at him shyly.

"That part is no act. You know it isn't," she said. "The thought of him succeeding with his deceptions raises my ire."

"Yes, I feel the same. He's a crafty one, which is why we must be all the more crafty. To catch a spider in his own web is not an easy thing." Kendrick said, touching her chin and raising her face toward him. "And I could have no better partner in accomplishing it. We will have him, my love, and you will be a large part of the reason."

She softened under his touch and smiled.

"Don't give me too much credit. If it were not for your spies, we wouldn't know half of what we do. I am grateful that they are so thorough, or else he might have succeeded in fooling us both."

"Yes, they have been very thorough, and discreet," added Kendrick. "If they were discovered trailing him, the game would be over."

"I'll be overjoyed when it is," Patrice said. "I don't like all this intrigue and playacting. It's not me."

"I know it isn't, my love. You are the most forthright and truthful soul I've known. This is hard for you, I know it. But it is necessary for now, and it may not be over for a good while. We must learn all there is to learn. Simon, or whoever he really is, must continue to think that I am his pawn rather than his king. It's the only way we will learn of the schemes he is planning."

"I know," said Lady Patrice with a sigh, "I know."

Lord James Kendrick pulled his wife close and she melted into his strong arms.

"My dear, you are doing a marvelous job. Hold strong. Hold strong for my sake and for Camille's. We will have him soon enough."

# CHAPTER TEN

Fiery clumps of thatch fell from the roof, burning Hon's face. He tried to rise but an unseen force held him fast in his bed. The walls burst suddenly into flame, transforming his room into a prison, with bars of hardened fire. The fiery bars closed in as he lay helpless, licking at him, then engulfing him in misery.

Blackness. He was alone in nothingness. A gloomy, strangely-lit fog rose from the dark like a thick, moist curtain that chilled his soul, obscuring everything. With a mournful whir the fog began to spin, becoming a vortex of thick clouds, propelled by a howling wind. His hair was whipped about violently. Pebbles pelted his face. The air was saturated with dust and he could hardly breathe. Faint, far away murmurs grew into familiar voices until he could hear each one distinctly, all at once. His papa shouting instructions. His mamma crying pitifully. His friend Rosamond, screaming desperately for her Dada to save her, and many, many more. The voices of terror reverberated, pounded, pulsed again and again in his ears.

Suddenly his breath returned, a rush of fresh air filling his lungs as he gazed into a star-lit sky. He stood in the middle of the village square, surrounded by the smoldering ruins of the town. On the far side of the square his Mama lay motionless on the ground, her blank face turned toward him in the dust. His bare feet were wet. Hon looked down to see himself standing in pool of crimson liquid. It immediately changed, becoming a stream of blood that flowed from his Mama's gaping mouth. He ran to her, desperate to help, but the distance stretched before him, endlessly unchanged. The stream became a river, and the

river a flood, its warm stickiness penetrating every pore of his body until he thought he'd suffocate.

The bloody flood receded into the deep well in the center of the square, sucking the town away one charred house at a time. Swept toward its whirling center, Hon grabbed a tree limb dangling overhead and held tightly. As the well-mouth gulped down the last trace of the village, Hon heard the dragon's chilling scream. His breath caught. It screeched again, closer and louder. His heart stopped. The stars shook in the sky. The next shriek was right on top of him. The heavenly bodies fell apart, showering down on him in molten droplets. The beast was coming for him. He knew it. He frantically tried to hide behind rocks and trees but each one shriveled away at his touch.

Standing defenseless in the infinite expanse of his dream, Hon turned to face the monster, its teeth bared, fire belching from its mouth. It bore down on him. Each beat of its leathery wings producing a gale capable of knocking him down; yet he stood. The massive beast plunged toward him, spewing flames all around him. Opening its mouth wide it swooped down, its razor sharp teeth ready to devour him. Hon screamed...

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It was his own screams that woke him. Disoriented, Hon found himself sitting upright in his bed. The dark, cold room still echoed with the sound of his voice. He shivered as the sweat on his body met the chilly air of the room. He sat panting, shaking with fear as his mind attempted to overcome his emotion and reorient him in reality. Though wildly unrealistic, the dream was very real to him. He had lived its terror. It was lodged forever in his mind. Its surreal images fueled an internal struggle between paralyzing fear and irrepressible hatred.

# CHAPTER TEN

No one had come because no one had heard him. The stony walls of the castle had muted his cries for help. But Hon did not know that. To his way of thinking he was completely alone. There was no one to comfort him, nobody to hold him like his Mama did, no one who cared for him. He sat alone, shaking from the cold, staring at the hard, unfamiliar stone walls of his room.

Hon wept.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

Thurmond looked up as the old man entered his study. He was a curious fellow, this old hermit. Nothing in his stooped, haggard appearance led a person to believe that he was anything more than a feeble old man. But Lord Thurmond had always suspected he was anything but feeble. It was part of why he kept him around. Not physically. In that sense, the old man was nothing to look at. But inside his balding head was a mind like no other, his haunting green eyes revealed a devious intelligence. Lord Thurmond had seen him outwit and undermine the shrewdest of adversaries, and do so in an unassuming way that left his opponents wondering what had happened. The old timer also had a way of discerning things, noticing details, knowing information that escaped the attention of others. He was widely skilled as well. Forest lore, weaponry, military tactics, and economics, Silas was a walking library of information, and he knew how to put it to best use.

And his words... his words flowed out in a soothing, confident way that could convince even the most ardent person of things they would never have believed before. The doddering old man was not one to be trifled with, and Lord Thurmond was pleased to have secured his talents for his own purposes. Thurmond took pride in believing himself to be the master.

"Come in Silas, come in. I have a special errand that requires your particular skills, my old friend."

"Friend?" said the old man, scratching his stubbled chin with the back of his hand. "Is that how you're referring to our relationship now? I'd be keenly interested to know

when that happened. I've never particularly considered the two of us to be friendly."

"My pleasantries are wasted on you, Silas. Friends we may not be, but we are at least useful to each other, wouldn't you say?"

Pausing to consider that, the old man released a breathy belch.

"That we are, at present."

Lord Thurmond let Silas's rudeness and last comment go, and moved to more important matters.

"Away to the south is a small village called Brookhaven. Do you know it?"

"I know it," the old man said. He peered sideways at Lord Thurmond from under wild eyebrows that floated below his age spotted bald head.

"My son is from there. I want you to take a handful of men, secretly, mind you, and discover what has become of his family. The boy thinks they may have been harmed, which is not altogether disagreeable to me," said Lord Thurmond, giving Silas a knowing look. "But what is most curious is that the boy says they may have come to harm from the attack of a scaly, red monster. Interesting, is it not?"

The old man's thick eyebrows lifted slightly at the mention of the dragon but otherwise showed little concern.

"And what is that to me?"

"That alone is of little interest," Thurmond replied quickly, wanting to maintain the upper hand. "But couple it with the fact that the boy says the dragon carried him off and deposited him in the middle of my woods, and it becomes quite intriguing," said Thurmond.

"Yes, that's a mite curious," Silas croaked, "if it's true. You don't know anything about this boy. He could be spinning a tale."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

"You forget, I am a father," Thurmond boasted. "I can tell when a boy is being false. He is not the sort of boy to tell such tales, and his wounds show his story to be true. There is no reason to think he is lying."

"Could be," Silas replied after a long pause. "But it still seems strange. A dragon wouldn't be losing its prey like that."

"Perhaps the boy wasn't its prey at all. Kendrick could have sent it to take the boy purposefully," said Thurmond confidently.

Silas's eyebrows raised whimsically.

"So it's not enough that Kendrick is some kind of sorcerer who has sway over the dragon, you think he's taught it to play fetch too?" He burst into a sudden fit of laughter that made the wispy hair above his ears shake vigorously. "Why not? If he can control it, I'm sure he could put it on a leash for that cute little girl of his too!"

Thurmond was incensed.

"How dare you make me out to be a fool!"

"You don't need my help for that!" Silas snapped.
"You're doin' a fine job all by yourself!"

Thurmond rose angrily to his feet, reaching for his jeweled dagger, but before it was out of the scabbard, the point of Silas's large, rusty knife was pressing into the underside of his chin. Frozen, he gingerly dropped his dagger back into its scabbard.

At the sound, Silas chuckled.

"No need to get testy, my lord," he said in a sarcastic whisper. "I'm only having a bit of fun. It's my way of exploring the subject. Why don't you back away and take your seat, before things get... uncomfortable."

Thurmond carefully retreated, his eyes never leaving the long blade.

Silas's eyes bore into Thurmond's as they sat in silence. Lord Thurmond looked away, unsettled by the turn

of events. Silas spoke deliberately, accenting his words sarcastically.

"Since you're not enjoying my kind of fun, let's get right to it. When did all this business about the boy and dragon take place?"

Thurmond cleared his throat.

"More than a week ago. He was unconscious for three days, and I don't know exactly how long he was in the woods before my patrol discovered him."

Silas sat still for a moment then asked, "He told you he's from Brookhaven?"

Thurmond nodded.

"And what is it you want me to do?"

Thurmond sat quietly for a moment, uncertain how to say it.

"Don't you know?"

"I suspect I do," replied Silas. "But with things such as they are, I think it best if I'm sure. I wouldn't want there to be any kind of misunderstanding. That could get... uncomfortable."

The wry smile on the old man's face reminded Thurmond of the knife at his throat.

Yes, uncomfortable indeed.

"He is my son," Thurmond emphasized, "that should make things clear enough. As to how you go about it, well, that is something I'll leave to you."

"I see," Silas replied coldly.

Thurmond shifted in his large leather chair.

"I think we understand each other," said Thurmond. "Do we not?"

"How soon?" asked Silas.

"It will take you the better part of a week to get there, from what I understand. I think it best that you are on the road immediately." Lord Thurmond said brusquely.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Silas rose slowly, putting away his long dagger and smiling up at the tall frame of Lord Thurmond. It was a smile of warning.

"As you wish," he said.

He brushed past Lord Thurmond with a slight bump, moved across the room, and went out the door. Thurmond released his inner tension in a long, slow breath, as Silas disappeared from sight.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

Three days on the road had taught Stewart one thing; the search for his son was going to be difficult at best, and impossible at worst. They had yet to meet anyone who even knew about the dragon, much less one who had seen it the night of Hon's disappearance. Most people just looked at them strangely. Every fruitless encounter seemed another proof that Hon was gone for good; every mile seemed another wasted. The glade through which they traveled was still and the road straight. They made good time. They had passed so many small villages and wayside inns, Stewart had lost count. He wasn't even sure where they were.

"This kinda' place puts me in mind of a time my dearly departed and me, God rest her soul, was travelin' with my elder brother," Irwin chattered. "We was headin' down to Saulsbury to see the jousting. You ever seen jousting, North?"

"No," said the big man.

"Jousting's a right violent thing to behold, that's fer sure," Irwin continued. "I can't see how any man can get that lance stuck into his chest with such force as happens in them tournaments and lives to tell of it. You can hear the crash a mile off, I'd reckon. It'd be a tough enough thing to keep yer bum in the saddle bein' hit by a lance under normal conditions, but when the other fella's ridin' all hellbent toward ya' atop a war horse, well..."

It was almost mid-day, and Stewart was weary. He was weary from the traveling, from the nights sleeping on the ground, and from the impossible burden of hope that his son was still alive. But the days of travel had given him much needed time to think. He thought of his wife and her

strong, but simple faith, and he remembered North's words over their noon meal the first day they had set out. The combination of the two had begun something growing in him, something he liked. Though weary, he found an uncommon strength within, a confidence that he was not alone, and that allowed him to avoid the clutches of despair. But it didn't keep him from assessing the situation realistically.

If something doesn't turn up soon, I don't know what we'll do. We can't wander around all winter searching for a beast nobody believes exists.

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Two miles down the same road, Silas and his four plain clothed soldiers moved quickly ahead. The soldiers had been chatting off and on all morning, but had fallen into silence an hour or so back. Silas was happy for it. He could only take so much bravado and tales of personal conquest Silas stopped suddenly in the road, years of woods lore coming to his aid. There was something different in the air. Someone was approaching. One of the men, walking with his head down, ran into his back as he stood in the road listening, almost sending him to the ground.

"You fool!" Silas said in a loud whisper. "Watch where you are going and look alive! Something is ahead. Be ready!"

"What?" said the bewildered soldier. "How do you know that, you old badger? You must think we're pretty stupid to believe something like..."

"Silence!" Silas interrupted with a deathly glare. "I must think a moment, and your babbling is a hindrance."

Stunned at the confident, compelling response from the old man, the soldier complied. Silas dropped to his knees, placing his ear to a large stone embedded in the road.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

After what seemed an eternal silence, he rose to his knees, staring down the road before them. His thoughts racing, considering, calculating, he settled on a course of action.

"Quickly, two of you get into the forest and snag some game, anything you can; squirrel, fawn, it makes no difference. Get it, and come back here, immediately."

Reeling from such an abrupt and strange order, the men looked from one to the other in disbelief.

"Move!" Silas insisted in a hushed tone.

Two of the younger men quickly moved off into the trees, drawing daggers as they went. The other two men looked to Silas and at each other, with questioning glances.

"One of you make a fire ring there in the clearing, between those trees, and get the flames going. We must have a roaring fire at hand within the next half hour, and it must look old, so take care of it! The other one, gather wood, enough to appear as if the camp has been made for a while."

He looked up from his thoughts to see them both still standing, mouths agape.

"Then off with you! When you are finished, hide yourselves where you can see the road, but do *not* make yourselves known until I call to you. Can you do that?" he said impatiently.

"Ye.. yes," stammered the men.

"Then off to it!"

As the men made themselves busy, Silas offloaded his pack and removed his bedding and some food. Arranging things as he normally would for an overnight stay, he quickly had what appeared to be a day-old camp arranged. As he finished, the two hunters returned, a large rabbit in hand.

"Good! Take it back down the road, to the large rock we passed just around that bend," he said, pointing the way they had come. "Carefully spill its blood on, and around,

the rock. Make sure you do it on the side where the clearing is. Let none of the hide or hair fall, do you understand? Once done with it, dispose of the animal far off the road where it cannot be easily found. Return to where you spilled the blood and do what you must to make it look a day or so old. Understand?"

"How are we going to..."

"You have brains, do you not? Use them! Make it happen!"

Dumbfounded by Silas's commanding demeanor, the men set off down the road.

Calling after them, just loud enough to be heard, Silas said, "Hide in the woods when you are finished, in a place where you can see this spot, but do not come and do not make a sound!"

The men turned, acknowledging that they had heard, but did not slow their pace.

*Fools*, Silas thought as he knelt to listen at the half-buried rock again.

Smiling as he rose, he settled down next to the already blazing fire. The men had done it. The wood was in place, the camp was ready, and there was time to spare. Closing his eyes he took a deep breath and calmed his mind. For all appearances, he was the only soul within miles, and had been there undisturbed for days.

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Fulton was the one who first noticed smoke rising ahead of them. The men paused to consider a course of action.

"It's near the road. In the light of day it's likely a traveler like us, but we should still be careful."

"Agreed." said Stewart. Irwin and Pierce nodded in agreement.

# **CHAPTER TWELVE**

With that they set off again, curious what they might find. Within a quarter mile they could see the source of the smoke. A fire blazed just off the road and an old man, who appeared to be alone, was enjoying its glow. Feeling more at ease, the six men moved ahead, eager to have someone to ask for news of the dragon and the boy.

"Hello," Stewart called, as they moved toward the roadside. "In the camp! May we approach?"

"Please!" responded Silas, in a kindly voice the hidden soldiers would've hardly been able to recognize. "I've had a weary night and could use the company! Will you stay for a meal perhaps, or share some wine?"

"Thank you, but no. We must journey quite a distance further this day, Lord willing. But we would gladly receive any news you may have," Stewart replied.

"News? Not sure I'll be of much help to you, there. I know a little about many things, yet not a lot about anything! A man of many interests but little focus, and you can see where it's gotten me," the old man laughed to himself, "wandering about in the forest, a hermit. But I'm a happy one, I must say. I haven't been to a civilized place since the last full moon."

Stewart smiled. He liked the old man.

"Thank you, but we have no need for the kind of news you mention, our interests are of another kind. We seek a boy, and the beast that carried him away."

"A boy!" the man responded, obviously surprised.
"The Lord does work in a mystery, to be certain! I came upon a boy just last evening, down the road."

The group looked from one to another.

His heart in his throat, Stewart couldn't get the words out fast enough.

"Where is he? What happened?"

Palms held forward, the old man tried to calm Stewart.

"Gladly, gladly I'll tell you, but please, come and sit by the fire. And brace yourself, for I haven't the news I suspect you are hoping for."

They took seats around the fire. Looking to the old man they longed for his words, but dreaded them at the same time.

"As I said, I came down this road just last evening, about an hour before sunset. A small piece down the road," pointing toward the bend and the unseen large rock, "I came upon the boy... or, brace yourself now, what was left of him. He looked to be, oh, six or seven years of age from what I could tell. Unclothed, and mostly unrecognizable; just a tousle of dark hair on top," the man said, waving his hand above his scalp. He looked to Stewart.

"He was yours?"

The pain on Stewart's face had revealed all, and his grief poured out in tears. The rest of the band sat silently, consumed in their own varieties of the same grief. Pierce, Fulton, and Irwin shed tears of their own. Reid's rage smoldered. North sat in blank silence.

The old man waited.

"I knew something terrible had happened, for such a young one to be left in such a state. But you said something of a beast. Can you tell me?"

All looked to Stewart, who was unable to speak. North cautiously spoke, looking often to Stewart to be sure he was not speaking too freely in light of Stewart's pain. But he continued, recounting the fiery assault on their village, the toll it exacted on each of them, and their decision around the blacksmith's fire the following night to seek for the boy and slay the dragon.

"My, my, my," the old man muttered, "a terrible thing. At such times one wonders what the Almighty is thinking, to permit such things to be done to innocents like your boy."

# **CHAPTER TWELVE**

At that, Stewart raised his head for the first time. Looking Silas in the eye, he spoke strongly and with great assurance.

"Though the Lord *has* allowed this painful thing, and I am greatly tempted to fault Him, I will not. As you said yourself, His ways are a mystery. For us to question Him is like the ants who scurry at our feet to wonder at our actions. They do not and cannot understand. Neither can we."

The old man looked at him, clearly surprised by his answer.

"That is quite an attitude," he spoke. "I'm pretty certain it would not be mine, were I in your boots."

After a long silence, Stewart asked the question they all knew would come.

"Where is he?"

Hesitantly, the old man replied.

"You must understand that I knew nothing of the boy; where he came from, or how he got here, I mean. How could I know you'd be so soon in coming upon him? I did what any worthy man would do. I put him to rest."

"Where? Where did you bury him?"

"I hadn't the tools to do that kind of job, and the sun was quickly descending when I found him. He's before you, in the ashes of the fire."

Every eye peered into the flames, probing the pile of ash under the burning logs. All they found was a mound of common soot. Silence descended around the campfire like the darkness of the night that was rapidly approaching.

"If you are still willing," Fulton interjected, "it would be a kindness if we could stay with you tonight. Come morning, we will see the place where you found him."

"Certainly. Not a problem at all, I'm pleased to be able to offer you the comfort of my fire, for what it is worth in such a terrible circumstance," the old man replied.

With that Stewart rose from the fire, took up his pack, and walked slowly into the darkening forest. When he was far enough to be out of earshot, he unpacked his bedding and curled up on it in silence, tears streaming once again from his eyes.

"He must grieve alone tonight," Fulton said. "I know him. Come dawn he will be ready, and we will consider what is next for us."

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The light of day found Stewart once again at the campfire, ready to go to the place that would finalize the loss of his son. The others went about their preparations silently, waiting for the cue from him that he was ready to set out. Within an hour the kindly old man was leading them down the road, to a large rock embedded in the ground beside the way. Darkening its side and the ground at its base, was a stain of blood.

"This is the place," he said. "He was lying right there at the base of the rock. Sorry to say it again, but there weren't much left by the time I happened upon him."

Stewart cried his last tears for his son, Honor. He cried silently but earnestly. When his tears were gone he dried his eyes with the sleeve of his tunic, breathed deeply, and turned to the men who had faithfully walked the path with him.

"After the dragon, then?"

To a man they agreed. The old man was quick to speak.

"I didn't know exactly how to speak of it, and had decided to leave it be until the right moment. I know of this dragon, or did at one time. Last I knew its lair is far up that way," he said pointing through the trees toward a high,

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lonely mountain far off to the east. Snow already covered its peak.

"You'll need plenty of provisions if you are to go up there. Prepare yourselves. Supply yourselves first. Then you might have a chance, if you don't mind me saying."

Looking at the other men, Stewart knew their minds.

"You speak wisely, and we will do as you say. We do not know this region. Can you point us to the nearest village or town, where we can be supplied?"

"Of course," the old man smiled. "A few more turns up the road is a small trail, heading off to the east. It leads to a hunting camp of no mean size. This time of year it will be more than fully provisioned for the cold winter that is ahead. Tell them that the 'old man of the woods' sent you to them for supplies, and they will be pleased to help, and to take your money," he said with a wink.

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Silas stood, smiling as he watched them go. He had pointed them down a trail that ended against the side of a sheer cliff, but they would not know that for six or seven miles. By that time, he'd have retrieved his soldiers and set them after the small group. He took a perverse pleasure in things of this kind; the challenge of it, the duplicity, the skill of deceit required to make it happen. He enjoyed it, immensely. Like a spider, he wove his web unsuspectingly, even beautifully. Then, when he had his prey bound with silky cords, he devoured them.

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Silas sat at his fire beside the road well into the afternoon, waiting for the soldiers to return. He knew them

to be an unsavory lot and had no doubt they would do the job. When they finally returned, bragging of their conquest, Silas demanded a full report.

"Nothing to tell," said their leader. "They're done fer. Hardly a whimper out of 'em."

"All dead?" Silas pursued.

"Yeah, as doornails," the leader sneered.

"Good," Silas paused. "You may eat and then we'll be off."

The leader, a brawny, smelly man, scowled then followed the rest of the men to a nearby creek to wash. They removed their cloaks and the leather armor hidden underneath, then returned to eat. Silas could hear them bragging of their exploits, and the coins and weapons they'd plundered. They sounded like school boys. Upon their return to the fire, the leader continued boasting loudly.

"That big fella' was an ox, fer sure, but did you see the way I took him down with one stroke? Sure weren't no fighter, I can tell you that!"

His laughter echoed through the forest.

"Quiet!" Silas scolded.

"Nobody down that trail's gonna' snitch on us!" the leader scoffed, as he pointed down the trail where Stewart's party had gone.

"You think them to be the only ones who use this road?" Silas snapped. "You are a fool."

The man bristled. He rose and tromped around the fire to where Silas sat and glared down at the old man, his eyes full of malice.

"Look here old man, I've put up with yer bossin' as long as I've a mind to. You shut yer mouth afore I shut it fer ya. If I hear another sound outta..."

In a blur of motion Silas was on his feet, a shiny, thin blade in his hand. Before the ruffian could finish his sentence Silas had thrust it deeply into his stomach,

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withdrawn it, and slashed him across the throat. The other men sat in shock, unsure what had happened until their companion fell backward into the fire, sending them sprawling.

Silas looked around the group with a cruel grin as he carefully placed the dagger inside his cloak.

"Eat up, men. Quickly, and quietly. Then bury what's left of him. And don't take all day."

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The harshness of the sunlight piercing Stewart's squinting eyes was only rivaled by the pounding of his head. His dark hair was sticky with his own blood. He stifled a groan as he peeked through his swollen eyelids, unsure if the attackers were still in the area. He turned his head slowly, the beat of his heart throbbing in his temples because of the movement. To his right he recognized the rough shirt Irwin wore. He was about six feet away, lying face down in the edge of a creek. There was no way he could be alive.

Past the creek he saw Reid, sitting upright against the base of a large oak tree, open-eyed. The feathers of an arrow protruded from one side of his neck, pinning him to the tree. Shifting his head to the other side his eyes came to rest on Pierce and North. The larger man's body was atop the other. Both were splayed out in such awkward positions, Stewart knew there was no hope that either of them were living. Fulton was strangely absent. After lying still and listening for some time, Stewart assumed that their attackers had gone. With more effort than he expected to need, he propped himself up on his right elbow. Pain shot like lightning through his head and chest. He collapsed back to the ground.

With another desperate lunge, he raised himself up again, almost fainting from the torture of the effort. He caught his breath and looked down at himself. He knew instantly that he was in trouble. A deep, horridly bloody wound in the left side of his chest was still oozing a bright red and blood dripped into his lap from his scalp. With great effort he reached for his pack, which lay a few feet

away. It had been sliced open and rifled through. He snagged a shirt with one of his good fingers, pulled it in front of him, and painfully pressed it into the chest wound. He prayed the flow of blood would stop.

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Stewart awoke with a start. The shirt was still in his hand and still pressed into the wound. He had managed to wedge a handful of the fabric deep inside, and the flow of blood was considerably less as a result. Trying to rise again, he realized that something was wrong with his left leg. With his good hand, he explored the area and discovered a broken arrow shaft protruding from the back of his thigh.

Slumping to the ground he muttered to himself. "How much pain can one man endure?"

The day would be over in a matter of hours. He determined that the first and most important thing he had to do was bind up his wounds. Knowing that the wadded up shirt he'd used to stop the flow from his chest would not stay in place once he began moving around, he searched out a way to secure it. Reaching into his pack again he found Ella's shawl, as bright and beautiful as ever. He hesitated for a moment, then painfully stretched it to its full length and threaded it under his arms, around his back, and wrapped it around his chest, knotting it together in the front. He decided not to explore his head wound, since it had stopped bleeding, and instead investigated the arrow wound in his leg. Taking a thin but sturdy stick from the ground, Stewart butted it against the broken end of the arrow shaft. Gritting his teeth he pushed the arrow further into his leg until it came out the front side. Using another shirt from his pack, he bound the wound tightly.

The scene around him revealed how the attack had happened. His party had resisted very little. Only North had

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even managed to draw a weapon. It was a perfect ambush, unexpected and devastatingly effective. Fulton's absence concerned him. His friend was too loyal and brave a man to have run away, so Stewart assumed he was either badly wounded nearby, or dead like the others. His heart ached more than his wounds.

In time, he rolled onto his knees and dragged himself to the place where North and Pierce lay. Neither of the bodies had moved. North's sword, still clutched tightly in his large fist, had not a drop of blood on it. From the amount of blood he could see in the space between their bodies, Stewart assumed North's massive chest had been too large a target to miss.

He turned his attention to survival and began to crawl, pushing kindling and wood ahead of him. He knew that if he did not have a fire going within an hour, he would die before morning from exposure. In spite of the exhaustion and pain, he gathered enough wood to last the night. In his pack, he found his flint and steel. The tinder was dry and quickly ignited, and a fire was blazing in a short time. Like the face of a familiar friend in a strange place, it comforted him.

What could have happened to Fulton?

"Fulton!" he yelled. Only a muffled, short echo replied from a nearby cliff wall.

Tomorrow, I will make a more careful search.

The darkness closed in. His fire was his only companion as the sounds of the forest came alive. Stewart had never felt so lonely.

Dawn came cold and hard. Stewart's shivering frame ached, almost as much from the cold as from his wounds. He was stiff and sore. The pain in his thigh was more intense. He turned the wound toward the sunlight and did not like what he saw. The wound was a festering red hue, and oozed white pus. Matters were suddenly worse. He had

to get out of the forest. As much as he hated the thought, his search for Fulton would have to wait. In spite of his broken fingers, he made quick work of a fallen tree branch and fashioned a crude crutch. He pulled himself up on a nearby tree and made his slow and painful way through the area, retrieving anything of use from the ravaged packs.

With a final, emotional look at his fallen friends, he set out. Each time he leaned on the crutch, his chest exploded with pain. Before he had traveled even a hundred feet, it was bleeding again. With grim determination, Stewart made his way back toward the road where he and his friends had said goodbye to the old man. He hoped he might still be there.

It was late afternoon, and innumerable painful steps later, when Stewart finally reached the road. The old man was not there. There were a number of footprints in the soft dirt alongside the road but nothing else. The prints led down the road, away from the direction his party had come. He did not like the thought of heading in the same direction his attackers had gone, but suspected that they had to know the territory better than he did, and were heading for a settlement or town. He would have to take the chance.

I will rest, for just a moment.

He slid to the ground against a boulder, just off the road. Within moments, he plummeted into an exhausted sleep.

Stewart woke to the sound of wagon wheels. The noise came from behind him, on the other side of the boulder against which he rested. He tried to rise, but weakness rendered him unable. He dragged himself around the rock on his stomach just in time to see a mule-drawn cart moving down the road, already fifteen feet past where he lay.

He called out weakly. "Hello!"

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The deep bark of a dog boomed across the woods.

"Whoa!" a voice called as the wagon came to a halt.

Unable to remain propped up on his elbows, Stewart collapsed to the ground, panting. He immediately noticed the dark, stiff blood stain in the dirt, where his son had died. It had been made darker by blood from his own wounds.

My boy. Hon.

He began to weep.

Feet hit the ground near the wagon, then a long silence. Stewart could hear nothing but his own sobs.

"Who's there?" the rough voice asked.

With his last spark of energy Stewart called, "Here... by the rock."

Through tears and dirt he watched a tall, lanky man in a fur coat move toward him. He carried a large axe. Trotting alongside was an oversized hound. The man's large feet stopped before him.

Rolling onto his back, Stewart saw soft, caring eyes floating above a beard so full and long he could not tell where the beard ended and the hairy coat began. With a great sigh, he let his body relax. The hairy man stood there, scratching his belly through the thick coat, as Stewart drifted toward unconsciousness.

Stewart heard the lilting sound of the man's heavy accent.

"Here lies another, Angus me boy. What d'ya make 'o that?"

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Lord Thurmond smiled, pleased to hear the old man's report even though he was still uncomfortable with the path he'd chosen. He had convinced himself it was necessary. Nevertheless, he did not want the unseemly work to be associated with himself.

"Say no more, Silas," he snapped, as he tossed a small leather pouch to the floor at Silas's feet. "You have earned it, *this time*."

Since Silas had shown himself to be much more than a doddering old man in their last encounter, Lord Thurmond felt less sure of himself. The old man looked down at the money pouch, and back up to him.

"It feels... *uncomfortable* to have your hands bloody, hmmm, *my lord*?"

"I don't know what you mean," Thurmond muttered.

"Oh yes, you do," Silas said bluntly. A thread of sarcasm was woven into every word. "But in case your *regal* mind finds it too distressing to think on such base things, I will spell it out for you."

Thurmond squirmed in his large chair.

"You sit here, in your walled manor. Warm. Secure. Ordering others about. When something unsavory needs doing you come to a man like me. Why? Because I am unafraid to do what you will not, what you cannot." He paused. "And when I have done it... you want to know nothing. You seem to think that ignorance of whose life was taken and in what manner it was taken somehow keeps you free from the stain of guilt." He let out an ugly chuckle and then raised his voice. "Six honest men are dead, *my lord!* Dead. They lie stiff and lifeless in the lonely woods

because *you* wanted it so. Because *you* asked me to make it so. Your hands are dripping, Thurmond. You've entered a murky realm where only the strong, only the devious can survive, and the truth is, you are neither."

He released a satisfied sigh and rose. Picking up the pouch of coins, he bowed mockingly.

"If your *lordship* has nothing further?"

Lord Thurmond shook his head without looking at Silas.

Instead of turning toward the door Silas walked directly toward Thurmond. The old man stopped, looked him directly in the eyes, and reached into the folds of his weather-beaten robe. Palm up, Silas extended his hand toward Thurmond. There, crusted with dried blood, lay Thurmond's own jeweled dagger. Silas dropped it at Lord Thurmond's feet and walked out.

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Hours had passed, and Wynstan Thurmond still sat in his chair, the ornate knife still on the floor before him. He was deeply shaken. He was afraid to touch the knife, for fear that doing so would make Silas's implications true. But in his soul he knew them to be true already. He had chosen the path he was on. He had chosen to take the lives of the men from Hon's village. For the first time, he clearly saw the evil that resided in his own heart, and knew there could be no turning back.

But the realization of his own capacity for evil was not the only reason he was shaken. He had also come face to face with a foolishness he did not know was his. He had underestimated Silas. Extremely so. In the past week, the old man had shown himself to be aggressive, malicious, and capable of the most sinister forms of treachery; a possibility Thurmond had not considered even remotely. He had

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judged too much by appearances, too much by assumptions, and was trapped because of it. As on the night the dragon had taken his family, he was truly afraid.

I must be rid of him, Thurmond thought, But how? Surely Silas did not reveal himself without giving thought to my response. He will be ready, watching, on guard. He will be waiting.

He sat embroiled in his thoughts, uncertain how to proceed. Finally, he took up the ornate bell, and rang. A servant entered.

"Yes, my lord?"

"Send for Hampton."

In time, the wild-haired steward of Lord Wynstan Thurmond came slowly through the door, seemingly undisturbed by the world. He paused just inside the room.

"You sent for me, sir? Happy to serve my lord, in any and every way."

"Yes. Sit. I have a matter of the utmost importance and secrecy to discuss with you."

Hampton turned and closed the door.

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Twenty minutes later Hampton left Lord Thurmond sitting in his library and moved down the hall. His quiet mumbling was barely audible, submerged beneath the shuffle of his feet. Rounding the corner, he lumbered up the stairway, to the upper hall of the east wing. He stopped in front of a heavy wooden door and knocked. The door was opened by a young girl. Hampton knew her to be the daughter of the housekeeper.

"Victoria, so good to see you, my peach. Lovely as ever and twice as cheerful," Hampton said, with a light stroke to her auburn hair.

"Hello Hampton," she said with a giggle as he entered.
"Why do you always call me by some kind of fruit?"

"Isn't it obvious, my apple, my cherry, my plum? It is because you're so sweet," he replied with a blank look.

"You're funny," she giggled again.

Looking away from the girl, Hampton found Hon seated on his bed. Victoria's mother, Abigail, was sitting beside him.

"We have been talking a bit before supper," Abigail said, as she patted Hon's leg. "Hon has become like part of the family these past few weeks."

"Nice, nice," Hampton mumbled. "A splendid sentiment. Boys need mums and mums love being needed by boys, for sure and for certain."

Abigail blushed.

Hampton stood just inside the doorway, his head bobbing here and there as he gazed about the room. It was a cozy room. A boy's room for certain. It was good to see it filled with life again.

Victoria giggled again.

"Is there something we can do for you, Hampton?" Abigail asked.

At the sound of her voice the steward jerked.

"What is that? Oh Yes! Well, it's the boy... naturally, the boy! He's been summoned. The master wants to see him directly."

Hon looked to Abigail, who smiled again and motioned for him to follow Hampton. Together they walked out of the room, down the hall, and descended the long staircase, Hampton leading the way and Hon trailing behind. Reaching the closed door to Thurmond's library, Hampton turned sideways and stood beside the door, his head wobbling in silence. Hon stopped with an inquiring look. Hampton turned toward Hon, then jerked his shaggy head toward the door. Hon stood speechless.

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"Well go in, little warrior, go in!" Hampton said.

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Wynstan Thurmond sat behind his desk awaiting the boy, trusting that the pieces of his plan would fall into place. Hon was his. There was no one alive who could contest it. What is more, he would be a hero in his own household. Hon's plight had become the talk of the estate and sympathy for him was high. When news of his parents' deaths circulated, Thurmond would be lauded for his compassion and nobility in taking in such a helpless child.

It is a perfect plan, except for Silas. He knows everything and has shown himself willing to cross me. I should kill him immediately. I should rid myself of the risk. Yet, I am cautious about doing it. Why? Why do I hesitate?

"Lord Thurmond?"

His thoughts dissipated at the sound of Hon's voice.

"Yes son, come in!" Thurmond said with a smile, as he rose from behind the large mahogany desk, "I have word for you about..."

"You found my parents?" Hon interrupted, rushing toward Lord Thurmond. "Where are they? When can I see them?"

"Patience, patience my boy!" Thurmond rebuffed sternly, his mind still full of dark thoughts.

Hon stopped half way across the room. Realizing his tone was too heavy, Thurmond tried to redeem the situation. He spoke with a disarming laugh.

"I do have some word of your parents, but please my boy... it will not do for you to rush in here like a ruffian."

Hon nodded with big eyes. Thurmond smiled.

"Very good. Now sit, and I will tell you the news."

Moving cautiously to the overstuffed leather chair beside Lord Thurmond's desk, Hon climbed into it,

swallowed by its girth. He said nothing, but his eager anticipation was evident as he probed Lord Thurmond's eyes with his own. Thurmond smiled again.

"I told you before that you are very welcome here, and it is still the case, especially now." Thurmond paused intentionally, letting the mystery of his last statement have its effect. "I have searched for a way to soften my dismal report, but have found no way to accomplish it." He sighed heavily. "I cannot make soft what is hard. It must simply be said. Your parents..."

He paused, pretending to struggle for words.

"What you witnessed the night the beast took you away was exactly true. The monster injured your mother quite severely, and it pains me to tell you, she is no longer living."

Hon's lower lip trembled and he quickly clinched his teeth to make it stop. His eyes brimmed with tears. Lord Thurmond waited, deliberately drawing out the tension.

"And Papa?" Hon whispered.

"Yes, your papa. Well, it seems that after the beast released you, it returned to your village. I am told your father and four other men of the town fought valiantly, but they too were destroyed by the vile creature." He paused, watching as Hon's tears began to flow. "I am sorry, my boy. Truly, I am."

Hon sat motionless, his eyes fixed on the wall behind Lord Thurmond. His heart was too young to know how to handle such news. The two sat in silence together, Hon stifling his cries and Thurmond watching as grief did its miserable work. Thurmond knew the pain of the loss would go deep and that its effects would be long-lasting. He was counting on it. He wanted to drive the boy into the security he offered, and toward the ends he had in mind for him. After a time, Thurmond broke the silence.

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"I am sorry for you, son. I too have lost those close to me. I know it is not easy to bear."

Hon looked to Lord Thurmond, his cheeks glistening. "My boy, I would help you through this difficult time,

if you would allow me," he said with an inquisitive tone.

Hon looked past him, his tears continuing to flow. Thurmond waited until he felt Hon would be able to answer.

"What do you think, my boy? Would it be possible for me to help you through this time, as I would were you my own son?"

Hon looked at Thurmond. His eyes were hard.

"May I go?" he asked, in a hushed tone. Surprised, Thurmond answered.

"Yes. Of course. I will check on you later."

"Thank you, sir, Lord Thurmond." Hon murmured as he slid from the chair.

Arriving at the door, Hon reached for the handle, then stopped. Thurmond watched as the boy stood motionless for a few seconds, still facing the door. When he finally turned Hon asked a final question.

"Where will I live?"

Thurmond smiled.

"If you are willing, my boy, I would gladly have you stay here, with me. As I said, I too have lost loved ones, a dearly loved son among them. You would do me a great honor if you would at least consider filling that place. It has been empty far too long."

Hon stood looking at him.

"No answer is needed now," Thurmond continued.

"Take time to think on it. We will have plenty of opportunity to talk of such things later, when you have had time to digest this horrible news.

Hon stood at the door a few seconds longer, nodded, and left the room. Sitting back in his chair, Lord Thurmond spoke into the silence.

"Astonishing."

Soft light rose in his awareness as Stewart willed himself out of the deep pit of unconsciousness. From the outside of his vision the light moved inward, growing brighter as he struggled to focus his blurry eyes. The fuzzy image of a person shifted back and forth before him, leaning over him, urging him awake. The man was calling, speaking, though Stewart could not make out the words. As his eyes regained their function, he saw the blurry, but familiar face of his oldest friend Fulton.

"Stew? Stew, there you are, man. So you've decided to come back to us! We weren't sure at all," Fulton said, his voice filled with relief.

Stewart tried to speak but found his voice strangely quiet.

"Ful-ton?"

"You need to keep quiet for now. Three days' rest is not nearly enough to mend the wounds you've suffered."

"Three days?" Stewart whispered. "What? Everyone was dead. I thought you were dead."

"I suspected you did," Fulton replied. "Had Gerrard not come along, we both would have been."

"Gerrard? The hairy man?"

Fulton laughed.

"So you did get a look at him before you fainted. He wasn't sure. We are in his hut. It's a small place, far off the road in the northern woods. It's quite a setup. He lives alone out here, hunting, fishing, trapping. He's even got a coop of pigeons out there that he cares for and actually uses to send messages back and forth to, well, who knows? Anyway, he found both of us and has been playing nursemaid, first to

me and now to you. His skill with woods medicine is amazing! I've watched him snatch you out of death's clutches over the past few days, my friend. He's a Godsend."

"He is that." Stewart whispered.

"You need to stop talking, Stew. So hush up. You just listen and I'll tell you what I know. Do you remember how we were ambushed?"

Stewart shook his head.

"I was bringing up the rear, and had just stepped around a bend in the trail when an arrow slammed into a tree next to me. I jumped behind the tree and by the time I peeked out, you and Reid were already down. I could see three men closing in through the trees, but I figured there had to be more of them. I began circling around them in the trees, trying to get behind them. But that archer was good. He kept at me, drove me right where he wanted me."

Fulton shook his head.

"Stew, they were no common bandits. Those fellas were well trained and knew exactly what they were doing." His head dropped. "I'm no warrior, Stew. Trying to dodge those arrows, I lost track of where all of them were, and of where I was. I wound up far out by the road, trying to figure out a way back to the rest of you without getting myself killed. That's when I got walloped from behind. When I opened my eyes, Gerrard was standing over me."

Fulton pulled back his cloak to reveal his left shoulder which was wrapped with a heavy, blood-stained bandage. "Stew, I've got a slice here all the way to the bone. It must have bled terribly and hurts like the devil! There's a bloody knot on the back of my head the size of my anvil. Gerrard thinks I bled so much they figured I was done for and left me to die." He paused again. "Stew, I expected to be skewered by the dragon, not by a gang of armed men!"

Stewart looked up at his friend, sympathetically. His voice broke as he forced out a reply.

"The rest are dead. I saw them."

Fulton's head dropped.

"I knew it. Not for sure, but... you saw them?" Stewart nodded regretfully.

"I led them to their deaths" he whispered.

"Hold on, Stew. You can't blame yourself for their deaths any more than you can for the dragon coming in the first place. Every one of us knew there were dangers. I figured we probably wouldn't come back alive. You can't do this to yourself, Stew. Don't you remember that day when we sat around Bluewater pond? Every single man of us agreed to risk it. I'm broken up about the loss of our friends too, but it isn't right for you to take responsibility for the decisions others have made for themselves."

Their conversation was interrupted by the rustle of the bear skin that covered the door. Gerrard's tall frame bent low to enter the hut. Once through he straightened to his full height, looking like a hairy, human tree from Stewart's prone position. Though his thick beard hid any trace of his mouth, Stewart could tell from His bright eyes that he was smiling.

He spoke with the playful accent of a Northman.

"Well, well, me lad! It brings me the greatest delight to see the color returned to yer cheeks!" He glanced Fulton's direction, "It's a grace beyond measure, it is, aye Fulton?"

"Yes, it is," Fulton replied. "Gerrard, this is my friend Stewart."

The tree-man strode across the room and took Stewart's hand with an unexpectedly tender grasp,

" 'Tis an honor and a joy to make yer acquaintance, lad. Truly, it 'tis."

"Thank you... for all you've done for us," Stewart said with a dry, cracking voice. "We are forever in your debt."

The beard stretched so widely, that Stewart had no doubt about the smile.

"Debts of such a kind are not accumulated among us wood folk, lad! "T'would be a vast burden of obligation to carry, trying to trace and repay every good ever done to a soul. I dare say, 'twould devour a man with guilt and consume his very life! 'Tis better to simply do good to them upon whom yer shadow falls, and let that be an end of it. And, my soul! That voice of yours needs some lubrication, me lad!"

Gerrard reached his long arms across the nearby table, pouring water from a small jug. Handing the cup to Fulton, he nodded in Stewart's direction.

"A sensible philosophy," Stewart finally replied, after drinking from his friend's hand, "and I am grateful that you practice it so well."

The beard smiled again.

"When you came in, I was telling Stewart what I recall of the day we were attacked, and how I came to be here with you," Fulton said. "When he's regained his strength, I suspect he'll add more to the story."

"Aye. Each man's view 'tis a piece of the whole. 'Twill be an interesting time, working on this puzzle. But for now, we mustn't sap your strength with puzzles and predicaments, lad. 'Twill be time enough I dare say. Winter will fall heavily this night. 'Tis in the air and no mistakin' it. You'll be going nowhere anytime soon, so consider me small hut yer den and hibernate 'til yer strength returns."

"You are very kind," Stewart whispered. "We cannot thank you enough."

The beard smiled again.

"You have yer own shadow, lad. All I ask is that you notice the souls upon whom it falls!"

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Three days passed before Stewart woke again, and when he woke, he saw Gerrard and Fulton speaking in hushed tones at the table. He lay awake, listening to the soothing tone of their voices and the creaking sounds of the hut and woods outside. A fire crackled in a stone ring in the center of the floor, its smoke drifting toward the high ceiling, where a blackened animal hide was stretched across a wood frame that encircled a hole in the roof. The design allowed the smoke a way out and kept the snow from coming in. On a spit over the fire was a large piece of meat. Stewart recognized the smell of roasting venison. Gerrard's gangly, hair-covered arm reached the spit comfortably from his seat at the table, turning it evenly. Gerrard was the first to notice Stewart was awake.

"It does me heart the best of good to see you come back to us again, lad. You struck a high fever since last we spoke. Fulton was fearing you would leave us."

"How are you feeling?" Fulton asked. "You look much better."

"Better, but sore. My chest feels aflame, but some strength has returned," Stewart answered. "I believe I could eat a bear."

"Venison will have to do!" Gerrard exclaimed as he rose from the table. "I had a feeling you might be needing some meat soon. You've only had broth for the past week, and that only in spells. It's time to get some substance into you, lad."

Fulton smiled widely, the first Stewart had seen since their reunion. He smiled back at him, grateful to have such a true friend. Though very weak and sore from his stilltender wounds, rising from the bed gave Stewart hope. It was a sign that he was moving into the land of vigor. Leaning on Fulton, he limped the few steps around the

small fire to the table. Gerrard gave him a generous portion, and he ate heartily as Fulton and Gerrard exchanged encouraging smiles over their plates. Neither attempted conversation, obviously glad to see his appetite returned. When Stewart finally pushed his plate away, he was ready to talk.

"You are both eager to hear my story, to work on the puzzle," he glanced at Gerrard with a smile. "So here it is..."

Stewart recounted everything from the time they set out on the trail, at the suggestion of the 'old man of the woods,' to his memory of Gerrard's voice over him as he fainted. The two men sat quietly all the while, only occasionally asking for more detail. Fulton was the first to respond.

"It fits with what I saw. You fell at the outset of the attack, so it's understandable that you have no memory of the attack itself. I have to admit though, I was hoping you'd have a bit more in the way of clues as to who those fellas were. I don't know what I was thinking you could say, but was hoping all the same."

Fulton shook his head with disappointment. Gerrard's gravelly voice interjected.

"Ahh lads. But there is a clue, an' it's one as cold as the snow outside! But it's only visible to such folks as knows these woods. Your 'old man of the woods,' is a charlatan or my name's not Gerrard Reginald MacGregor the third! You're looking at the only soul ever called by that name in these parts, lads... that and 'Skinny Malinky Longlegs.' Now that's a name for meself I understand, but 'old man of the woods' has always struck me as a peculiar one, as I don't consider meself to be anywhere near 'old' as of yet. It must be the beard. Regardless, whoever the stranger was, he was not me. Your old man was in on the plot as sure as a bear poops in the woods."

Both men sat in silence, looking at Gerrard's shaggy face in disbelief.

"But he was so helpful and friendly," Stewart responded. "He knew of Hon and showed us the place where, where..." his voice broke.

"He showed us a large bloodied rock, with blood around it on the ground," Fulton continued. "He *said* it was where he found Hon's body."

"Oh, did he now?" queried Gerrard. "If that be the case, what happened to the boy's body?"

"He had no tools to dig a grave, so he, he burned him," Stewart offered.

"A likely story, and convenient too," Gerrard continued. "He was in on it, sure as I'm sitting here, lads. Think on it, lads, think on it! Put yer God-given brains to work! That scoundrel is the one who sent you down that trail where you were waylaid. And to find a village that's ne'r existed, I might add. He put you in harm's way deliberately, and I'll bet my beard he's the architect of the harm itself!"

Gerrard's explanation made perfect sense, but it was hard for Stewart to accept. The old man had been very convincing.

"But there were no men with him when we met, and he was not with the attackers..."

Gerrard laughed.

"A king bids his servants come and go as he pleases, lad, and he is seldom on the front line of the skirmish. But he's surely part of the battle! Hear me straight, lads, I'm a far piece away from declaring the old man a king, but you can bet your grandma's best knitting, he's behind the hooligans who waylaid you."

"Stew! The only reason we've resigned ourselves to Hon being dead is because the old man told us he was dead. But if the old man was a fake, then Hon may still be alive!"

Stewart jerked up his head, shocked that he'd not made the connection himself. Hope sprang to life.

"But what can we do? There are just the two of us now."

Gerrard leaned forward.

"I'm sorry to dump the chamber pot on your campfire lads, but I've yet to uncork the whole jar of pickles regarding your injuries. Stewart lad, you are not out of the woods by any stretch, and I'm not talking about yer takin' up residence in me hut. Great gains have been made, but that hole in your chest lad, it's nasty bad. I've packed it with herbs that reduce the swelling a bit, but the redness continues to grow. And you saying its burning, that points to harder days ahead. Lad, it's a serious thing. You won't be going on adventures or rescues any time soon.

"And Fulton lad, that cut in your shoulder is not as bad as Stewart's, but it's deep and unpredictable. Could flame up any day, could heal up pretty, just as soon. Either way, yer still not going to be moving that arm the same as you once did. Might be able to hold your smithing tongs enough to get back to work, but thoughts of killing dragons and such is foolishness. Sad to say it lads, but say it I must... and deal with it you must."

The crackle of the fire was the only sound for some time, as Stewart and Fulton considered the ramifications of Gerrard's words. Fulton eventually broke the silence.

"Stew, my first instinct is to get as patched up as we can and continue on. I still think it's the honorable thing to do. But on the other hand, I'm not sure it's the wisest. What good would it do for us to get out there in the middle of winter and die alone in the mountains? If we tried it, that's what you're saying would happen, right Gerrard?"

Gerrard looked from one to the other.

"I've no clear view of the future, lads, but I've lived. I've seen what mountain winters can do to a man who's

foolish enough to wander out in 'em. Me innards tell me, there's no chance you'd make it."

As if on cue, Stewart's chest began to burn, accenting Gerrard's warning. He knew the mountain man was right. It was a bitter thing to accept, even harder than the possibility of Hon being dead. Wearied by the thought and their extended conversation, he realized how helpless they really were.

"Well, I'm getting tired, and we obviously have other bridges to cross before we get to that one. Gerrard, I thank you. For your wise warning and for your generous hospitality. Fulton, let's work on getting well before we decide whether to traipse off into the woods again. What do you say?"

Fulton smiled and nodded. Gerrard rose and tended the fire, sparks flying upward as he tossed in a fresh log. The smoke rose out of the hut, filtering through the snowcovered branches of the forest, spreading into the endless, cloud filled sky.

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As the winter snows piled inch upon inch that long winter, healing played a deadly game of "hide and seek" with the occupants of the small hut. Fulton's body continued its unhindered regeneration while Stewart fared much worse. Despite Gerrard's great skill with woods medicine, the infection in Stewart's chest lingered and finally raged. Like twin demons, pus and a persistent fever took turns wreaking havoc on his already weary frame.

The flow from Stewart's chest began slowly; only a sticky residue on his bandages at first. But within days it had increased to the point that the bandages could not contain it. The yellow goo oozed slowly, but continually, which Gerrard insisted was a good sign. He believed it was

the body's attempt to rid itself of the sickness. But after two weeks with no sign of it stopping, even he became less confident. It became impossible to apply herbal remedies to the wound. The sickly flow pushed them out within half an hour. Nevertheless, Gerrard and Fulton worked in shifts, constantly wiping, cleaning, and treating the gaping hole in Stewart's chest.

The fever arrived suddenly, in the darkest hour of the night, two days after their conversation around the table. Fulton woke to the sound of Stewart's chattering teeth, and after lighting a candle, found his friend shaking, though covered with many heavy skins. For weeks, Gerrard sought to subdue the fever by various means, even bringing in buckets of snow to pile around Stewart. He achieved moderate success at times, but whenever it appeared progress was being made, the fever would flame to life a few days later. The two men worked tirelessly to gain healing for Stewart, but it eluded them most of the long winter.

By the late days of March, the discharge from Stewart's chest had diminished significantly and the sporadic fever had been gone for two weeks straight. But neither had departed without leaving its own unique mark on the man. The infection had decimated Stewart's chest. The scab covered muscle was less than half its normal size, leaving Stewart unable even to extend his arm to pick up his own cup. But the most discouraging effect of his winterlong struggle was a result of the fever. His speech was slurred, to the point that Fulton and Gerrard often had to ask him to repeat his statements. Stewart hoped and prayed for improvement, with time

Sitting alone one morning, while Gerrard and Fulton were hunting, Stewart felt like a broken man; and he was, in body and soul. His losses loomed like a storm, far beyond the capacity of grief. At that place of brokenness, an

unexpected and life-giving progression began. Pain turned to numbness, and numbness to resignation. Resignation led him to the realization that his future would be one of dependence. Without his two friends, he could not rise, walk, or even provide his own food. It was this realization that caused him to see that he had always been dependent, no matter how self-made he had tried to be. Only in his brokenness were the scales able to fall from his eyes.

From the mists of memory came conversations he'd had with Ella, conversations that showed him how the truth of his dependence had been before him all along. Over and over his stubborn defensiveness had resisted her attitude and words of simple dependence. He could see for the first time that even then, there had been little in himself that could truly be relied upon. He was fickle, inconsistent, unreliable in many ways, no matter how diligent or dependable he endeavored to be. He was human, and to be human is to be needy. Stewart began to see that he could not breathe, walk, think, act, or even live, without the strength and capacity to do those things being given to him. His crippled body and tangled tongue were mercifully teaching him that reality.

Memories of Ella's way of life drove the lesson home. Her plain, peaceful manner rose through the mists as a bold contrast to his tenaciously independent demeanor. Her everyday attitude had been that of a trusting, dependent child, who relied on the goodness and strength of her Creator to care for her every need. He could hear her soft songs of trust, sung so often over her sewing. He could see her, moving about the cottage, whispering unceasing prayers. He saw her intentionally building a mindset of faithful trust into Hon in the course of daily chores. Memory mounted to the heavens, showing Stewart his departed wife's simple, child-like trust in God.

Tears flowed freely, as he realized the depth of his own need. To be sure, Stewart cried for the loss of his wife, his son, and his health. He cried knowing it was not likely that his son would be found alive. But more profoundly, he wept because his pride had blinded him from seeing the most important fact of his existence; his own need to know his Creator. He had fought the notion his entire life, raged against it through determined self-effort, but there, at the weakest point of his life, the truth held him in its painfully merciful grip. He needed his Maker more than he needed life.

As the tears rolled down his stubble covered cheeks, that need overshadowed all else, and redemption met him in its midst. He lay crippled in the presence of his Creator, utterly dependent and glad to be so. For the first time, he turned his heart toward receiving instead of achieving, toward relying instead of providing, and met his Maker there.

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As the days grew warmer, Stewart was surprised that his heart did too. The security of knowing that he was not alone wrapped around him like a soft blanket. He touched the stained blue shawl that was draped around his shoulders. It was a symbol to him, a sign that the Lord was present with him from the very outset of his trials. He breathed deeply as he held it to his nose. Ella's fading fragrance was a merciful reminder, and Stewart received it as a personal gift from his Creator.

The warmth of spring finally came, slowly melting the deep snow that had blanketed the little hut for months. With it came the longing to go home. Stewart and Fulton both felt a need for the comfort and hope that familiarity could bring. It was unspoken but clearly known between Stewart

and Fulton that their excursion to find Hon and slay the dragon was over. They hadn't the physical strength and would be unable to muster the endurance the job would require.

One bright morning over breakfast, after Gerrard had come in from tending his pigeons, the woodsman leaned his tall frame across the table. His piercing blue eyes glowed from beneath his fur cap.

"Lads, the days have grown bright and fair. Methinks the time has come for you to make yer journey."

"Yes," Fulton answered, "we have been considering it ourselves."

"Glad of it," Gerrard continued. "And rather than send you off and wish you well, I believe it right that I see you safely there. If we make haste, leaving afore the week is out, I can do so and still make it back to prepare for the winter ahead. What say you?"

Stewart looked to Fulton and saw agreement in his eyes.

"Thash mydee kine ov you," Stewart replied.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Thurmond truly believed that Silas was an asset; in many ways he was indispensible. The strange old man was willing to do things others could not or would not, and there was always need for such a man. But his insolence and outright aggression had grown over the past few months. He could no longer be trusted. Lord Thurmond sat in his library pondering the situation.

Silas is clearly a problem and I must do something. But what? If I banish him from my realm he becomes an enemy, one I can't afford to have. For all I know, he might go over to Kendrick. Or I could allow him to remain, so that I could keep him in view. At least that way I would know what he's about.

He sighed.

But even if he remains, I won't know any more than I do now. He's always been secretive, and even more so now.

He sat for some time, staring out at the lightly falling snow. It was likely the last of the heavy, wet snows of early spring. His eyes lost their focus as the flakes danced outside his window. In a calm, hypnotic tone, in the deep recesses of his damaged mind, a voice spoke. The husky sound and condescending tone were unmistakable. It was his long dead father.

"It's easy, Wynstan, but you are too weak to admit it. You could rid yourself of this problem in one stroke. Kill him."

He fought the thought.
Kill him? But I'm, I'm a lord...

The voice whispered again.

"Yes, you are a lord. But not for long if you allow such impertinence to continue. The quaint morality you cling to is a flaw that will destroy your realm. Your line will fade into obscurity unless you act. Do you want to be strong, Wynstan? You are lord of the house of Thurmond; strong, powerful, the master of your destiny. The old man is warped and pitiful. He is nothing compared to you. His paltry life doesn't matter. You, and the line of Thurmond are what matter. You know what you must do."

Still, Thurmond resisted

But I am no killer...

The voice shattered his resistance.

"You killed those men in the woods. Silas did the deed, but you had the desire. You Wynstan, you. A powerful ruler, a lord, must be what he needs to be. If the situation requires you to be a killer, then you become one. That time is now. So kill him. Kill him now."

At that moment, as the last traces of sanity broke from his being, anything truly regal that remained in Wynstan Thurmond crumbled to dust. Preoccupation with self consumed him. Fear took hold. He smiled as he reached into his desk drawer and removed his jeweled dagger. He tucked it into his belt, covered it with his cloak, and headed toward the grand hall. As he suspected, Hampton was there, overseeing the preparations for the noon meal.

"Hampton, to me."

The steward turned to face his master and shuffled across the room to where Thurmond stood just inside the door. He peered from underneath his mop of hair.

"Yes my lord, are you well this evening? How may I serve you at this hour?"

"Where is Silas?" Thurmond answered coldly.

"I only wish that I could say for certain, but I cannot say at all, my lord," Hampton said as his shaggy head bobbled from side to side with each phrase. "I've not seen

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him for a number of days, at least a week in fact. He often leaves us before weather sets in."

"Do you know where he goes?" Thurmond inquired.

"I only wish that I did, but I cannot say that I do, my lord."

Hampton waited, mumbling under his breath.

"The moment you know he has returned, send Commander Eadric to me. Have him bring his three best men. Tell him nothing else." Thurmond stooped to look Hampton directly in the face. "Nothing else. Do you understand?"

"Absolutely. Positively. Silas returns, Commander Eadric, three of his best, nothing else. I have it. Certainly, my lord."

"Make it so," Thurmond commanded.

The steward performed a hobbling about-face and returned to his work.

Thurmond turned back toward the library, already working out the details of his plan. He would be strong. He would take control of the situation and ensure his line for generations. The situation required it. He must be a killer. He walked into the dimly lit library, deep in thought. The voice whispered reassurance to him.

"It is necessary Wynstan, and the old man is of no consequence compared to you. He is no more than a stone in your path that must be kicked aside."

Thurmond sat behind his desk, convinced that killing Silas was the right thing to do. He whispered the details of his plan to the silence of the room.

"When Hampton sends Eadric and his men, I will tell them of Silas's treachery. They will gladly protect their lord. It is their job to do so. They will hide in the chamber across the hallway while I send for the old man. When he arrives they will follow him in. He will not have a chance.

They will restrain him while I thrust my dagger into his pitifully shriveled old heart."

He rose and opened the window. A thick, damp cushion of white silenced the world. Thurmond closed his eyes and inhaled the cold air. He had not felt so alive, so powerful in years. All the while, the voice of his dead father continued to whisper reassurance. He turned and looked into the darkness of the room.

He was alone, but in his tortured mind he saw Silas's haunting green eyes. They were there, floating ghostlike before him. The old man's long, rusty blade danced menacingly, threateningly. Another voice emerged from deep within his mind, the voice of Silas.

"That's quite a plan... my lord," it mocked.

Lord Thurmond backed away from the imaginary green eyes, fear gripping his heart. His paranoia and guilt pushed him over the brink. He pulled his jeweled knife from his belt.

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Hours later, Abigail knocked on the library door. Her master had not responded to the bell signaling the evening meal. When she received no answer, she gently pushed the door ajar. A frigid gust escaped the room.

"My lord?"

There was no reply.

She stepped inside the dark room. The only light came through the open window behind the desk. She waited a moment to allow herself time to adjust to the dim light. The icy wind had strewn quill pens and parchments across the floor, and the last embers of the fire glowed in the hearth. She thought it strange that her master would leave the window open.

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She gathered the parchments nearest her as she made her way across the room. Rising, she moved to shut the window. She stopped short, noticing a dark shape that lay against the wall, beneath the window. Inching forward, the form came gradually into focus. Lord Wynstan Thurmond was slumped against the wall, his throat slit. His bloody, jeweled dagger was gripped tightly in his hand.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It had been over eight months since Stewart had set his eyes on Brookhaven. He had missed it, but knew it would not be the same home he remembered. Not only would there be lingering evidence of the dragon's attack the previous fall, the most important things to him, the people who made it "home," were forever gone. He'd be starting over, all alone.

"Stew? What's rattling around in that head of yours?" Fulton asked, as Gerrard's wagon rumbled beneath them.

Not entirely alone. Fulton is still with me.

"I'm just thinking about what it will be like to be home. I'm happy for it, but sad as well. It will be familiar, but not the same at all." He was happy that his speech had improved over the last few months.

"I've thought the same, and I feel for you most, because you have lost most," Fulton answered.

Stewart sat quietly, thinking on that reality. He had lost the most; his wife, his son, his health. But he was learning to be content, learning to trust. They were all things he could do nothing about and therefore they were not his responsibility. He must release them to the Lord.

"I have lost much. But the losses do not make me who I am. It is the Lord who does that, and I am content with what He is doing."

The wagon wobbled on, past Bluewater Pond where their small crew of brave men once discussed the way ahead. Stewart remembered North's words most of all.

"It's true, the odds are against us, but I don't care about 'em. It may look impossible, and it may be impossible, but I believe the Lord above rules over the

impossible. If we go wisely and in the strength He provides us, we'll do alright, even if suffering comes with it."

Suffering had come. Death had come. That fact reminded him that others in the village, wives and children, had lost much as well. How would they respond to his return? Would they blame him? What would he say if they did? North's words had become a balm to his soul and a prayer he said each night. His prayer was that if his son still lived, he would learn to go wisely, in the strength the Lord provided.

Many hours later, Angus' deep bark alerted him to two children ahead on the road. Both had been friends of Hon. Rosamond was there, along with Pierce's oldest boy, Buck. They stood a moment, wide-eyed, then turned to run ahead, announcing the wagon's approach in excited shouts. The smoke of many chimneys was floating up in the distance. He was almost home.

Mounting the rise, the huts of Brookhaven came gradually into view. Stewart was surprised how unchanged it looked. The rubble had been cleared away and almost every hut was rebuilt. Except for the new construction, he would never have guessed that the town had been almost destroyed less than a year before.

In the town square, gathered around the well were most of the townsfolk, a few last ones rushing out from their huts. He was not surprised to see them there, knowing that Fulton kept a regular correspondence with Ida every chance Gerrard could get a message out to the road. What he did not expect was the warm welcome they received; applause, cheering, and laughter.

Fulton leapt down from the wagon at the sight of his wife running to meet him. Others followed her lead and ran out to welcome the two men home. Stewart sat in the wagon and wept. He wept for the comfort of being home, and for the losses he'd be reminded of every day. It felt as if

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his tears were the release of months of anxiety and fear, and they flooded out uncontrollably. Comforting hands reached out to him, patting his legs, touching his shoulders. He could hear the sobs of others around him. It was good to be home.

"Stew. Stewart, look!" Fulton beckoned.

He raised his head and followed Fulton's extended arm. He pointed through the crowd, into the village, past the well in the center of the square. There stood his newly built hut. He stared in disbelief, uncertain what to say. Ida pushed forward in the crowd.

"Stewart, we love you and are glad to have you back. You are home."

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The first evening home, the travelers were given all due consideration, and were allowed to rest after their long journey. The next day, a feast was planned to celebrate their return. Ida had taken the lead to organize the food and allow time for conversation in the town square. Stewart sat in his new home grateful and amazed, feeling very undeserving. It was fully furnished and stocked with supplies for the next few months. He wondered at the goodness of God, expressed through his friends, and thanked Him for it.

A knock on the door interrupted his prayer. He limped to the door and opened it to Ida and three other women, the widows of the men who had been lost. Inviting them in, Stewart sat down with them, looking at them through misty eyes. He wondered what was in their hearts, how they had fared in dealing with their losses. His own burden had been heavy and he knew theirs must have been the same. The four of them sat in silence for some time, crying softly. Stewart was the one to break the silence.

"Thank you all for coming. I know it must be very hard for you to do, but I am grateful. To be honest, this is the conversation I've dreaded the most." He paused. "I am so sorry. I can't say it enough. I am so sorry that I led your husbands to their deaths."

Soft sobbing filled the room.

"Stew," Ida replied, "we came here to tell you that we don't blame you, not at all." The others nodded their heads. "Our husbands all chose to go with you. They went knowing they could diem, and we knew it too. But it was our concern for you, and Hon," she paused to gain her composure, then spoke again with a clenched throat, "and our love for Ella, that let our husbands go. We wanted to somehow be of help, to give something to you in your time of need. None of us wanted the cost to be as great as it was. We hoped and prayed that it would not be, but every one of us knew it could be. Stewart, what has happened is not your fault."

North's widow spoke up.

"Stewart, we're all of that same way of thinkin'. Me and North spoke long into the night after you men met 'round the forge. I din't want 'im to go. I was 'fraid. I could see this moment, this one, right here," she said, spreading her hands around the group. "I din't want it to be. I told 'im what I felt, that things wouldn't end well. My fears and worry and dread gushed out on 'im that night. But my man was calm and brave, a rock as always, and so full of faith." She paused to wipe her tears. "He said to me, 'Tess, you put away those fears, 'cause that's all they are. We can't let something with so little reality as that, make our decisions for us. We are responsible before our Maker to do what we know to be right, and we can't let fear or nothin' else keep us from it.' Stewart, that's what he said, and that's what he did when he went with you next morning. I've had eight

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long months to ponder it, and I know in my heart of hearts that he did what was right."

"North was a brave and wise man. As we got out on the road, he said things to me in my lowest moments that still echo in my mind. I'll be grateful 'til the day I go to meet him. Then I'll thank him myself."

Everyone in their small circle smiled and mumbled their affirmations.

Pierce's widow, Margaret was the last to speak.

"I feel the same. Pierce kept saying how he'd feel if it were our Buck who had been taken, that he'd want someone to help him. That's what drove him out our door that morning, and what led him to his death. I couldn't be any more proud."

"He told me that very thing, Margaret. He was true to himself to the end," said Stewart.

"We know you are tired Stewart, and that you are still recovering from your journey, so we will not keep you any longer," Ida said as she rose. "Please, let any one of us know if you need anything, will you?"

The other women spoke their agreement.

"I will. Thank you all, you are so gracious."

As the door closed behind them, Stewart automatically resumed his prayer of thanks. He thanked the Lord for how He uses friends to express His goodness. When he realized how instantly he turned to prayer, he was surprised, and glad for the change.

The days after Lord Thurmond's death were confusing and bleak. Many soldiers and members of the household staff packed their few belongings and left the moment they heard the news. Commander Eadric was among those who left immediately. Soldiering was nothing more than a profession to him. Others, who had served the line of Thurmond for years truly mourned. Rowan stayed on to see what would become of the estate, and to help manage the change in whatever way he could. Thirteen years in Lord Thurmond's service had brought him and his family to think of the estate as home, and it was difficult to consider leaving, even though they knew it was the only option they had.

"As much as I hate to say it Rowan, we'll have to leave," said Julia, Rowan's wife of twenty years. "There's only a few who can afford to pay a soldier's wage, and none of them are nearby. We'll be traveling at least a week to get anywhere promising, and won't know if we'll be welcomed until we arrive. How do we know which of the lords to seek out?"

"We will know in time," Rowan replied. "But for at least the next few days, our place is here. Many are in a state of panic; others are gone already. They are our friends, Julia. We must do what we can to help them."

"Help them? We are in the same boat as them! What do we have to help them with?"

"We have the stability of a family. You and me, and Frederick and Elsa, we have security in each other. Many don't even have that. Think of Hampton, the old steward. He's got no wife or children and he's served his entire life

inside these walls. Where is he to go, and how is he to get there? He probably could get by on his own, but I cannot bring myself to leave him to fend for himself. There are others who are worse off than him. Think of Thurmond's adopted son, Hon. He's an orphan twice over, now."

Julia sighed.

"I do feel for them. I have cared for that little boy ever since the day you found him out on that road. He's a forlorn little rag of a boy, if I've ever seen one. Misfortune has reduced him to tatters and left him to flap in the wind. Poor little man. He is going to need someone to care for him while everyone else is looking out for themselves."

Rowan smiled. Though Julia's fears often pulled at her fiercely, he could always count on her compassionate heart to win out in the end. He pulled her close, holding her in his lean but powerful arms.

"You have a mother's heart, my dear, and it breaks for every lost soul, old or young. I knew you would see your way to being a help to those in need. You always do. I'm glad for it, because something has been stirring in me the last few days, something unexpected and a bit fearful."

Julia cocked her head. Rowan continued.

"I've been thinking that soldiering may not be the way ahead for me."

Julia pulled away and turned to look into his dark eyes.

"I mean it," he continued. "Why don't we find a good spot and form our own little town with those who are interested? It would take hard work and determination, but most of our friends here have those two things in ample supply. And it's almost spring time. We'd have the bulk of the summer to make a good beginning."

"You really want to do that, to give up being a soldier? I thought you loved it."

"Why not, Julia," Rowan answered. "We could be settled, once and for all. And you'd not have to worry about me being in harm's way like you do now. You've been saying for years that you die every time I head out on a campaign. We should take this opportunity to make sure that you never have to feel that again."

She leaned into him again and began to cry.

"What is it, Julia? What is it?"

She choked out her reply.

"I never thought the day would come, that you would be able to give up soldiering, that you would be safe, at home, away from skirmishes and battles. I never thought it would happen."

Rowan raised her chin.

"So it's settled?"

"Yes," she nodded, smiling through her tears. "Yes, I want it more than anything!"

"Then we should get to it. We need to find out who will join us before anyone else leaves."

"Yes, go. And Rowan, find Hon."

He smiled at her tenderly.

"I will."

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Of all the people he wished to find, Hon was uppermost in Rowan's mind. In the months that had passed since his arrival, Hon had spent a good deal of time with their son Frederick, and the family had taken a keen interest in him. Rowan felt an urgency to find the boy, bordering on desperation. He didn't know why, but he felt that their futures were intertwined. He went immediately to the manor house. His best guess was that the boy would be there, unless someone else had already taken it upon themselves to become his custodian.

Walking through the main gate of the manor house was a strange sensation. In thirteen years of service, Rowan had never been inside. He passed a large wagon, half-filled with furniture, and as he began to enter the massive doorway he was nudged aside by two men carrying out an ornate table. The noise inside indicated that the attitude of polite deference that usually reigned around the estate was gone. Former servants had taken their destiny into their own hands, pilfering anything they could carry. It was a disturbing sight.

Pushing his way through the hall, Rowan passed into the great room, which was already bare. Just then he saw Abigail, one of the housekeepers and a friend of Julia's, exiting the opposite doorway.

"Abigail!" he called, his voice echoing across the empty room.

As he moved toward the doorway, Abigail's portly frame stepped back inside, a look of curiosity on her face. Upon seeing Rowan, she smiled in a half-hearted way.

"I did not expect to see you here, Rowan. Not that I'm unhappy about it. I've been meaning to come see Julia, but then, well, I've not been my usual self since I found him."

"Found him? What do you mean?" Rowan asked.

"Oh, you don't know." Abigail said, her voice dropping. "I am the one who discovered Lord Thurmond."

Rowan was stunned. He hadn't considered that someone had to have found his body, or what that experience might have done to them.

"I'm so sorry Abigail! It must have been terrible for you. Are you doing alright?"

She paused.

"Yes... yes, I am. The good Lord has given me strength even at my weakest, and He's kept me occupied with my Victoria and the boy, so I haven't had much time to think of that dreadful scene."

"The boy? You mean Hon?"

"Yes, Victoria and I have taken him in, after a fashion. You see, before, before Lord Thurmond died, Victoria and I had been getting to know Hon. We were trying to make him feel at home, having lost his parents and his home, and... well, you know what I mean. I kept imagining what it would be like for my Victoria if she had experienced such a loss, and I couldn't bear the thought. So Victoria and I determined we were going to be a source of comfort to him, however we could. Then..." she swallowed hard, "after I found Lord Thurmond, my thoughts flew straight to Hon. I think I saw all this coming," she said, gesturing toward the empty room, "and I knew he'd need someone to look after him."

"You are right," Rowan said. "Hon needs that now more than he ever did. That's the reason I came to the manor, at least part of it."

"Oh?" Abigail said.

"Yes. Since the day I found him out on that road, he's been on my mind often too, and he has become friends with our Frederick. Just today we realized there are many here, including Hon, who will have a hard time making a go of it alone. I began to think that there is an opportunity rising out of this tragedy, if we are brave enough to take it."

"What do you mean?" asked Abigail.

"Julia and I would like to give up this type of life, a life of servitude. We have a mind to start a village with a group of our friends. We could start a new life, a free one Abigail."

Abigail's brow wrinkled as she listened. Rowan continued.

"And think of what that would mean for Hon. He could be reared in a village, very much like the one he came from. Abigail, we would love for you, and Victoria, and

Hon, to come with us. What do you think? Is it something you could do?"

Rowan could see that Abigail was struggling to digest the idea. He wondered what it must be like to be widowed, raising a daughter all alone, and without a foreseeable means to support herself.

She stuttered out a reply.

"Well... I, I... I haven't given much thought to... to what we'll actually do now. I suppose I presumed to find another place in a great house, as I've always done." She paused."I really don't know how to do anything else, or how to even go about finding something else to do."

"But that's the beauty of the idea, Abigail!" Rowan interjected, pausing to find just the right words. "Julia and I don't know anything but this life either. It's all we've known for the last thirteen years. But with friends alongside, we can step into that kind of new life as a group, so that none of us is alone. We will watch out for each other, take care of each other, we'll do our very best to be a family. I don't have a solution for every problem we'll face, but at least we could face them together."

He paused, seeking some sign that Abigail was warming to the idea. She looked down pensively, softly rubbing her hand along her forearm.

"Who else will be going with you?" she finally asked.

"You are the first I have spoken to, but I'm convinced there are others who would be eager for the opportunity to cast off their servitude for a better life."

"It's such a fearful thing, to change so suddenly," she interrupted. "If we had more time to prepare and consider..."

"But Abigail, we don't have time. Look around you. The secure world we've known in this place is already vanishing. Like Hon, Lord Thurmond's death has made orphans of us all, only we have the ability to make good

come of it for ourselves. If we wait too long, those who might have joined us will already be on the road." He paused. "I don't want to seem pushy, but if this idea is to happen, we have to begin now."

Abigail sighed heavily.

"It is unnerving even to consider, but I must admit that it is exciting too. I'd like to talk with Victoria about it before I say 'yes.' Can you wait for my answer?"

Rowan smiled, knowing what her answer would be.

"Yes, Abigail, I can wait."

"Be sure to find Hampton. He is... was, steward of the household."

"I know him," Rowan replied with a broadening smile.

"I think he will be excited to consider your idea. I saw him last in the library, in the lower hall of the east wing," Abigail said.

"Excited? I wouldn't have thought him capable of excitement," joked Rowan.

Abigail swatted his arm playfully.

"That just means you don't know him well enough."

"I will come by your room for your answer before I leave the house. Does that suit you?" Rowan asked.

"Yes, please do," Abigail said, with a wink.

They moved out the door together, Abigail turning toward the servant's chambers in the west wing and Rowan moving in the opposite direction. The hall grew wider as he went and he paused to glance in each doorway. He finally reached what was once the library. Every wall was covered with shelves, but there were only a few books remaining, torn and scattered across the floor. Sorting carefully through some parchment behind the large desk sat Hampton. Rowan cleared his throat to announce his presence.

Without looking up, Hampton spoke.

"Yes, Sergeant Rowan, is there something I can do for you or have you come to sift through the leftovers?"

"I am surprised you remember me by name," Rowan replied.

"It is... was, my business to remember everything in this household, and I seldom forget a name or the face that goes with it," Hampton sighed. "How can I be of service to you?"

"I'm sorry that all this has happened, Hampton. You've served here faithfully for many years. I'm sure it is not easy for you."

A sarcastic chuckle interrupted him.

" 'Easy' is certainly the last word I would have put to it, be assured of that, young Rowan. Perhaps I would call it, 'excruciatingly discombobulating,' but not 'easy'!" He looked up with a wry grin. "What do you need?"

"Actually, Abigail suggested I speak to you," Rowan said.

At the mention of Abigail's name, the shuffling of papers stopped, only for a second.

"She thought you might be interested in being a part of our little band."

Hampton stopped his activity altogether and peered up from beneath his graying mop, a wry smile stretched across his thin face.

"A little band? Is it the instrumental kind of which you speak, or are you planning to galavant off into the woods as rogues? And Abigail is involved in this escapade? What is the dear woman up to now?"

"Actually, it was an idea my wife and I had. I think I've convinced Abigail to join us, with Victoria and Hon, of course."

Rowan's smile grew broader. Hampton looked at Rowan curiously.

"It's a lark, really, no, it's more than that. It's quickly becoming a dream, something we can't shake. It sounds crazy to people such as us, I know, but I believe it to be the right time..."

Hampton interrupted again, "Sergeant Rowan, if you will pardon the interruption, may I ask when I am to receive the privilege of knowing what your illustrious band is going to be about, or should I sit here until the ungrateful hoards come to salvage my bones?"

Rowan laughed at himself.

"I'm sorry, Hampton. You must think me quite strange."

"The notion was nibbling at my mind," Hampton teased.

"Yes, well, we are hoping to gather up a handful of friends, and others who will join us, and set out on our own to form a village of our own. A new town, someplace out there." He waved his arm toward the window. "Abigail thought you might be excited about the prospect."

Hampton puffed out a breath that sent his unruly bangs fluttering.

"She said that about me? Excited?"

"I do believe that was her exact word," Rowan said with a smirk.

The older man rose and began pacing behind the desk, rolling his eyes and bouncing his head. When he finally spoke, his hands flung about him to emphasize each point.

"Well, I've never considered... I suppose it's possible to do such a... but the odds... can't think of the odds, you old goat... for one my age? But I'm not that old yet..."

Rowan watched in amusement as Hampton argued himself into and out of the adventure a handful of times. He finally stopped his pacing and turned to face Rowan.

"Positively."

"You will come with us?" Rowan confirmed.

"I believe that is the meaning behind what I just articulated," Hampton replied, with a roll of his eyes. "If Miss Abigail is engaging in this endeavor, then I must go as well. Were I to stay, I would miss my dear little plum far too intensely!"

Rowan was embarrassed to ask, but couldn't resist.

"Your little plum?"

Hampton blushed.

"Victoria! Oh my, no... not Miss Abigail, heavens, no! That's not at all what I meant."

"No need to explain further," Rowan laughed. "Your secret is safe with me."

"Oh, well, fine. Yes, then it is settled... secret? What secret are you meaning?"

Rowan's laugh filled the empty room.

"Just a joke Hampton! I'm glad you will be joining us. We can all gather around the fire outside my cottage this evening, then. You know where it is?"

"Sergeant Rowan," Hampton scoffed. "It is my business to know everything."

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As the sun dipped behind the hills, a good sized group sat around the fire outside Rowan and Julia's cottage. Rowan looked over the group happily. As he had hoped, Abigail was there, with Victoria and Hon flanking her. Hampton lurked about, pestering Victoria with his teasing, while Rowan's son Frederick talked and played with Hon. Two of the men from the barracks had joined them; Preston, whose wife Alise held their infant child, and Phillip, who Rowan knew to be a bachelor. There was Leechy, the surgeon, and his wife, Margaret, along with Susanne, the baker and her husband Ian, who had been the stable master. Added to these were other household

servants, pages, and field workers. They numbered forty-three in all.

Throughout the evening they dreamed, spoke of their fears, and discussed the possibilities. Most pressing was the subject of where they would go. Hampton suggested they move west, into the lands of Lord Kendrick. He had heard that Kendrick was a good man and a fair lord to his subjects. Though nobody wanted to be under his or anyone else's direct sway, they agreed that being near a man of principle and strength would be to their advantage, if it was true. It was midnight before any of them left the fire, the promise of a new life holding them tightly together. In the end, Rowan was happy to realize that every fear and objection had been overcome by that prospect. Abigail was among the last to leave. Hon had stayed close to her all evening. Rowan knelt in front of him.

"I'm so glad you'll be with all of us, Hon. And I know that Frederick is especially glad."

"Thank you," Hon replied softly.

"You must be feeling many things; can you tell me?"

Hon stood quietly, his eyes revealing a mind deep in thought.

"What are you thinking about, right now?" Rowan asked.

Hon looked up nervously, a tear forming in his eye.

"About my mamma and papa. I miss them."

Rowan was moved.

"I know you do. Abigail told me what happened. I am very sorry." He paused. "Are you afraid?"

Hon nodded, biting his lip.

"Hon, you may not be old enough to understand this yet, but there are many things in this world that bring fear to our hearts. Even me, a grown man and a soldier. I am afraid too."

Hon gripped Abigail's hand and looked up into Rowan's face.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked.

Rowan smiled.

"I am afraid of being hurt or killed in a battle, or losing my family, like you did. I am afraid of growing old and being unable to take care of my loved ones or myself. But mostly, I think I am afraid because I don't know what is going to happen tomorrow, or the next day, or the next day. I know it could be good, or it could be bad, but that is all I can know. But Hon, I have learned that I cannot change that. It is simply the way life is. So I try to be brave, instead of afraid."

"What is 'brave?" Hon asked.

"'Brave' means you behave with strength, even when you are afraid. It might mean that you stay and fight when you want to run. For me, right now, it means I move ahead, into the future, even though I don't know what I will find when I get there. It means that for you too."

Hon was deep in thought.

"My papa was brave. I saw him fighting the dragon. He shot it with a crossbow. My mamma was brave too. When the dragon grabbed me she yelled at it, and threw rocks."

Rowan was surprised at Hon's vivid memories.

"I have seen the beast, or one like it, many years ago, right over there." Rowan pointed to the west wall of the manor. "It is a fearsome thing. The night it came here many men who had fought bravely in other battles ran away, so your parents were indeed very brave. I think they were brave because of you."

"Because of me?" Hon said.

"Yes, Hon. They were trying to protect you, to save you from the dragon."

Hon's unblinking eyes were fixed on Rowan.

"Hon, brave people are often brave for the sake of others. Your parents did their best to help you, even though they knew the dragon might be too strong for them."

Hon's tears began to flow.

"It was too strong for them. It killed them both."

Abigail knelt and held him as months of pent up sorrow flooded out. Rowan's heart went out to him. He looked to Abigail, whose sympathetic smile told him she would try to be the comfort Hon needed. Rowan touched Hon's head and rose, looking down on him with compassionate eyes.

"You are brave too Hon, even though you don't feel like it right now. How about if we try to be brave together?"

Hon nodded through his tears. Suddenly, Rowan felt a strong longing to be with his own wife and children.

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Their travels had been smooth, without a sign of danger, and Hon had come to feel at ease among their "little band," as Hampton insisted on calling it. Overall he felt at peace, glad to be with people who seemed to care for him. But despite the relative happiness of his life, it was colored by the recurring nightmares he had most every night. Though exhausted from lack of sleep, come evening, Hon fought to stay awake. He lingered around the fire as long as Abigail would allow, dreading the nightly terror.

Abigail had been awakened by his screams many times already, and often allowed him to fall asleep against her shoulder as they sat up with the others. On the nights he did go to bed earlier, he lay awake as long as he could, fighting sleep's inevitable grasp. Over time the distorted dream images of the dragon became a representation of all that was bad or could go wrong in the world. Though he tried to remember Rowan's words about being brave even

when he was afraid, the dreams made it seem impossible. Even when he was awake, it was there, reminding him how helpless he was, overwhelming him with dread.

The day they reached The Ridge was Hon's seventh birthday, and Rowan and Abigail made sure that everyone was a part of the celebration. Under Abigail's watchful eye, Victoria baked a flat, sweet cake from flour and sugar, which everyone enjoyed. That evening, Rowan pointed out to the entire community that nobody but Hon had ever flown with a dragon, and lived to tell the tale.

"This boy is among us by no mistake," he said. "Julia and I have talked of it much. Providence has brought him to us, to be with us, and to be one of us. Think of the terrible end he would have come to had the dragon not deposited him along the forest road. Think of how strange it is that it did so! Is this not Providence, bringing Hon to us through such strange and painful events? And are we not glad for it?"

"Amen!" Abigail agreed with a broad smile. "You are a blessing to us all Hon, but Victoria and me especially. You are like my own son, and a brother to my Vicki. I thank God for you, and pray daily that He will protect and guide you. Yours is a purpose unique and wonderful, I know it. The good Lord would not have saved you as He did, were it not so."

The attention felt good to Hon's little boy soul.

After the celebration, sitting around the fire, Hon remembered Rowan's words and wondered what some of them meant. Looking across the fire at Rowan, cuddling in a blanket with his daughter Elsa, Hon spoke.

"Sir, what is Providence?" Hon asked.

"Well, Providence is a way of saying that God is in control of everything, making things happen the way they do. When we say that we should trust Providence, we're

saying that we should trust that God is doing things the right way, even when they are going badly."

Rowan waited patiently. Finally, Hon's trembling voice broke the silence.

"Does that mean God wanted my mama and papa to die?"

Rowan released a massive breath. He hadn't expected such a thoughtful reply.

"Hon, all I can tell you is that God is in control, and I know that He is good. He could have kept your parents from dying if He wanted to, but He didn't do it. Does that mean that God wanted them to die? Well, I suppose it does, or else He wouldn't have allowed it at all."

Rowan paused, as Hon struggled with the concept. Abigail joined the conversation.

"Hon, it's natural for us to ask why God allows things, and it's alright to ask, too. So you go ahead and ask. He wants you to try to understand Him. But keep in mind, you are asking questions of a God who is much bigger and much wiser than you are. He won't always explain things to you because you won't be able to understand. Why your parents died may be one of those things. Do you understand what I mean?"

Hon sat, perfectly still for a long moment, then nodded his head.

"I think so."

Hon looked up to see Rowan and Abigail exchange looks across the fire.

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The next day they began their ascent of The Ridge, a craggy outcropping that stretched high against the sky, not quite mountains, but much more than rocks. The group had agreed that they would make their new home somewhere

beyond it, and everyone was eager to get a peek over the top. The road through the forest was narrow, with remaining patches of snow here and there. Rocks jutted out randomly along the sides. Making their way ever higher, the little band reached the half way point by mid-day. After a light meal they continued on, hoping to crest the summit before nightfall. Hon rode on a donkey with Frederick, its reins firmly gripped in Rowan's muscular hand as he led the way.

"Soon, we'll see our new home, boys. What do you hope it will be like?"

Frederick blurted the first response.

"I hope it has lakes, and rivers, and lots of fish! I want to catch them, and cook up a mess for supper, every night!"

"Well then, I'm glad we brought you along," said Rowan, as he tousled his son's hair with a warm smile. "It sounds like the rest of us won't need to work at all!"

"Papa!" Frederick exclaimed. "I can't catch that many fish!"

"What about you, Hon? Do you have any dreams about this new home of ours?" Rowan asked.

"No. I just hope it's a safe place," he said.

"We'll do everything we can to make it a safe place," Rowan assured him. "From what I hear, it's a good land, and Lord Kendrick, who rules there, is a good lord. We should at least have a chance of building something good for ourselves."

They mounted the summit just as the sun was setting, its last direct rays stretching brightly across the valley below. At the far horizon, they could see the glistening waters of a large river that flowed into the valley from the northern mountains. Closer to them was a rich plain, dotted with clumps of trees. Rowan looked on the scene with wonder, thankful that such a rich land lay at their journey's end.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

Lord James Kendrick sat on his balcony in the cool spring evening with his wife and daughter, a fire crackling in the hearth inside the doorway. The sunset had been particularly stunning; pink, orange, and gray hues painting the entire sky. He breathed in the cool air, very content with his life. He turned to look at Patrice, snuggled beneath a shawl, with their daughter Camille. He could hear her telling the familiar stories of knights, and princesses, and fearsome beasts. His heart melted as he watched them. They were the joy of his life. Through her shawl, he noticed the swell of Patrice's belly. Before the end of summer, he would have to make room in his heart for another. He could not imagine a better life, and was thankful.

He looked down on the lights of the village just outside the castle walls. The gentle sounds of life were going on below. People cooked their meals, told the same stories of maidens, and beasts, and sang songs around their fires. Kendrick was happy to provide for them, happy that he'd been able to serve as their protector in a way that endeared them to him. The tone of things in his realm was very positive, and again, and he was thankful. Raising his head, his gaze was drawn to the low range of mountains known as "The Ridge." The craggy rocks at its summit stood black against the darkening sky. Beyond it lay the forest lands of Lord Thurmond.

He did not desire conflict with Lord Thurmond. He would much prefer them to be allies. But as soon as he considered the possibility, he knew it to be impossible. Men like Thurmond, bent on conquest, could not be trusted, even if they did make alliances. Kendrick's father had taught him

about such things, and he'd experienced his own hard learned lessons too.

A movement in the northern sky caught his attention. It was a large bird moving slowly. In the dimness of the evening sky he could not make it out exactly, but something about the creature was amiss. It flew with large, powerful strokes, seldom gliding, as birds of that size normally did. It was covering a large distance very quickly.

"Camille, Patrice... come, look at this bird! I've never seen its like before."

The two rose and hurried to his side, awed by the dark form as it drew closer. Kendrick enjoyed hearing their gasps as it grew larger in the sky. But the nearer it came, the more uneasy he felt. It was still quite a distance away, and still coming toward them, but its silhouette was much larger than any bird he'd seen before.

"Patrice, it's huge!" he exclaimed in a concerned tone.
"I've never seen anything like it."

Within a minute it was circling overhead, a black image against the now moon-lit sky. A long, graceful neck stretched forward like an arrow from a bow grip, and a tail of equal length trailed behind. From a massive body stretched broad, bat-like wings which produced a strong, whooshing sound. The creature was beautiful and fearsome at the same time. The excited laughter of his two ladies subsided as their wonder was replaced by uncertainty.

"I want both of you to go inside, now," Lord Kendrick said calmly. "I don't know what it is, but it may not be friendly."

"But Father, I want to watch!" Camille protested.

James Kendrick turned on his daughter with uncharacteristic sternness.

"Inside. Now."

He caught Patrice's attention as she turned Camille toward the door, giving her a look of warning. He turned

#### CHAPTER NINETEEN

back just in time to see the creature tuck its wings tightly to its side, hover momentarily in mid air, then dive straight toward the east tower above the main gate. Within seconds it was directly above the tower, it's wings spread to slow its descent. The creature lit gracefully atop the tower. Kendrick saw for the first time that a hooded figure was perched on the creature's shoulders, small against its massive girth. The creature stretched its wings wide, stood high upon its thick hind legs, and released a piercing screech that echoed over the village. The people scurried to safety like roaches, their fearful screams rising to meet Kendrick's ears.

The beast flapped its wings vigorously and shook its head from side to side wildly, as if it were displaying its magnificence for all to see. Then, unbelievably, it pulled back its head, and in a mighty forward thrust, released a torrent of flame that shot into the night sky, illuminating the top of the tower as if it were mid-day. In the momentary burst of light, Kendrick could see his newly placed flag, green with a red dragon, against the backdrop of the monster's scaly, red hide. The beast flung itself from the tower and dove toward the village. Kendrick watched as mayhem incarnate descended on the helpless people. He expected to see the huts burst into flame, but at the last moment the beast leveled its descent and skimmed the village, releasing a shriek as it glided across the rooftops. With four or five strokes of its great wings, it shot high into the sky, moving off in the direction from which it had come.

A whisper behind him caused Kendrick to turn. Patrice and Camille stood peeking around the corner of the doorway. He turned to them in frustration.

"I told you to go inside!"

"We are inside," Patrice insisted.

He rolled his eyes, knowing he should have expected as much. Camille exploded with excitement.

"That was a dragon, Father! A dragon! It blew fire right out of its mouth! How can it do that, father? I was so afraid! I thought it was going to turn around and eat you up, Father! I thought it was going to tear the castle to the ground and..."

"Slow down, Camille, slow down. You're right, it had to be a dragon. There's nothing else it could have been." he replied.

"I thought they were only legends," Patrice responded, "stories, like I was just telling Camille."

"After what I've just witnessed, I can tell you, none of the stories have ever done it justice. It was amazing!" he exclaimed.

Kendrick looked over the wall. Some of his men were already heading out to the village.

"James, why was it here? Why did it show itself like that and just leave?" Patrice asked.

Kendrick paused, realizing that they had not seen the passenger between the dragon's shoulders.

"Patrice," he said, trying to remain calm, "I... I don't know." He paused again, trying to direct his wife with his eyes. "Let's get in, out of the chill night air. We can talk about it more around the fire." With a soft lean of his head in Camille's direction he added, "After Camille is in bed." Patrice acknowledged his hint and began moving Camille toward the door.

"But I want to hear all about it, father... I want to know what you saw too!" Camille protested.

"And you shall my dear," Kendrick said, "tomorrow. Now it is time for bed."

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#### CHAPTER NINETEEN

An hour later, as Patrice walked into their bedroom, Lord Kendrick was just dismissing Rupert, commander of his troops. The soldier bowed his head respectfully at her entrance, then left the room. Patrice looked to her husband, deep concern written on her face.

"James, Camille can't stop talking about the dragon. It's like a fairy tale adventure to her, but I'm truly frightened! James, what did you see? What happened?"

He motioned to a bench covered in sheepskin.

"Sit down, Patrice. At first I couldn't believe what I'm about to tell you, but, Patrice, there was a rider astride the dragon's neck."

She stared back at him.

"How could a person... I don't believe it, James. Are you sure?"

"I find it hard to believe myself Patrice, and I'm the one who saw it!" he said, shaking his head. "But I saw someone very clearly, all the same. You know the line of sight from the balcony to the east tower, it's absolutely clear."

"But how could... for a person to ride such a beast... James, it's impossible!"

He laughed.

"Impossible or not, the rider was there, Patrice." He put his arm around her. "Rupert just reported that some in the village saw the same thing." His wife's eyes swelled with surprise. "And they had a much closer view than I did."

She sat for a moment, shocked at the facts she found so difficult to accept, then spun toward him.

"Did anyone get a good enough look to see who it was?"

He shook his head.

"A good look? Yes. But to no avail. The rider was bent close against the dragon's body and wore a sack over his head."

"A sack?"

"Holes cut for the eyes," Kendrick said, making a circular motion with his index finger, in front of his right eye. He rose and paced the room, considering. "Patrice, I'm as shocked about the dragon as anyone. To see the stuff of legend descending on my own castle; it was like a vision, a dream." He stood motionless, reliving the scene in his mind. "But what it did, or should I say what it didn't do... Patrice, I believe the entire thing was staged."

"What are you saying, James?"

"From the first moment I saw it in the northern sky, it flew a direct line toward us. Patrice, that rider brought the dragon to this castle. He came here for a reason."

"What possible reason could there be?" she asked.

"To frighten the people... to make the dragon's presence known... perhaps to intimidate us, I don't know, Patrice, but it was no accident, I'm sure of it," he answered.

Suddenly, the memory of the flag, waving against the backdrop of the dragon's hide flashed into his memory. He paused, struggling to make sense of something that was nudging him, in the back of his mind, something he felt he should recognize but could not. Then it came to him in a burst of clarity.

"Patrice! Do you remember when I made the decision to replace the bear with the dragon?"

"What?" she mumbled, still deep in thought.

"When I decided to change the image of the bear on our coat of arms with the image of the dragon, do you remember how you felt?"

The irritation on her face was instant.

"You know I do. I was opposed to it from the beginning."

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He sat down, moving close to her.

"And why were you opposed to it?"

"Because I thought Simon was up to something by even suggesting it, and..."

Lord Kendrick interrupted, placing a finger to her lips.

"My dear," he said, as her eyes grew wide, "you were right."

# CHAPTER TWENTY

As the servant stepped inside Lord Kendrick's study to announce him, Silas heard hushed, tense voices inside. They paused as the servant entered. There was whispering and shuffling of feet inside before he was admitted to the room. Upon entering, Lord Kendrick stood next to his desk where a parchment and quill pen lay. Kendrick pointed him to the chairs near the fireplace,

"Come in Simon! Won't you join me for a cup of wine?"

"Surely my lord, surely. Have I come at an inconvenient time?"

"No, not at all. In fact, I see it as quite a providential thing that you've come. I'm sure you've heard about the events of last week?"

"I did hear something in the village of a beast flying about, or some other such nonsense."

"Oh, it is anything but nonsense. I saw the dragon myself." Kendrick assured him. "I first noticed it far to the north and thought it a large eagle, but as it came closer, I realized it could not be. It was too large and had different mannerisms. Before my very eyes it lit on the east tower, right above the village and then swooped down as if to gobble up the whole of it in one bite. I tell you Simon, I've never seen anything like it!"

"That's quite a tale, my lord," Silas said. "If any other man had told me such, I would have thought he'd been at the bottle!"

"It does sound fantastic, I know, but true nonetheless. I've spent the past week trying to determine a course of action," Kendrick replied. "I'm amazed that it came and

went without doing any harm, but I can't afford to think that will always be the case."

"No, I suppose you can't," Silas answered. "But truly, what can you do regarding such a beast?"

"I honestly don't know," Kendrick said. "And though that's an important question, I am more concerned about the people's reaction. They must be terrified. And who knows what tales are going around?"

"I got a taste of the tales as I passed through the village, my lord," Silas said. "As outlandish as it will sound, there are some who believe that you are the beast's master."

Kendrick released a nervous laugh.

"Outlandish indeed! I don't believe any man could control such a creature."

Silas didn't hesitate.

"That's what I told them, but you know how fear and superstition can make commoners believe things that are unbelievable. But in this case, they at least have reason to think it. It did come to rest atop your castle. It scared the liver out of them, but it did no harm at all. No harm, my lord! The common people see that as a sign. I heard one man claim that he saw you standing atop the very tower where the beast lit!"

Kendrick scoffed.

"I was on the upper balcony of the central tower, nowhere near the beast..."

"You see!" Silas interjected. "The truth is already twisted into gossip. Before the week is out you'll be a mighty dragon wizard, feared by all the people."

"That is exactly the trouble, Simon. I don't want them to fear me, I want them to trust me."

Silas hesitated. If he pushed too hard Kendrick would balk, He could feel it.

# **CHAPTER TWENTY**

"Yes, as you should, my lord. So you have an idea of what to do, then?"

Kendrick was quick to respond.

"Perhaps. The thought that continues to come to my mind is that I should be proactive with the people, to speak to them openly and honestly about the events of last week, so that they know the truth."

"I wonder if that would be prudent, my lord," Silas cautioned. "What of your new, dragon-clad standard? How would you explain the change there? Coincidence? We both know it was a calculated attempt to take subtle advantage of the rumors that were circulating. But now that all know the dragon to be real, well, it puts you in a tenuous position. If you are so forthright regarding what happened that night you may raise questions about your integrity that are not easily explained to the common people."

"Hmmm," Kendrick thought. "I had not thought of that. I wish I hadn't resorted to such a ploy in the first place. My father always said that once a man's integrity is compromised, it is not easily rebuilt. I can see now what he meant."

"Oh, my lord, there's no need to go that far," Silas objected. "You are a man of impeccable character. Any of your subjects would eagerly say so. This is only a small misstep, a - a - a step into the mud that simply needs to be scraped from your boots, nothing more."

"Perhaps you are right, Simon."

A noise at the door drew their attention. Lady Patrice stood just inside the room, a thick, dark braid hanging to her waist over her right shoulder. Silas thought it quite striking against her lavender gown. He immediately noticed she was with child.

"Ahhh... my lady. Lovely as ever I see! And glowing with the radiance of new life." he gushed.

She glanced at him, warily.

"Simon."

"Come in, my love. We were just talking about the events of last week," Kendrick said. "Simon was telling me how the villagers are concocting all sorts of tales."

"I'm sure they are," Lady Patrice responded. "And you can't blame them. I dare say no one in this room has beheld a dragon before last week," she glanced at Silas. "So why should we think it any different for the people? The beast is the sort of creature legends are made of. For one to appear in real life is a staggering event that has left us all in shock."

"Well spoken my dear. It is embarrassing to report, but some of the tales that are being told are quite outlandish. It seems I'm being portrayed as some sort of dragon lord. Can you imagine?"

"I wonder who gave them that idea?" Patrice responded, with an upraised eyebrow aimed in Silas's direction.

"My lady," Silas began, "you can rest assured that I have never spoken such a thing, except in repeating the outlandish tales of others to your husband just a moment ago."

"Why does that not assure me?" she responded.

"You know how I trust your counsel, and you know the people too."

She sighed.

"It is clear to me, James. You have always been as open with the people as you can be. You should do no less now."

"Do you hear, Simon? It appears you are outnumbered."

"Oh?" said Patrice. "And what counsel did the calculating cook give this time?"

Kendrick spoke before Silas could answer.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

"My dear, he was concerned that such a forthright response, along with my use of the new dragon standard, would raise doubts in the mind of the people."

"Oh? Do explain," Patrice quipped.

"Well, my dear," Kendrick stammered, "the use of the dragon on my flag could imply that I am in control of the beast. And I did start using it before the beast appeared. To come right out and explain that I am not a dragon lord could lead the people to think I was using the dragon emblem to intentionally take advantage of rumors to that effect."

She swung around to face Kendrick directly. "Were you?"

Silas wanted to laugh out loud. Instead he took it as an opportunity to win more favor with Lord Kendrick by relieving the tension.

"My lord. My lady. I believe I have been misunderstood. Could I perhaps have the opportunity to clarify further, over dinner tonight?"

Patrice glared at Kendrick, then at Silas. He found it humorous that Kendrick seemed to be in as much trouble as he was.

"I believe that is a splendid idea, Simon," Kendrick said as he reached for the bell.

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After the servant girl left to escort Silas to his room, Patrice turned to her husband.

"It is so hard James, with what we know."

"'Hard' is an understatement, love. I want to rip him in two for his treachery. But we need to know if he is up to more than what we see. Is he devising a way to usurp us, or trying to foment a revolt? Is he trying to destroy our

reputation with the people? If so, to what end? Patrice, the longer we bait him along, the better an idea we'll have."

"But I grow weary of waiting, James. I feel we need to be done with him before something terrible happens."

"Is there something specific you suspect?" he asked.

"Well, no," she stammered. "I am fearful, like Camille used to be fearful of the dark. I know I'm acting like a silly girl, James, but we must do something to end this, soon. Call it intuition, but I feel a dread in my soul."

Lord Kendrick had learned that Patrice's intuition was more than riled up emotion. She seemed to have a sense about such things.

"Patrice, I trust your intuition. It has served us well. Let's think on it the rest of the day. This evening we will set our course. Perhaps something in our dinner conversation with Simon will reveal the way ahead."

Lady Patrice exhaled, obviously relieved.

"Good. I hope we can find a reason to cast him out of the realm for good. I don't want him near Camille a second longer than necessary."

"I am in agreement, entirely. We know now that Simon is clearly a deceiver. He cannot be trusted with her. We will resolve the issue tonight, then. But let us turn to more pleasant things. I believe you have something special planned for Camille's birthday? A high tea, I understand?"

Patrice lit up.

"Yes James, I have it all planned! Mother's fine tea set and our best lace, candles... oh James, I hope she likes it! I want it to be her most special birthday yet!

"How could she not enjoy it?" he encouraged. "She will be with you."

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# **CHAPTER TWENTY**

Upon leaving the study, Silas had followed a hunch. It was entirely believable that he could find his way to his room on his own, so he dismissed the servant girl. Once she was gone, he retraced his steps to the study and listened in on the continuing conversation. As he had suspected, something was not right, and now he knew.

Outwitted at my own game, he grumbled to himself. And by a couple of self-serving royals! I was careless. But not as careless as they have just been. I will strike them where it hurts most.

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A knock sounded on the study door.

"Come," Kendrick's voice answered from within. Silas stepped inside the door and shut it behind him.

"Simon," Kendrick said. "I did not expect to see you until dinner. I must apologize for Patrice's merciless badgering. She is not one to trust easily, and she's become even more so, expecting our second child. You understand, I'm sure."

"Think no more about it," Silas replied. "My lord, I wondered if we might speak further about the dragon standard, *before* the evening meal?"

"Of course, but I warn you that I am in full agreement with Patrice on the matter. I do not think you will be able to persuade me."

"I understand, my lord, but I ask you to stop for a moment and think a bit further of what is at stake." He stepped closer as he spoke. "The people need to see strength in you. They need to see you as the source of their protection and comfort. If you were to admit to them that this dragon is outside your control, fear may overtake them. They may flee your lands, or worse yet, revolt against you.

You cannot afford that, my lord. You cannot take that chance."

Silas stopped to observe how his words were being taken, and took a step forward. Kendrick was thoughtful, his eyes cast upward. He waited to speak, longer than Silas had come to expect.

"I know that some of what you say is true, Simon. The people are afraid, and they do need security. But I don't know that putting myself forward as a dragon lord, or remaining silent, would serve that purpose. What happens when the dragon returns in a less friendly mood? What then? It would be clear at that point, that I am not in control of it."

"Unless, my lord," Silas replied, taking another casual step forward, "you were able to turn that too, to your advantage."

"What do you mean?" Kendrick asked, his brow suddenly serious.

"In such a case, you could play to the superstitions of the people. Suggest that those who died were somehow unworthy of the realm."

Kendrick remained serious.

"And what if the attack is on this castle? What then?" he retorted. "It sounds to me that you are suggesting I abuse the trust that I have been given, by lying to the people for my own gain?"

"No my lord, I..."

"That is exactly what you are suggesting," Kendrick interrupted, taking a step toward Silas.

"My lord, may I explain..."

"You have said quite enough Simon," Kendrick said as he took the old man by the front of his cloak. "Patrice was right all the..."

The cold steel of Silas's wide blade sank awkwardly between two ribs in Lord Kendrick's side. He had not

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expected Kendrick to grab him, so his thrust went wide of its mark. Kendrick lashed out instinctively, the back of his hand smashing Silas across the cheek. Enraged and unphased, Silas pressed forward, slashing wildly. Lord Kendrick stumbled backward, the desk catching him in the back of his right thigh. His left hand clasped his bleeding side, while his right grasped wildly at the desk. Silas moved in for the final blow, but Kendrick swung the inkwell from the desk in a wide arc, making solid contact with Silas's temple. The blow rocked him sideways, but Kendrick was not able to take advantage. The momentum of his swing caused him to crash to the floor.

Hearing voices out the window, Silas was reminded of his greater goal and chose to retreat. He moved for the door, leaving Lord Kendrick gasping for breath in a pool of his own blood.

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Trotting his horse toward the south gate, Silas found what he was looking for. Camille's nurse maid was sitting on a stone bench, at the entrance to the rose garden. He knew Camille must be close at hand. Looking behind him for signs of pursuit, and seeing none, he turned his horse toward the gate.

"Ah, there you are," he laughed. "Lord Kendrick said you might be out here."

The maid rose, and Camille popped her head up from behind a bush full of yellow buds.

"Simon! I didn't know you were here."

"Just for a little while, my mouse. I came especially for your birthday! And *for* your birthday your father says I am allowed to take you for a ride in the countryside. How does that sound?"

"Really? He said so? I'd love to go!" She looked to her nurse, who looked to Silas curiously.

"Truly, I just left him," Silas said to the nurse. "We can go verify it with him if you like, I don't mind."

"No, it's fine," the nurse assented. "Just have her back within the hour. She is to join her mother for a special surprise."

Camille grinned and bounded toward him. He helped her up behind him and started off at a trot. He could feel her innocent enthusiasm as she pressed her cheek into his back and gripped him around the chest. He turned his horse out the south gate and was soon galloping across the countryside toward Crystal Lake.

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Lady Patrice read in her sitting room, awaiting her daughter's arrival. She had planned a lovely tea for the two of them, with the help of her lady in waiting, Madeline. Camille's favorite yellow roses were adorning the table, and the best lace had been spread. The candle light reflected on her mother's finest tea set, handed down over four generations. All she needed was the guest of honor.

"Madeline, could you come in here?" Her lady in waiting entered from the bedroom. "Would you be a dear and see if you can find Camille? I'm sure she's out on some birthday adventure, but I fear our tea will get cold and spoil the fun."

"Happy to do it, m 'lady," Madeline replied.

Patrice's hands moved to her stomach; six months pregnant and showing clearly. She wondered if Camille would have a brother or a sister, and what the name should be. She hoped for a boy. It would mean the world to James to have a son. She could already see them rollicking down the hallway, or sword fighting with sticks in the courtyard.

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James was just the kind of man every boy should have for a father. Her thoughts wandered far and wide as she waited, but were soon interrupted by Madeline's return. Her maid's face was white.

"Madeline, what is it? Where is Camille?"

"I did not have time to find her milady. Lord Kendrick, he's been injured."

Patrice hurried after Madeline to the study, where the physician was already at work. Her husband lay in a pool of blood, his face pale, but alert.

"James, James what happened?"

"I will be fine my love. It, ouww... it was Simon," he said, wincing from the pain of the doctor's treatment.

"My lady, please stand away," the physician pleaded.
"I must finish my work."

Lord Kendrick nodded to her, smiling through gritted teeth. As the seconds passed, her mind raced, wondering what could have happened. Suddenly, she spun around, in a panic.

"Madeline, go find Camille. Hurry!"

When the physician had completed his work, her husband was helped to his feet. His tunic had been removed and white linen was wrapped around his midsection. The wound was deep, but had missed puncturing Kendrick's lung by only an inch. He smiled as Patrice rushed to him.

"Simon must have known we were on to him, so he made the first move," he volunteered. "He came here, encouraging me to deceive the people even more, to use their fear of the dragon to suppress them, to dominate them. Your words of warning echoed in my ears, and it was all I could stand. I moved to confront him. When I grabbed him by the cloak, he stabbed me. I didn't expect much resistance from one such as him, nor did I expect him to be so quick."

Patrice's fears took flight.

"James, Camille did not come to her birthday tea! At first I thought nothing of it, a childish distraction perhaps, but now... oh, James we must find her!"

"When the servant first discovered me I told him to alert the guards to find Simon. He cannot be far away. If Camille is with him, then she will be found when we find him. If she is not with him, she is already safe within these walls."

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The horse charged around the southern edge of Crystal Lake, barreling across the main road and into the trees reaching out from the foot of The Ridge. From there, the animal trudged silently up the mountainside, familiar with the wild terrain. On its back were two riders, one a man, cloaked and hooded, the other a young girl, clearly enjoying the wild romp, her coal black hair streaming behind her in the wind. Upon reaching the summit of the first rocky rise, Silas turned to look at Kendrick's castle far beyond the lake.

"Look how small it is," Camille beamed. "How far do you think we've come?"

Giving no reply, Silas turned the horse and pushed deeper into the woods. Upon coming to a stream, he walked the horse alongside it for a moment, then eased into the water. For miles they rode the center of the stream until they reached a large boulder that sloped gently into the edge of the water. Exiting there, Silas stayed to the rocks, moving even higher up The Ridge. He blazed a path across the enormous stones, leaving no trail. Within an hour, the two were high above the trees. He followed the eastern side of The Ridge toward the wild, north country.

"I'm going to be late for my surprise," Camille said with sudden recognition. "I think we should go back now." Silas laughed, and continued on.

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Camille's nurse confirmed that Simon was to blame for her disappearance, and the search began in earnest. The trail skirting the lake was soon discovered and followed, all the way to the top of the first rise on The Ridge, but once in the highlands, it vanished. Lord Kendrick joined his scouts as they scoured The Ridge, but no further sign was ever found. Days passed, and then weeks. Lady Patrice was consumed by grief, blaming herself for not insisting that something be done about the old man sooner. Lord Kendrick tried valiantly to comfort her, taking the responsibility on himself, but she was inconsolable. Guilt and regret weighed on her more each passing day, suffocating hope and fueling anger.

The once unflappable Lord Kendrick became a man obsessed. He was determined to soothe the heart of his wife through finding their daughter, and making Simon pay for his treachery. Reward notices were posted in every town across the realm. Regular patrols traveled the roads and frequented even the smallest villages, always on alert for any sign or word of Camille. But none came.

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The "little band" settled near the great river that split the valley, known as the Rillebrand. They began their settlement in a set-back, near a grove of large elms growing along the water. It was a fertile place for those who wanted to raise crops, and the river and nearby woods provided additional means of support. It was also a good stopping point for those who traveled the river as traders. Still, it was enough out of the way to draw only scant attention. It was a good place, an ideal place. Everyone agreed to call their home "Newtown."

Abigail loved the spot. With the help of Rowan and Hampton, a small cottage was built for her, Victoria, and Hon. As she worked hard to make their little house a home, she became particularly burdened for Hon. The losses and pain he'd been through reminded her of her own losses, and the long journey she had walked in trying to overcome them. Every experience had shaped her, made her who she was, and she knew it would have to be the same for Hon.

As Newtown thrived, Hon seemed to thrive also, but Abigail knew it was only an appearance. At first he was quiet and unsure of himself, which made it difficult for him to form friendships. Were it not for Victoria, he would have had no friends at all. But as the months passed, his wounded heart made itself evident in a variety of subtle ways. Hon's inner turmoil affected Victoria the most. Often, in the midst of their play, he would snap at her, or harshly criticize her girlish ways. Such conflicts left her in tears and him in a flood of guilt. As months passed, Hon became self-protective. It was not uncommon for him to lash out verbally when he didn't get his way, accusing Victoria of

cheating or being unfair. Abigail tried to help them be at peace with one another, but Hon accused her of playing favorites. It seemed that every effort turned back on her, and made the rift between him and Victoria even wider.

For Abigail, it was excruciating to watch Hon's struggle, especially when she felt uncertain how to best help him. He was a boy, so much unlike her Victoria. He had become moody and stubborn, and unresponsive to her tenderness. But she pressed on, doing the best she could. Each night around the fire she sang songs to Hon and Vicki, and quoted from the scriptures, but nothing seemed to touch Hon's troubled heart. In addition to it all, his nightmares continued.

As Hon grew older, the nightmares became less frequent, for which Abigail was thankful. But with their retreat came a new menace; anger. Abigail never would have thought the dear boy she'd brought from Lord Thurmond's estate would be capable of such hostility, but as he grew into a young man his temper grew as well. He became aggressive, even cruel at times. More than once Abigail was approached by concerned parents whose children had felt the sting of Hon's tongue. Some children even claimed Hon had struck them in a fit of rage. Abigail believed them. Hon had even raised his hand to her. She didn't know what to do, yet knew she must do something.

She decided to seek counsel. One evening, when Hon was hunting with Rowan's son, Frederick, Abigail invited some friends to her little hut. Rowan and Julia, Hampton, Leechy and Margaret, and Preston and Alise all accepted her invitation.

"I'm grateful for your coming," Abigail began. "I don't know where to begin, really. You all must know the terrible time I've been having with Hon. He's a handful, and..." she began to cry, "I don't know what to do. Life has dealt Hon many painful blows, you all know that. I've tried to provide

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him the love and security that every child needs, but he continues to spin away from me. He is unruly, resistant to my authority, and has become more and more insolent. I have lost track of the number of times his harshness has sent my Vicki from the room in tears. The conflicts are more and more frequent, and I fear we are losing him."

Silence hung over the room as she cried. Hampton moved to her side.

"He's a wild cur," Leechy began. "We can all see that." Margaret elbowed him. "It's no fault of yours Miss Abigail, please don't hear me saying that! The boy's got something churning on the inside, such that he don't know what to do with it. It's natural. I seen soldiers do the same thing once they been stuck with a sword the first few times. They get jittery and unpredictable. Some get violent, others freeze up. The boy is in the same boat. I know, 'cause I lost my folks when I was just shy of nine years. I was raised by my sainted grandmother. The poor woman. I delivered her hell in a hand basket most every day of my growing up years."

"How did you get past it?" Abigail pleaded.

"He hasn't!" Margaret volunteered. Everyone laughed as Leechy resumed.

"Part of it was seeing the pain I was causing others." Leechy scratched his head., "'Course that didn't matter to me a bit at first, 'cause I was young. But as I growed up, it began to matter. And I didn't get there fast, by no means! But what truly helped me was a man who come across my path. He took an interest in me, put me to work helping him with sundry things; odd jobs at first, things he showed me how to do. Fixing things, organizing, that kind of thing. Eventually, he started teaching me about herbs and remedies. It was nothing more than an interesting subject to him, but it grabbed hold of me. To know how to heal a man

instead of hurt him, that did something good on my insides."

"Maybe that's what Hon needs," Preston added.
"Something more than play, and chores around the house.
He needs to expand his world a bit more, learn what it's like to get out and do something important, start learning how to be a man."

"I'm sure that will be helpful," Abigail agreed. "The good Lord knows I don't know anything about being a man." The group laughed. "But doesn't he still need to deal with the turmoil inside? I fear he could get so busy with responsibilities that he doesn't have time to think of what's going on deep down, and all the while the wound would continue to grow."

Julia spoke up, tears in her eyes.

"The poor boy! Losing his parents and an adopted father all in a year's time, and in such horrendous ways!"

"That's exactly what I'm trying to be mindful of Julia," Abigail interjected. "He's been hurt terribly, and I want to be, well, considerate of that fact. But his behavior is not something I can tolerate. He's becoming *so* hurtful, to Vicki and to me. We want to love him, because he needs love, and because the Lord has commanded us to love the unlovely, as He does. But Hon's not making it very easy, and we're becoming weary."

Rowan spoke.

"He does need a tender hand, which you've been trying to provide Abigail. But he needs something in addition to that to help him see that he, himself, is more than his hurts."

"Agreed," Hampton said, blowing an unruly lock of hair from his eyes. "When I was a boy, younger than our young friend is now, I wasn't one to be out roughhousing with the others my age. Small, I was, and sickly for a time. But my father, and I don't mean to boast, you must know

# **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

that as I say this, my father noticed that I had intellect, and he nurtured it. He arranged for me to be apprenticed to the steward in the Senior Lord Thurmond's house, and you all know how that path directed the course of my later years."

"So what does Hon need?" Alise asked.

"I've been considering something lately," Rowan said. "Not really for the sake of Hon, but I think it might be a good fit for him. Until we moved to Newtown, my life was spent defending other men's property and interests. Now that we're out here on our own, I've been wondering what purpose all that time in arms really served. I think I'm coming to see at least part of the answer a bit more clearly. We are a peaceful group, and want to remain so. But in time, others will come who are not so peaceful. We need to be ready when that day comes. I believe I should begin teaching the men the use of weapons, and the self-discipline it takes to be responsible with them. They are skills that are useful to any man, but especially to a group like ours that is newly planted, and thus, vulnerable. If we can encourage Hon to take part, it may serve him well. Some of his pent up aggression could be channeled into a better path and he'd have the opportunity to get alongside some men to do something that matters. And, if he is coming home of the evening tired from weapons drills, he will have less energy for making mischief once he gets there."

"And perhaps his exhaustion will make him more prone to let out the things he's holding inside, " Julia interjected.

"It's a great idea, and I'm all for helping you with it," Preston piped in. "It would enable me to make sure I don't get too rusty with a sword myself."

"I was thinking to ask you," Rowan replied. "I'm glad for your eagerness."

Abigail listened as the group chatted on excitedly about the possible outcomes of Rowan's idea, and her tears

resumed. In time the talk quieted down and Hampton put a hand on her shoulder.

"Dear lady, what is it?" he asked.

She put her hand over his.

"I'm just thankful. These six years since we left the manor haven't been easy on any of us. You've all had your own struggles, but have continued to care for me and Vicki... and Hon, in spite of your own difficulties." She struggled to compose herself. "You've been like Jesus to me, in flesh and blood, and I'm grateful." She smiled up at them as she wiped her eyes. "And I'm hopeful," she sighed. "For the first time in a long time, I'm hopeful about Hon."

"We are more than a village," Alise said. "We are friends. We've proven that we can stick together to establish our town, but things like this are even more important. Hon is one of us, and we all have to come alongside him, Abigail. I think we've all wanted to be of help to you, and to him, but haven't known how to go about it. Thank you for inviting us in."

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Hon stood with Rowan's son, Frederick, as a small group milled about on the slope between the town and the river. There were old, young, and everything in between. The two of them were thirteen years old and bursting with energy. It was the prospect of learning swordplay that had drawn Hon; he imagined himself a knight, or a soldier, like Rowan, someday. He was eager to have a sword in his hand. With it, he felt he could do something with the anger that Abigail had brought to his attention so many times. It burned in his chest, relentless and powerful.

"I am glad you are all here!" Rowan's voice called out.
"There is not a lot to say, other than this: Preston and I challenge you men to join us in preparing a defense for our

# **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

little town. We are a blessed lot. These six years since we came over The Ridge, we have not had reason to defend ourselves. To be honest, I am embarrassed I did not think of the need earlier, but I am thankful that the hand of Providence has given us the mercy of peace. But now, the need for defense stirs in me, and I believe *that* is the hand of Providence, guiding us to prepare. It would be foolishness itself to imagine that life will continue on as it has. We all know that change comes. Hardship comes. Sometimes violence comes. But we are not condemned to lives of helplessness before the winds of change. We can prepare for it, and it is our responsibility to do so.

"The first thing I want us to be clear about is the reason behind our defense of Newtown. Our actions today are not born out of a desire to keep our little town to ourselves. Each of you know that. There are some of you here today, who have joined us since the time we original settlers came over The Ridge. You know our hospitality is warm toward those who come to make a contribution and be a blessing. But people will come one day who are not so inclined. They will come for greed and for gain, without concern for the people of this town. They will come to exploit what we have worked so hard to build."

Rowan paused as Victoria and Abigail walked up to the back of the group. He motioned Victoria forward. The fourteen year old girl strode to the front of the group, demure but confident, her long, auburn hair trailing down her back. Hon was surprised to see her. He craned his neck to watch as she moved to the front of the group.

"I have asked Victoria to assist me in driving home a point. She is a fair maid, yes?" Rowan asked.

Hon looked around as murmurs of agreement came from the crowd. A strange feeling stirred in his stomach.

"She is one of us," Rowan continued, "and has been from the beginning. She represents all that is good and fair

about our little town. She is confident, strong in her own way, and pure, but at the same time, vulnerable. Could she stand against a ruffian who might come among us, a man with no morals? What could she do to protect herself?"

Rowan paused and looked around the group, then jerked Victoria in front of him. In a flash, the glimmering blade of his dagger was pressed against her tender throat. Instinctively, Hon pushed a few steps through the crowd, anger burning up the sides of his neck. Rowan stood for a moment silently, his eyes darting from face to face. He locked eyes with Hon.

"Do you fear I will do her harm? Do you?" he shouted.

The tension mounted as men looked from one to another, uncertain what to do. Slowly, Rowan lowered the dagger and released his grip on Victoria's arm. Relief swept over the gathering. Rowan put his arm around Victoria's shoulders and gave her a hug.

"The very possibility of Victoria coming to harm has provoked you, and it should. That is the spirit behind what we do here today. Your love for Victoria, your care for her welfare and that of others like her, it provokes a manly courage in you that is right and true." Rowan looked at Hon. "In some of you the blood still boils, even though you see now that my aggression toward Victoria was play acting. It is *that* anger, an anger toward wrong and injustice that motivates defense. It is not about glory or gallantry. Those who take up the sword cannot be filled with boyish longing to be lauded as heroes. That is an outcome that only exists in fireside tales.

Here is the hard truth, and the cost you must be willing to bear: those brave enough to take up arms are often misunderstood and maligned because they must do the most horrid thing imaginable, they take the lives of other men. Make no mistake. If you dare stand to defend the folk of our little town, you will one day have to take

# **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

another man's life. But it is the price men must pay to defend the defenseless and protect those they love.

"I ask you men, gather up your courage for the sake of Victoria, and Abigail, and Alise, and the many other women and children among us who are unable to protect themselves. Preston and I will train you to take up arms rightly, not only with skill, but with a right mindset to guide it. We will give you the tools that will enable the manly courage that rose in your chest a moment ago to take action when needed. Men, you are important to this village, every one of you. If you are willing, stay with us now and we will discuss how we intend to proceed. If you do not feel the desire to be here, you are free to go, and no shame is upon you."

Hon knew he would stay. But first, he wanted to see Victoria. Though her peril had been contrived, he was strangely compelled to make sure she was alright. He was already making his way through the crowd to where Victoria and Abigail stood talking with Hampton. Victoria glanced toward him as he approached, and he thought he perceived a flush in her cheeks before she looked back to Hampton.

"Quite a drama," Hampton was saying. "But powerfully effective. My heart almost burst even though I knew it to be a sham from the outset. My pomegranate," he said, touching Victoria's cheek, "your pseudo peril provoked this old heart, no doubt."

"Yes, I'm sure," said Abigail, noticing Hon's approach. "Hon, what did you think of Victoria's performance?"

"Great," he stammered. "I mean, well, it made the point, that's for sure. I didn't know what to think, or what to do."

Victoria raised her eyes to his. "What did you want to do?" Hon hesitated, flustered.

"I don't know. But I wanted to do something," he looked away embarrassed. "But it was an awful trick to play on your friends."

An awkward silence fell until Abigail spoke up.

"I think Rowan is beginning Hon, do you mean to join them?"

"Yes, I do. I should go," he stammered. He ran to join the group.

Training under Rowan was grueling. It was the most difficult thing Hon had done in his life, but he wasn't going to quit, no matter how hard it got. It required self-discipline and willingness to subject himself to the pain of physical endurance. Both of those things were foreign to him, but he pressed on. At first he resented the training, feeling that Rowan was pushing them too hard. But a memory of Rowan's knife pressed against Victoria's neck was all it took to remind him of the importance of what he was doing. As he learned, encouragement came. He discovered natural ability flowing out of him, especially with the sword and bow. He was outshooting many of the men within weeks.

He could feel the gaze of Rowan's watchful eye. He was always there, watching, giving caution and instruction, evaluating every move Hon made. Hon knew that he should be grateful, but deep down he felt restricted more than helped. Rowan was still clearly the teacher and he the student, but he chafed under the arrangement the more his skill grew. As time passed, Hon rose in prominence among the other boys and even began to hold sway over the young men in the village. His proficiency at arms was a fact to be reckoned with, and he liked the feeling. He took full advantage of it, impressing his will on those who were younger or weaker. Before long, he had created an unspoken pecking order with himself at the top.

When his sixteenth birthday was a week away, Hon arrived at Rowan's afternoon training session especially confident. He was eager to be done for the day so he could get on to the evening's activities. The town had developed the custom of celebrating the sixteenth birthday of every

young man or woman publicly, as a recognition of their transition from childhood to adulthood. That night, Hon was to be celebrated, and he was looking forward to it. He felt himself an adult already, able to take on any challenge manhood might bring.

"Everyone come around," Rowan called to the group.
"I have a demonstration for you today that is of vital importance. I will need a volunteer." Many hands shot up, Hon's among them. "Be careful before you raise your hand. This demonstration consists of a contest between myself and one volunteer, where nothing will be held in reserve. Though we will be using our wooden training swords, we will be fighting as if our lives are at stake. I want you to see the intensity and danger of an actual battle situation, one you may be in one day."

Hon had not lowered his hand as many had. Hearing Rowans words caused his heart to surge with a rush of adrenaline. This was what he'd been waiting for.

"I will do it," he called. The boys around him murmured their approval.

Rowan shot a grin at Preston, then acknowledged Hon.

"You think yourself up to the challenge?"

He looked around at the smiles of his boyish followers and replied, "I *know* I am up to the challenge."

His friends hooted and cheered as he made his way forward. At Rowan's feet lay two sets of armor; mail shirts, leather vambraces to cover the forearms, heavy leather gauntlets, and rounded metal helmets. Hon recognized them as belonging to Rowan and Preston from their days in Lord Thurmond's service. He stood before Rowan, looking over the assortment before Rowan caught his eye.

"If you believe yourself ready," the teacher said with a crooked smile, "you may choose first, young man."

Hon flashed a cocky smile and reached for the armor nearest him. Once he and Rowan were properly outfitted, Rowan gave the instructions.

"Today will be different from anything you've experienced in your training thus far. I promise you that. We will both have to be fully alert and on guard. Nothing will be held back."

"I understand," Hon blurted. "I am ready."

"The rest of you make a wide circle, 40 feet across or so, "Rowan barked. "And give way to the fighters if we come too close. We do not want you being injured accidentally."

The circle formed and the fighters met in the center, each with his sword held ready.

"You are ready?" Rowan asked, peering through the slit in his helmet.

"I am," Hon's voice rang boldly.

"Then we begin," Rowan said.

Hon began a slow circle to his left, assessing the situation. Rowan responded to every move, keeping the distance between them. Hon had seen Rowan fight many times, and knew him to be the most capable swordsman on the field. He would have to be careful. Rowan was waiting patiently for him to make the first move.

Hon thrust forward, bringing the tip of his sword over in a high arc and down toward Rowan's right shoulder. The more experienced man easily parried the move and returned with a quick, hard beat to the middle of Hon's sword as he withdrew it. As Hon pulled back to prepare for his next attack, he was not ready as Rowan immediately lunged at him. He raised his sword in a quick defense. Rowan brought a powerful blow down, the force of it driving Hon's sword back across his own chest. He felt the thump of Rowan's "blade" as it struck him across the chest and shoulder, partly deflected by his own sword. Rowan did not

relent, continuing his attack viciously. Hon was barely able to counter the numerous blows before he escaped the onslaught and retreated to catch his breath.

"I said we would hold nothing back," Rowan puffed, in a stern voice. "Did you not believe me?"

Hon answered with a violent attack of his own. attempting to take advantage of Rowan's momentary distraction. He feverishly hacked at his teacher, angry that he'd been embarrassed in front of the entire group. But every blow was countered, his sword knocked harmlessly aside again and again. Frustrated at his failed attempts he chose another tactic. He fell back, feigning fatigue. As he hoped, Rowan moved forward to take advantage of his retreat. With Rowan's first strike, which he blocked, Hon pretended to lose his footing and allowed himself to fall to one knee. As Rowan stepped forward, Hon planted his left hand firmly on the ground, and using all his strength, flung his legs around in a wide sweep. His right foot made contact with Rowan's forward leg, knocking him off balance as he was about to deliver a killing blow. Following his own momentum Hon rolled once and pushed quickly to his feet, advancing immediately on Rowan as he struggled to keep from falling.

Hon delivered a slice from right to left, chopping down toward Rowan's exposed left side. Just in time, Rowan regained his balance, and instead of attempting to block the attack, moved into it. The entire weight of the older man's body crashed into Hon. As they collided, Hon's blow fell harmlessly behind Rowan. The older man came around with his right hand, delivering a powerful stroke with the pommel of his sword to the side of Hon's helmet. The loud clang of metal on metal, combined with the force of the blow, rattled Hon's brain as Rowan continued his attack. A punch to the chest, an elbow to the face, a knee to the midsection, strike after strike came until Hon was

breathless, disoriented, and collapsing painfully to the ground. Rowan stomped across the wrist of his sword hand, forcing his grip open. He flicked Hon's sword away with the tip of his own and put the full weight of his other boot across Hon's cheek, the point of his sword indenting Hon's neck just to the right of his Adam's apple. Stretched out like a tanner's hide, Hon felt helpless, as he had so long ago, lying on the forest floor as a boy.

Rowan released him and stepped away. Hon rolled to his side, gasping for breath.

"You are a dead man," Rowan said coldly. "And your village has one less defender."

As Rowan moved away, the circle of onlookers collapsed around Hon, who was struggling to rise from a pool of embarrassment he could not escape. He had been beaten, soundly, and he could not deny it.

"Everyone take a seat," Rowan huffed.

The group did as they were told, a hushed reverence coming over them as their teacher spoke. Rowan fell to the ground next to Hon, still breathing heavily.

"Any of you, what did you see from the outside?"

Hon looked around the group. All eyes seemed hesitant to meet his. He wondered what they would say. After a short silence a young boy spoke up.

"I thought it would last longer."

Murmurs of agreement, mixed with chuckles, echoed across the group.

"What you saw is the way battle is, most of the time," Rowan replied. "Each attack and each defensive response takes its toll. Fatigue sets in quickly. You not only face the danger of your opponent's sword, you also face the danger that your own body will become too weak to defend. Then you are vulnerable. Look," he said, holding his hands out straight. "My hands are still shaking. That is one reason I have been pushing you so hard day after day. You need to

be able to physically outlast your opponent. It could be the only thing that keeps you alive. What else did you see?"

"As I watched with the eyes of experience," Preston added, "I felt that Hon began with too much confidence."

Hon glared at him.

"Hon, you are right to have confidence in your abilities, but you cannot become overconfident. When you do, you will underestimate your opponent every time. You may not think so, but that is what you did. You thought Rowan your equal, when he is actually superior to you on the field. You have skill, but he has both skill and experience. Overconfidence is self-deception, and it will get you killed."

Hon understood what Preston was saying, but didn't like to hear it, especially in front of the entire group. Another boy piped up.

"It weren't a fair fight!"

Laughter followed.

"Really?" Rowan asked. "How so?"

"You punched and kicked, 'stead of sticking to yer sword!" the boy answered.

The crowd laughed again.

"I understand, but consider this," Rowan explained.

"Once you make the decision to step into a fight, you are in it to win, and life is the prize. Is there anything more precious?" Around the circle many heads shook. "Are you going to let yourself be governed by a neat set of made up rules when such a priceless thing is at stake? The only rule that need concern you is that a heart that does not beat belongs to a man who does not live. You do everything you can to preserve your own life! If you do not," Rowan paused and looked from face to face, "you will die."

On that somber note, the circle became quiet as each one counted the cost. Hon sat thinking of what Rowan had said

"But it wasn't fair in another way," Hon mumbled.

"How is that?" Rowan asked.

"You are bigger and stronger. We weren't evenly matched."

"Ah," Rowan said thoughtfully. "I could equally say of you, 'You are younger, quicker, more agile.' But do such differences receive much consideration when the need to fight is forced upon us?"

He rose and took a few steps toward the village, extending his arm.

"When ruffians come to ravage Newtown, do you think they will kindly ask us to line up so they can match each of the townsfolk with an opponent of their own size and ability?" The group laughed. "I don't mean to make light of what you are feeling Hon, but you need to know the reality of it. It is not only possible that you will face an opponent bigger and stronger than you, it is likely. Men who take to aggression usually *are* stronger and meaner than those who remain peaceful. They take advantage of their natural abilities, at the expense of those who are weaker." Rowan caught Hon's eye with a knowing look. "Hon, they impose their will on others by intimidation or by force, *because they can*."

Hon squirmed as he caught Rowan's meaning.

"Listen," Rowan said as he scanned the group. "Men like that have evil, selfish hearts, and that is what we must resist, wherever we find it."

Hon looked away.

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Following the celebration that evening, Hon sat at the fire, sore and exhausted. He mindlessly pulled threads from the hem of his tunic, tossing them toward the fire by the handful. Victoria sat across from him, next to her mother as

both knitted in the crackling glow of the firelight. Humiliation at Rowan's hand had stung Hon, as did the words the older man spoke afterward. He felt afraid, but not of dragons or the unexpected calamities and losses of life or warfare. Hon was afraid of who he might become. Rowan's words echoed in his memory and he realized he was on his way to becoming one of the evil men Rowan described. He was cocky, and already willing to force those weaker, to his will. Hon felt as if he was on the edge of a cliff and all it would take would be a misstep or a nudge, and he would plummet into a life of evil.

The flames crackled. The soft click of knitting sounded in his ears. He thought about the important things of life, the things he longed for as a young man; a home and family, a means of support, and security. But he felt driven in the opposite direction. He was angry, and afraid. He had never admitted it to himself before but it was true. Something in his defeat at Rowan's hand forced him to look at himself with new eyes. Fear was driving him in a vain effort to control his world, to make it what he wanted it to be by force, and it wasn't working.

As was her custom, Abigail quoted from the psalms as she worked.

"He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust. Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.

"Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. Only with

thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked. Because thou hast made the Lord, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone... "

When she paused, Hon spoke softly, staring into the flames.

"How can it be true?"

Abigail started.

"Wha.. What Hon, dear? What did you say?"

"How can it be true? That a person can truly live as you are saying? No fear? I can't believe it is possible."

Hon raised his head to look her in the face.

"Hon my dear, they are not my words. They are the words of God, from the scriptures. They are promises from His own lips."

"Promises?" Hon said intrigued. He sat up and leaned toward her, his elbows on his knees. "Promises for who? Anyone?"

"No, not just anyone. The verse says who they are for," she said, and began to quote the passage again. " 'He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High'... that is who the promise is for."

Hon sat back, thinking. Abigail waited.

"What does it mean? To dwell in the secret place of the most High? Is it a religious vow to go and live with the monks up in the mountains?"

Victoria giggled softly. Her mother shot her a serious look.

"No. It means that you must choose to make yourself humble before God, to submit yourself to *His* purpose for your life. It means you must learn to trust in Him alone." She paused, putting down her knitting. "Hon, it is to live

your life openly before Him, admitting your need for Him. You have to start there. You cannot receive His promises of help if you won't admit that you need them."

They had never had a conversation of this nature, and Hon didn't know how to take it. Victoria was looking at him curiously. He felt his cheeks flush as Abigail continued.

"Hon, we are all guilty of sin, things like boasting, pride, insolence, lying. Such things come so easily to us. They show us how needy we really are. None of us can be what life demands of us, as parents, as children, or as protectors of the village. We are not what we should be. So we must humbly admit our sin and our need to the Lord, and rest in His forgiveness. That is what it means to dwell in the secret place of the Most High."

Hon thought of the younger boys in the village he'd bullied, and his actions toward them suddenly seemed very ugly. He had been selfish, greedy, seeking his own benefit and nothing else. He sat motionless, almost paralyzed by a very real and right sense of guilt.

Victoria's soft voice entered the silence.

"Hon, what are you thinking?"

He shifted in his chair. He still felt embarrassed, but something in him compelled honesty.

"Lots of things." he stammered, raising his head to meet her gaze. "But mainly that I don't like myself. I do need forgiveness."

"You can have it," she replied. "You only need ask for it."

"But it can't be that simple," he protested. "I've been mean, and harsh, and selfish," he paused to look Victoria directly in the eye. "I should make amends, make things right first. Then I can be forgiven."

Abigail stepped back into the conversation.

"But Hon, you're not seeing the depth of your problem."

He furrowed his brow.

"If you had the ability to make things right, you would have kept them from going wrong in the first place. That's the problem. You don't have the ability. You are unable, as we all are. It is only the grace of God that can make amends for your mistakes. And He does it *for* you Hon, through two things. First, He sent His Son Jesus to bear the punishment your sins deserved, so that you could be free of that burden of guilt. When you humble yourself to receive that gift, God forgives you, once, and for all."

Hon looked at her as she paused.

"What's the second thing?" he asked.

"With His love inside you, He will begin to change you from the inside out."

Hon brooded over her words. He longed to be forgiven, but could not believe that he could be changed. He was filled with too much anger and fear.

"Think of it this way Hon... there are many things in life that we tend to trust in. Riches. Power. Strength. Weapons. All of them have some sort of strength, but none of them are a *sure* place of refuge. Every one of them will fail at some point."

Abigail left her knitting and knelt on the floor in front of him. His gaze met hers.

"I'm not one to avoid the truth Hon, as you know. I won't pretend you've not suffered. The pains you've experienced are part of why you have behaved the way you have. They are the reasons, but they are not excuses. You are still responsible. You can either make amends for your sins yourself, which I hope you see you cannot do. Or, you can allow God to make amends for them in your stead. He will do so, through His Son Jesus, if you will simply ask. Then the doors of heaven are open to you," and she quoted again, "Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; Nor for the pestilence that

walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee."

Terror by night. Hon knew exactly what that meant. He'd been reliving that terror since he was six years old. A new thought came to his mind, and with it came seething anger.

"Where was this sheltering God when the devil himself ripped apart my village?" he muttered through gritted teeth.

"Hon," Abigail paused. "We talked about this before, years ago, around the campfire. Do you remember?"

Hon nodded.

"I don't pretend to understand why He would allow such a terrible thing. But I do know that though God is responsible, He is not to blame."

"Really? Then who is to blame?" he exploded. "God is God, right? He's all powerful, right? He could have stopped that beast with a word, but He didn't!" Tears pooled in his eyes. "My mother and father are dead because He did nothing. Don't talk to me of your forgiving, sheltering God!" he snapped at her through clenched teeth. "You don't know what you're talking about."

He wanted to storm from the cottage, but something kept him there. Slumping into his chair he stared into the fire, his tears flowing freely. Victoria's wet cheeks glimmered in the firelight. Abigail took a breath as if to speak and he shot her a look of warning. Nevertheless, she pressed on.

"Hon, I have only one more thing to say and then I'll leave you be. I do know what I'm talking about. I too have lost much. I'm telling you, as a woman who has lost a husband and a son myself, God is not to blame."

His heart sank, instantly regretting his last words. He had never considered why Abigail was alone, why Victoria had no father. It had never occurred to him to ask.

"Tell me," he whispered.

"You will not believe it possible. It seems too coincidental, I know, but I lost my husband and my son the same way you lost your parents." Her voice trembled with emotion as her eyes looked far away. "They were sitting just outside our hut, laughing around the fire. It was a beautiful, dark night with no moon. The stars were so bright I felt I could have picked them right out of the sky, like juicy blackberries from a bush. I had been with them outside, enjoying the cool summer evening but had stepped back inside to check on Victoria. She was only a babe and was asleep in her basket, inside the hut."

Hon could hear Victoria softly crying behind Abigail. Reaching out her hand, Abigail beckoned her daughter near.

"What happened?" Hon pleaded. "What happened that night? I have to know."

"I have tried my whole life to wipe the memory away, but it is etched here forever," she said with a touch of her fingertips to her temple. "Out of the stillness, flames rained from the sky, engulfing our little fire ring. It was like a moment of daylight, flashing through the window. I looked out in time to see my Peter and our boy wither away, like grass in the heat of the summer. Just as I reached the door a dark, massive form swooped down on their smoldering bodies and snatched them up into the darkness."

She paused to wipe tears from her eyes.

"As soon as it began, it was over. I was left there, standing in the doorway, gazing out at nothing. Victoria slept. The stars shone. But my husband and son were forever gone. Hon dear, your village was not the first to be attacked by one of those beasts. Mine was not either. My

father told stories of it when I was a child. Lord Thurmond himself was scarred deeply by one of those creatures, which I think may have been at the root of the madness that caused him to take his own life.

"Hon, I don't want to see your life end in the same pool of despair that he did. If you're to avoid it, you have to get this straight in your mind; as you said a moment ago, 'God is God.' His ways are beyond our puny understanding. I have learned that He will not make Himself subject to our scrutiny or examination. I don't like that my men were taken from me. It makes no sense to my tiny mind and aching heart. But Hon, one day I will know the reason, and on that day, when I stand before my Maker, I will say that He has done what is right, in every case. Even mine."

Hon was stunned. He glanced at Victoria then back to Abigail.

"I am sorry. I didn't know."

"No Hon, you didn't," Abigail replied.

A log in the hearth crumbled as the fire did its work, sparks flying upward. Mother and daughter still knelt before him, their eyes moist.

"I am sorry," he said with uncharacteristic tenderness.
"I've hurt you both."

"You are forgiven," Victoria answered, through a clenched throat. "We know what it's like to hurt, and to cry, and to be angry. And we know what it's like to be unable to bear the weight of such powerful emotions. But Hon, we also know the peace that comes from knowing that the same God who could have stopped the tragedy, is powerful enough to heal our broken hearts, and that He longs to do it."

Hon reached down and softly touched her cheek, then quickly pulled away as he realized what he'd done.

He abruptly rose and strode to the door, turning halfway around as he pulled on the handle.

"Thank you for supper, and for the company, and for all you've done for me. Thank you for telling me about, about that night."

He strode into the night, leaving Abigail and Victoria kneeling in front of his chair.

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The starlit sky stretched over Hon like a canopy, bright and glorious in a way he'd never noticed before. His eyes were drawn upward, as was his heart. Victoria's final words were still ringing in his mind. She was right; his heart was broken. It was what fostered his deep need to protect himself. It was what fed his anger and aggression. He could see that fact clearly, for the first time. Could it be true that the God who allowed the monster to tear apart his village and take the lives of his parents, really cared for him, really longed to heal him and to forgive him? The thought still created dissonance. It was hard to believe. But a newfound compulsion deep in his heart made it even harder not to.

The vivid, twinkling light overhead spoke to him from the blackness of the sky, telling of a glory beyond their own, the glory of their Creator. They existed, they sparkled they moved across the sky, all according to the perfectly wise design of One who was far beyond even the limits of Hon's imagination.

Abigail was right. God is God. He is surely too vast for my small mind to comprehend. Even if He explained his reasons for taking my parents, I probably wouldn't understand.

Looking upward, Hon uttered his first prayer of faith.

"God... if it's true that You long to heal my broken heart, I want You to do it. I miss my parents. I miss the life I could have had with them." He began to cry. "I hurt every

day because they are gone. I tremble every night at the thought of the beast who took them. I do stupid, mean things because of it. I'm not a good person. But Abigail said You are willing to forgive me, that You put all the blame for my wrongs on Your Son, Jesus. How can that be true? How can He take the blame, when I'm the one who did the wrong?"

He sniffed, wiping the back of his sleeve across his tear-moistened cheeks.

"You know I don't deserve it, but if You're willing to forgive me, I want to be forgiven. Forgive me, God. Clean up the mess I've made of myself, please. And don't stop there. I want you to make me new. I want to be different."

The stars flickered as silent witnesses of Hon's interaction with his Maker. From the impossible heights of the universe, their light reached him, testifying to the grace of God, poured out on him. They seemed more brilliant, more radiant and alive than ever before. The young man closed his eyes again and breathed deeply of the cool, moist air of the river valley. He stayed there a long while, soaking, in the grace of His God.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"The Twins" lay south of Newtown along the Rillebrand, two cities of equal size and significance that flanked the river on either side, connected by a large stone bridge. Appropriately, the cities were named "Eastbridge" and "Westbridge." They were the most prominent cities in Lord Kendrick's realm, lying not only on the river, but also along the main east-west trade route. Together, they were the center of commerce for the realm. Each fall, Rowan led a trip to the Twins to trade and gather supplies for winter. Everyone in Newtown had some sort of business to be done in the city and entrusted their commerce to Rowan and his hand-picked companions. A boat named "The Swan" had been constructed, large enough to transport all goods to be traded, and to bring back those that were procured. The trip was a high point of the year for everyone.

The selection of Rowan's companions had become a coming-of-age ritual for the young men of Newtown. Every one of them worked hard throughout the year, seeking to show himself capable and responsible, in hopes that he might be chosen for the journey. For the last two years, Hon had hoped to be chosen but had not been. Abigail told him it was because of his lingering temper and stubbornness, which he knew was likely true. He had just begun his eighteenth year, and could see the wisdom of her words. He could not continue in stubborn foolishness and expect himself to be ready for the future. He had been working diligently and believed he had a good chance of being selected for the trip to the Twins.

One month before the trip, at an evening celebration, Rowan would announce who would accompany him that

year on the journey. It was a time of great anticipation, and Hon thought he would burst from the suspense. On the morning of the feast day, Hon answered a knock at the door of Abigail's hut. It was Rowan. He invited Hon outside.

"Hon, I know that you've been working hard the past year to prove yourself ready for the trip to The Twins. You have grown much and have proven yourself in many ways. I am very proud of you. You are the best swordsman in the village, without a doubt, and you rival Phillip with a bow. Your skills as a hunter ensure that Abigail's table will never be bare. But more important than those things, you've also learned much about consideration and service to others." Hon blushed and dipped his head. "You see! I have been watching you, haven't I? Hon, all those things are wonderful, they are just the kind of things that every man needs to develop. But despite all that, I don't think you are quite ready."

Hon's heart sank.

"The trip will require that every man is unquestionably reliable. When a job is given, I must know that it will be done. In some cases our very lives may depend on it being so. Hon, you've grown, no doubt, but I don't feel you are quite up to the challenge yet. I am confident that by next year, you will be."

Rowan's words hit hard and cut deep. Hon had worked so hard and had overcome much. It seemed very unfair.

"Hon, tell me what you're feeling right now. I know it must be a disappointment," Rowan said.

"Yes it is," he said angrily, pausing to catch himself. "I have worked hard and I truly thought I was ready. To hear you say that I'm not reliable is, well, it is painful to hear and I don't know that I agree!" He gritted his teeth wondering if he'd said too much.

"Go ahead Hon, say what you feel," Rowan encouraged.

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"Right there Rowan, that's what makes it so hard! You. You are the closest thing to a father I have had. I mean, Abigail has done her best, but a boy needs the stronger hand of a father as well, and you have been that for me."

He paused, fighting the compulsion to lash out.

"I have kicked against your authority. I have responded to you with anger and rebellion. I've been a foolish child much of the time, yet you've never given up on me. This is a painful blow, you know it is. I *am* angry about it. But that's been the main thorn in my side my entire life - anger. I'm so filled with it that I don't see clearly. But I am trying to see clearly. So," he sighed heavily, "I accept your decision. I don't like it, and I will have a hard time watching you head down the river without me, but I accept it."

When he stopped speaking, Hon was surprised to find that he was breathing heavily. His emotions had come like the frothing liquid of a cauldron, bubbling up from deep inside. But he had held them at bay.

"Hon, I have seldom seen a man handle disappointment with the humility and self-control you just did, and I'm thankful for it. You may think it a cruel trick, but I had to know how you would handle a difficult situation, one where my authority had to be accepted without question."

Hon looked up.

"Hon, you are ready. I would be honored if you would join me for the trip to the Twins."

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The festivities the next day were everything Hon had hoped for. His place among the travelers was secured and he was sincerely congratulated by all. He liked the feeling

of respect that came with responsibility, and told Abigail so after the festivities were over.

"Yes, being respected is a good feeling Hon, and as you're learning, it doesn't come automatically. It comes because you have a character that is respectable." She thought for a moment then resumed. "Do you respect me, Hon?"

"Of course I do, why would you ask such a thing?" he asked.

"To make a point, I suppose." She bit her lower lip. "I have not always been as you see me now. As a young woman I was not respectable. In fact, I was not truly a woman at all. I was a foolish girl, thinking I was grown up, when I wasn't. I made adult choices with the maturity of a child, and got myself into situations that compromised my integrity. Nobody respected me, and I didn't respect myself. Hon, you have made great strides these past years. Your selection to man The Swan is a testament to it. But we both know it has not always been that way, don't we?"

Hon nodded his head.

"Now it is up to you, with the Lord's help of course, to make sure that the respect you are being given is warranted."

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Preparations for the trip downriver were all-consuming for the entire next month. Hon pitched in with as much strength as he could muster. It was an exciting time, knowing that the coming foray into the wider world, his first as an adult, had the potential of marking his life for years to come. Though he didn't fully know what that could mean, it kept him sober minded and diligent as the team prepared. The boat was loaded with stores for the journey downriver and back, as well as with goods to trade. In

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addition, four donkeys were loaded, along with their feed. They were needed to pull the boat back upriver.

Departure day was a celebration all over again. There was a communal, morning meal, stories of past trips, and words of encouragement for those going on the journey. Not a soul in Newtown was absent. When the meal was at an end, and with the crew aboard, Rowan asked Abigail if she would lead in a prayer before they set off.

"Our Lord, You have been good to us. Since the time we departed the lands to the east and came over The Ridge, You have been faithful to guide us and to provide for us. This trip is one of the means You've used to do that again and again, and we thank You for the opportunity to take part in our own provision in this way. Lord, as we do every year, we ask You to give Rowan wisdom as he leads this crew. Give him the discernment and understanding he needs to make decisions and give direction. We ask You to provide strong backs for those who are along for the journey, and that they will come back better and wiser men. We thank You Lord, Amen."

"Amen," the entire town replied in unison.

"Thank you Abigail, and thank you all for your help, encouragement, and support," Rowan said. "We ask that you continue to pray for our safe and prosperous return. Men. let's cast off!"

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The journey downriver was a fast one. The strong flow of water rushing from the northern mountains was an able conductor. It rushed with such volume, its path contained very few turns. The main job of the crew was steering the boat, to prevent it from colliding with rocks and other debris that clogged the river. Rowan referred to their role as that of a "Poler," since their main tool to keep the

boat off the rocks was a 15 foot pole, reinforced with saplings which were attached to it with a wrapping of twine. Thankfully, the spring runoff had been strong, and much of the debris had already been washed downriver. But the rocks, immovable as they were, posed a constant danger. The crew worked in shifts, 30 minutes at a time. Four men took up positions at the starboard and port sides of the boat, two at the prow and two at the stern. Hon found the pole heavy and awkward. He learned to keep it upright when not in use, only extending it to keep the boat off the rocks, and then, using both hands. At the only noticeable bend in the river, Rowan announced that they would soon be arriving at The Twins. He shouted out instructions they had gone over many times before.

"Those of you who have never taken this journey must know this. Keep your attention to your work! The cities are captivating to look at, but you must not let their beauty cause you to put us in danger. I do not know at which city we will be docking, it will depend on availability of space at the docks. I will call out our destination once it is determined and the Polers will guide us in that direction. Once we are approaching the docks, Preston will drop anchor to slow our approach. Polers, keep us from slamming into the docks. Once we are near, the men ashore will throw us lines. Those not poling will take them and pull us in. Any questions?"

Hon was thankful that he was not poling as they approached the cities, because Rowan's warning was wholly appropriate. The cities were tremendous. High white walls surrounded each, their smooth stones rising from the water's edge. High water marks darkly stained each wall, twenty feet below their tops. Both cities were situated on hills rising from the river bank. Each had its customary homes, modest but neat, with roadways dividing their

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groupings into regular patterns. Interspersed among them were many white-stoned public buildings.

Eastbridge boasted tall, white towers at the city's center, while Westbridge's central district was comprised of many domed structures. Like human twins they were alike enough to belong together, yet unique enough to have their own particular charm. The bridge that connected the two was unlike anything Hon had seen. It was built of solid, white stone that matched the city walls. High, wooden arches reached toward the sky only to descend to the deck of the bridge once again. At five points along the bridge's length there were wide, twin columns of stone that thrust downward into the river.

The shout of a man on the dock roused Hon from his admiration just in time for a thick coil of rope to strike his chest. The Swan was docking on the Eastbridge side. Hon secured the rope to the wooden cleat atop the gunwale as Rowan had taught him, and stepped back from the boat's edge as it lurched toward the dock. Within moments, the boat was softly bobbing alongside the city as the river rushed by. With the first part of their journey completed, Rowan called the men together.

"Great job men! We made it safely, which is not always easy to accomplish. Our first task is to get our produce and other goods organized and to market. We have a list from each person who has sent goods, regarding what price they need. Our job is to get that price, if possible, and to purchase or trade for what they need, in return. The ideal outcome is to bring home adequate provisions, and money to boot.

"If this is your maiden voyage with us, you may have wondered why we have some older men aboard. Leechy and Hampton have proven themselves to be very skilled at trading, and we make good use of their talents. The rest of you will serve as pack mules and servants, hauling our

goods to market and helping the traders in whatever way they need. Part of that role is to protect them and our goods. We are not in Newtown. I hate to say it, but you cannot trust the people here as you would at home. Some will deal honestly, but others would as soon slit a man's throat to take what he has. Be careful, and if you must fight, do so for the right reasons."

As the men scattered around the boat to ready the carts, Rowan pulled Hon aside.

"Hon, you and I are the best swordsmen, so we will be splitting up. I will go with Leechy and his crew, and you are to be the eyes and ears of Hampton. He is in charge of your team, but his years have made him a bit slow to notice danger. Keep your eyes open. Bring things to his attention that don't seem right. If he is aware of the danger, he will make the right move. Do you understand what I'm asking you to do?"

Hon's spirit soared at the trust that was being placed on him.

"Yes, I do."

"Then come with me."

Rowan led the way to the starboard side of the ship where Hampton was carefully assessing the goods he would be taking ashore.

"Hampton, you know Hon?"

"Know him? Of course I know him Sergeant Rowan, not in an intimate manner, mind you, but we are surely more than acquaintances." Hampton replied. "I've seen him grow into the fine young man he is, these past eleven years."

Rowan interrupted as he kept an eye on the activity all around.

"Good. I am putting Hon in charge of your security. You know how we do things, so see that Hon is aware of

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

your needs and that he understands the way you wish things to work."

"Yes sir, Sergeant. You can count on me your soldierly leadership!" Hampton replied with a salute and a wink in Hon's direction.

Rowan turned and rushed away, not even noticing Hampton's playful jab.

"He's still barking out orders years outside the barracks!" Hampton joked. "But he's a splendid man, good in all respects, a leader to be admired, but you know that."

"Yes, I do, more than most," Hon replied. "I am here to help you Hampton. Tell me what you want and it will be done."

Hampton cocked his head to the side, his wild hair falling away from his eyes.

"Oh? I could become accustomed to such amenable treatment. For the present moment, step ashore and assess the situation for us. We are off to the market in Eastbridge while our counterparts traverse the bridge to the adjacent city. We shall resume this conversation in half an hour's time, agreed?"

"I'll see you then," Hon replied.

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Stepping ashore, Hon was immediately swallowed in a sea of activity. Mules pulling carts, men heaving bags of grain and crates of produce, and boat owners barking orders to their crews. It was the sound of commerce. Hon stood at the foot of the plank for a moment to get his bearings, wondering where the market lay. His eyes were drawn across the docks to a burly man wearing the bear-clad coat of arms of Lord Kendrick. The man was astride a barrel, hand on his sword, observing the activity of the dock. Hon made his way toward the man, careful to step clear of the

puddles and manure. The man saw him approaching and readied himself, keeping his eye on Hon's hands.

"Could you help me?" Hon inquired as he drew near.

The soldier looked him over with a wary eye.

"If I can," he replied. "What's your business?"

"I just came ashore with the crew from that boat," Hon said, turning to point back to The Swan. "I'm new to the cities. I'm to escort our merchants to the market and would take it kindly if you could point me in the right direction."

The man sat back, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

"That way, just beyond the entry tower on the left side of the lane. You'll know it when you get there."

I'm sure I will. Thank you," Hon replied.

Moving past the man, in the direction he was pointed, Hon found himself swept into a stream of people, produce, and livestock, all heading for the market. As promised, the market was evident, with many vendors already engaged in lively trade. He looked for an area where Hampton could set up shop, but the merchants already there had wisely taken the spots nearest the entry. He moved deeper into the market area, the sound of hawkers and trading filling his ears. Across the lane, he saw a booth displaying a large sign that read, "Merchant Tax." He knew that Hampton would know the procedures for paying the tax, but wanted to show himself capable of handling the situation on his own, so he moved toward the sign.

As Hon approached the booth, a man glanced up from his writing just long enough to acknowledge his presence. Hon waited for the man to indicate that he was ready to assist him, but the man continued to shuffle through a stack of parchments, jotting notes on papers in what appeared a haphazard fashion. With a huff the man stopped his activity and looked up.

"Are you here to pay your merchant tax or do you enjoy watching others work?"

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"I'm sorry," Hon stammered. "I wasn't sure if you were ready."

"It's my job to be ready, boy," the man interrupted impatiently, as he returned to his shuffling. "And none does their job as I do my job, as you can see from the job I'm doing, while you stand gawking. So which is it, son? Tax or gawking?"

"Tu - tax," Hon stuttered. "We have many goods to bring ashore..."

"Size?" the man demanded.

"Size? I don't follow..."

"What size of market space do you require, genius?" the man snapped.

"Oh. Well, what are the sizes you have?"

"There, there, and there!" the man barked, pointing across the lane at three different booths without looking up from his table.

Due to the growing line behind him, Hon couldn't tell where the man was pointing, but he knew that their goods would take up plenty of space, and he wanted to be done with the man as soon as possible.

"The largest," he said quickly. "We have many items..."

"Yes, yes, you said that already, bumbler. Two shilling," the man said impatiently, thrusting out his hand.

Hon fumbled for the bag Rowan had given him and counted out the 24 coins quickly. Never looking up, the man dumped his full hand into a bucket on the ground between his feet, scribbled on a small parchment and slapped it on the table in front of Hon.

"Sixty-three! Next!"

Hon stepped away from the table, trying to read the parchment as he walked. Scrawled across it in the man's messy hand were the words "Sixty-three" and a rough diagram of the market place with the booth location circled.

Following the map he found the booth, squeezed between a tall wall and another booth that was already filled with pigs and chickens. It wasn't the best location, but he was glad there would only be one direction of approach for him to watch.

As he turned to head back toward the dock, Hon ran directly into a tall, sandy haired young man about his size who was standing in his way, feet wide.

"What're you doin' lookin' at our spot?" sandy-hair demanded. Hon noticed two other toughs gathered behind him. Each already had their hands on the grip of their daggers.

"Sorry. I have my tax paper right here," Hon said, holding up the parchment. "Anyone can see it matches the number on the booth."

"Don't matter. It's our spot! We been sellin' there fer years now, so move out!"

Hon looked around.

"I don't see any goods..."

"An' I don't see none fer you neither, move on!" sandy-hair insisted as he stepped closer.

"Look," Hon stalled, "You may think you can muscle in here, but I'm not having it. I paid for this spot and I'm keeping it."

"Hear that fellas? He paid!" the leader teased. "I think we should make him pay again." The others laughed.

Hon's anger rose. He took three deliberate steps forward until he was in the leader's face, their noses touching.

"You seem eager to get hurt," Hon threatened, "even though I've given you plenty of chance to back away." He pressed even closer. "If that's what you want, I'll give it to you, and then I'll see if your friends are dumb enough to want some of the same. But I'm hoping they are a bit smarter than you."

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He took another step into the boy, pushing the entire group back a step.

"But then again, if they were that smart they wouldn't be following a misfit like you. Move out of here and don't let me see you when I get back. If I do, well, let's just say I won't be happy."

Pushing the boy aside with a firm hand, Hon began to walk away. As he did, he heard the familiar sound of daggers being drawn. His sword was out instantly, swinging in a wide circle. He spun around, the flat of his blade catching the nearest tough across the side of the head before he had a chance to react. He fell instantly to the ground. A sidekick to the stomach of the next you man sent him backward, into the leader. Taking advantage of his momentum, Hon rushed them, his right forearm thrust across the chest of the first man, his left hand twisting the dagger from his grip. Driving hard with his legs, Hon slammed the two into the high stone wall behind them. Both crumpled to the ground as he stepped away, Hon raised his sword in the direction of the first tough, who was still trying to get to his feet.

"I told you to move out," Hon stated, in measured tones. "I won't tell you again."

The three scampered away, not so tough after all.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Watching over Hampton's trading booth was anything but predictable. Squabbles over pricing and value seemed to be a normal part of the process, and Hampton was well suited for the task. His matter of fact, unflappable manner, though a bit too eloquent for some, combined with his quirky ways, made the interchanges humorous to watch. It was especially entertaining when a potential buyer assumed that Hampton's oddities meant that he was going to be an easy target. They quickly found that behind his odd exterior lay a shrewd mind that was not easily tricked. After witnessing a handful of exchanges along that line, Hon concluded that in most situations, Hampton was in little need of his help.

Early on the first day, Hon encountered a small girl with a dirty face, perhaps five or six years old. She tiptoed up to the booth, her big eyes taking in the colorful produce. She gazed around, two fingers of her left hand poised loosely between her lips. She disappeared for a moment, behind a portly woman who was haggling over the price of potatoes. Hon was about to turn away when he noticed a small, dirt encrusted hand extend from behind the bountiful folds of the woman's dress and snatch away a bag of snap peas. The girl was pressing her way quickly through the back of the crowd before Hon could even move. She was gone, lost in the hustle of the market.

Throughout the day, other street urchins made their way up to the booth. Hon could see the hunger in their eyes and suspected that some of them would not eat if they were unable to filch food from vendors. The reality of their hard and meager lives compelled Hon to look the other way

when he saw them coming, but he could not. The goods they sold were for the support of their friends and neighbors back home, and he knew for their sake it must be protected, even from such unfortunate and needy souls as these. He stood close to the front of the booth, knowing that his presence and the sight of his sword would be deterrent enough for most thieves.

Toward the end of the first day as the crowds were thinning, Hampton was taking one of the only breaks afforded him. He sat hunched on his stool, his unruly hair hanging heavily over his skull, damp from the sweat of the unseasonably warm day.

"What a relentless flow of human beings, like a river of flesh and bone, surging upon us all the day long. Reasonable though, I suppose, demonstrating that they are wise individuals who are stocking up for what calamities winter may bring. My mind is discombobulated, spinning like a top upon the master's dining room table..."

Hampton's voice droned on as Hon looked around the market. The last buyers of the day were milling about with full baskets, looking for deals on the remaining goods. Across the aisle was a heavy set young woman Hon estimated to be around his age. Her long, brown hair was pulled back in a scarf. A full basket hung from her arm. He looked away, to keep an eye on the booth, but his mind was drawn back to the young woman, and he didn't know why. She seemed familiar, but Hon quickly dismissed the thought from his mind. It couldn't be so. He saw her again, moving across the market toward their table, and the feeling became stronger. Hon determined to keep her in view as he glanced back at Hampton, who was bartering with a toothless old woman.

As the brown-haired young woman approached, her eyes were cast down, looking over the remaining produce on their table. Hon moved closer, hoping to get a clear look

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at her as she continued perusing their goods. She lifted a pumpkin, to smell its stem. Hon stepped behind Hampton, directly across from her. As she lowered the pumpkin their eyes met. She squinted, then a look of surprise grew in her eyes and her mouth dropped open.

Hon spoke first.

"I feel that I know you, and it appears that you know me." His heart began to race. "But I cannot place where, or how we met."

From the look on her face, Hon believed she could just as easily burst into laughter, or tears. Finally, she spoke.

"Is... is your name Hon?" her quivering voice replied. "Yes. Yes, it is."

Her eyes grew wide, then she closed them, steadying herself against Hampton's table. When her eyelids parted a tear trickled down her cheek.

"We were childhood friends. My name is Rosamond."

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"I remember you now," Hon said, as images emerged from the darkness of memory.

"We thought you dead," Rosamond said in a faltering voice. "All of us did. The memory of that night still haunts us. How did you get free of the dragon?"

Hampton's voice jarred Hon to the present. He realized the odd scene of which they were the center. Loud bartering was going on all around them. Rosamond was being jostled side to side by a newly gathered crowd and yet the two of them stood wrapped in memories 12 years past.

"Come around the table and sit with me," Hon implored.

Rosamond followed him along the front of the crowd and around the side of the booth. Hon tipped a barrel of ale

on end and bid her sit as he straddled the few remaining sacks of grain.

"For some reason the dragon dropped me. I fell into the treetops, and eventually to the ground."

In a burst of emotion, Rosamond leapt to her feet and threw her arms around Hon.

"Oh Hon! Hon, I can't believe you are alive! We never thought to see your face again. We thought you dead and..."

She stopped short, her eyes wide as she pulled away.

"What? What is it?" Hon asked.

"Your father! We have to get a message to him!"

"My father? Wha... Rosamond, what do you mean? My father is dead."

"What? No, no! I saw him just last week, before we made the journey to The Twins."

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The news of his father's existence changed everything. After years apart, Hon could not imagine life continuing until they were together again. As Hampton's crew returned to The Swan, Hon rushed to tell Rowan the news.

"Rowan! Rowan, my father lives!"

"What? How can it be? I..."

"I must go to him, Rowan! I must leave immediately!" Rowan grasped Hon's wide shoulders.

"Slow down, Hon, catch your breath! What are you talking about?"

Hon eased up a bit, feeling embarrassed.

"It was a girl, well, a young lady, from Brookhaven, where I grew up. She told me that my father lives!"

"What? But I thought they had been... Do you remember this girl?" Rowan asked.

"Yes, she was a childhood friend. When I saw her across the market I knew her, but didn't know how. She

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came to our booth and when she saw me, the look on her face told me I was right. Rowan, I'm sorry, but I have to go."

Rowan's perplexed expression softened into a wide smile.

"This is glad news, of course, you must go! For this kind of news, we will find a way to get along without you. What is your plan?"

"I don't have one. I just need to get there as soon as I can. Rosamond's family plans to leave in two days, but I can't wait."

Rowan furrowed his brow.

"Agreed. But first we have to get the lay of the land. Do you know where Brookhaven lies?"

"No, I didn't think to ask her," Hon answered.

"No matter, we will find out, and by morning you can be on your way," Rowan said with a grin. "I believe some of the sales from today are for Abigail, and Victoria, and you. I don't know what part is yours, but perhaps some could be used to get you a horse."

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The evening was filled with preparations for Hon's departure. Everyone aboard ship was excited for him and eager to help. The soldier on the dock was the one to tell them that Brookhaven lay to the east, across The Ridge, outside Kendrick's lands. Hon would take the main road, turning south at the crossroads, then continuing on until he veered eastward around the southern end of The Ridge. Brookhaven was two days beyond, and to the north. It was a week-long journey that Hon planned to make in two to three days.

In the months that had followed Lord Thurmond's death, the land across The Ridge passed through a time of

chaos, with various factions vying for power. The victor of the short-lived conflict was from the far east; a brutal, dark skinned man whose black-clad troops had covered the land like a plague. Hon wondered how many of the changes he would recognize, since he had not seen the land of his birth since childhood. It could be difficult to reach his father, but for once he did not feel fear, only resolution. He would see his father again.

Next morning, Hon rose early and Rowan accompanied him to the stables to purchase a horse. As they walked, Rowan cautioned Hon about what to expect.

"Horse traders are notorious for making the most they can and giving the least they can. It's a point of professional pride for them. I once heard a couple of them sitting over their ale, boasting of how they fooled an unsuspecting purchaser. We should be wary and inspect the animals carefully. Say nothing of the urgency of your need, he will find a way to use that to his advantage if he can. You are a man now, and it's to be your horse, so you can do the talking."

Approaching the large wooden building, Hon noticed the double doors were open. He called out.

"Ho there! Are you open for business at this hour?"

A gruff, female voice replied, with a shout equal to that of any man.

"Door's open aren't it?"

Stepping inside, the smells of manure and hay greeted them. Hon squinted into the shadows of the barn.

"Aye gents, what would you be needin' this fine mornin'?" the gravelly voice inquired from the dark.

"A horse," Hon answered. "What else?"

A rough chuckle came their way and a burly woman emerged from the shadows. She eyed them both, with a large hand shading her eyes, a crooked, yellowed grin

# **CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR**

dawning above her chin. She cackled wildly at Hon's remark.

"You're a cracker, aren't ya' now? If you was a bit younger we'd get inta some trouble together, no doubt," she said with a wink. "Take a look 'round," she began, just as a deep cough erupted from her throat. She paused, hacked loudly, and spit the resulting phlegm into a pile of hay. Wiping her mouth on the back of her sleeve, she continued.

"I say, take a look 'round and make an offer for what ya like. We'll go from there."

"Sounds fair," Hon replied.

She laughed wildly.

"Now don't you tell nobody! You'd ruin my reputation!"

She pointed out the back door and disappeared into the shadows again.

The men moved outside and found eight horses. Most were typical cobs, useful for farm work and hauling. But two were better bred. One was jet black and muscular. He trotted back and forth along the fence, kicking up a small cloud of dust. It had the look of a runner. The other, a fleabitten gray, stood noiseless in the center of the pen, its head held high.

"Those two are what we're looking for," Rowan said in a low voice. "Both are coursers, do you remember your lessons?"

"Yes, and that's what I was thinking. They both look strong and steady; just what I need."

"The black seems speedy, which I want. But there is something about the gray."

Rowan smiled.

"You have good instincts Hon. The black is built for speed, naturally so. But he's also high strung. A horse like that can get you someplace in a hurry, but he's also going to be unpredictable. The eye is immediately drawn to him,

because he's full of energy and handsome to look at. But he could be a handful even for a very experienced rider. My guess is he's here because his previous owner couldn't handle him. What do you see in the gray?"

Hon stepped up to the pen and made a clicking noise from the side of his mouth to draw the horse's attention. The black snorted, and trotted to the middle of the pen. Hon stretched his hand to the gray and it walked over. He allowed it to sniff the back of his hand until it seemed comfortable, then he reached up to stroke its nose.

"She's calmer, steadier. She seems unflustered by the commotion the black is causing, and I like that she's friendly."

"As I said, you have good instincts," Rowan replied. "She is the one, no doubt. Now the trick will be to strike a deal you can afford."

Turning back into the barn they found the woman hunched over a pile of manure, shovel in hand. Hearing their footsteps, she straightened and turned to face them.

"That black's a beauty, aren't he?"

"Yes, very impressive," Hon said. "Very fast, I assume?"

"Fast? As a greased pig in a butcher shop! *That* horse can move! You lookin' for a horse what can move?"

"No, I have an eye for the gray. What do you think is fair?" Hon replied.

The woman chuckled again, continuing to cackle as she talked.

"I said make an offer for what ya like, didn't I? I've gotta' give you credit for tryin', but you are gonna' have to make the first move."

"I'd say ten pounds is fair," Hon offered.

She threw back her head and held her stomach as if in pain, a deep belly laugh exploding from her wide mouth.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR**

"Boy, you are a cracker! That's the funniest thing I've heard in a fortnight! That mare is worth double, not a penny less."

Hon looked to Rowan, who was smiling broadly.

"I told you, this is your deal," Rowan whispered with a laugh.

The woman looked askance at the two and offered her counter.

"Tell ya what I can do, since I like ya. I'm gonna' let ya have her for fifteen pound."

"Fifteen?" Hon responded with shock. "I could almost get a destrier for that!"

The woman just grinned.

"Almost, boy, and it's too much a pity that I ain't got one. Then I could charge ya thirty pound for it."

"Thirty pounds!" Hon exclaimed.

The woman cackled even louder.

"Alright now, this is muh final, be sure of it." She paused a moment to raise her hairy hand, picking at a wart on her chin. "I'll give ya the gray, with saddle and reins, for fifteen pound. I'll even throw in a couple days feed. If ya don't like that, ya can walk to wherever you're goin'."

Hon looked to Rowan who only replied with a grin and raised eyebrows.

"Let's do it," Hon said.

"Alrighty then," the woman said. "Don't never let it be said that Griselle ain't fair."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Smoke rose from the chimney of a small, stone cabin nestled high on a mountainside northeast of Montfall. It rested atop a cliff, among the last grove of trees before the forest gave way to tundra. Inside, a man sat at a rough table, a bottle of wine and four wooden cups before him. Two candles were lit, their dim light chasing shadows to the corners of the small room. Two beds lay against the far wall and a short, curtain-covered doorway broke the stony pattern of the back wall. The curtain lifted and a servant entered, a woman of almost twenty years. Her long, dark hair hung over her face in greasy strands. The entrance of the servant interrupted the man's thoughts, and he watched in irritation as she placed a wooden platter of stale bread and smoked meat on the table.

"When they come, you are to be out of sight for the duration of their visit," he threatened. "You will stay in the pantry, without movement or sound. Do you understand?"

Her head bobbed in acknowledgement, the stringy hair swaying side to side. The man reached for a long, thick cloth that lay on the table, and rose. Folding the cloth repeatedly, he made it into a long, thick strip. The young woman turned her back to him and stood still. He bound the cloth tightly around her head, covering her eyes and ears. He produced a rope from the folds of his cloak and bound her hands behind her back.

Turning her in the direction of the pantry, he loudly said, "Go!"

The young woman stumbled across the room haltingly, finally discovering the covered doorway. Once

she disappeared into the pantry, the man turned toward the front door.

After generations of waiting, they will soon be here.

Twenty minutes later, the sounds of a horse roused the man and he opened the door. An enormously large, jet black horse bore a rider to match it. A tent-of-a-cloak hung from the man's broad shoulders, flowing outward as it covered his large midsection. His rough, black boots were thrust forward through the thick, leather stirrups. The man in the cabin door laughed to himself.

I suspected Hugo would be the first to arrive. Restraining his eagerness will be like holding back the tide. But it will be done, one way or another. His impatience cannot be allowed to foil decades of deliberate planning.

"Come in," he called to the approaching rider. "Join me for a cup of wine, while we wait for the others."

The rider threw back his hood to reveal a fat face with tiny eyes. A deep scar marked his right cheek, from eye to chin.

"The wait will be short," he said, in a high-pitched voice that did not match his size. "I spied the other two converging at the foot of the cliff. I will wait, astride my steed."

"Fine," the host replied.

Ten minutes passed in silence, the large man's horse stomping impatiently, the man in the cabin door picking at his nails with a large, rusty dagger. Two riders approached in silence. The first was a small figure, a woman. She sat atop a stocky, speckled mule. Her cloak bore evidence of the long and dusty journey she had taken through the desert lands to the south. The host smiled. He knew she would come, no matter the distance. Like the rest, she was bound by a blood oath, passed down through generations. She dismounted, gracefully for her age, her gnarled hands protruding from her cloak sleeves.

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The other rider sat on a common gray horse, a man of muscular build, dark skin, and piercing eyes. Unlike the other two, he wore no cloak, but was clad with a thick coat of shaggy hide. Over it, a thick leather belt encircled his waist. Protruding from it was a set of katar, razor-sharp, close combat blades used in the far eastern lands.

An uncommon choice of weapons, the man in the doorway thought. But not surprising. He is not a common man.

"Come. I have wine and food ready," the host called from the doorway.

Stepping inside, the cloaked riders shed their outer garments, and all of them remained silent as they made their way to the table. Their host found it humorous to watch as each silently assessed the others. Though bound together by a common generational vow, they had never met in person before that day, which added to the difficulty of the task that lay before them. They were a cautious lot, and had reason to be. The secrecy of their sect had been preserved over hundreds of years by just such caution. As the man had imagined, this first meeting would be one of assessment and positioning.

He began pouring the wine. Hugo drank deeply the moment his cup was filled, scarlet drops falling onto the table in rapid succession, trickling from his heavily bearded chin.

The woman had pulled her chair away from the table and sat in the shadows, her back against the wall. Leaving her cup untouched, she surveyed the room. Her face was a mellow brown, her lips full, and wide. The host noticed her large, dark eyes moving to the pantry door, and wondered if a movement from his servant had drawn her gaze. A few seconds, and she turned her eyes back to the men at the table, showing no sign of suspicion.

The dark-skinned man turned his cup upside down and leaned a heavy forearm across the table.

"We have come together at last," he spoke. "We must understand this at the outset: we are one. We have our individual ambitions, we have our own methods, we have particular realms. Yet, we are one. Our ancestors have purposed it to be so, and it must be so."

The dark-skinned man looked around the group, his piercing eyes causing Hugo to look away first and the woman, Saniyya, a hesitant second. But the host of the meeting was unwilling to divert his gaze. He knew that though they were to be allies, influence and power would still exist among them. Here, at the outset, he was determined to make it clear that he did not intend to be subject to any man. The two sat locked in a silent struggle for dominance, until the dark-skinned man smiled knowingly, and resumed his speech.

"If there are any of you whose opinion differs from what I have said, speak now." He turned to look at the others. "We must all know that the others bear a mutual commitment."

The woman leaned forward, the candlelight revealing a wrinkled, but striking face, one that once shone with rare beauty. Her thick, gray hair fell forward around her shoulders. She spoke in clear, but broken English.

"My ancestors, honor will be theirs. My vow is being fulfilled. My Gahlib is strong. He ready. I have labored to train. His nightly roaming, it has filled the desert winds with tales of the great Falak, rising to swallow the world. Terror rises. Hearts tremble in my people. But they do not know I control him. By words. By sign of hand. Ready. We are ready."

She looked intently at the dark man.

"I am ready as well," Hugo's piercing voice interjected, as he slammed his cup on the table. "I do not

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differ with you Raj, not a bit. The time for which our ancestors planned is now, and we must act in unison! We will cover all lands with the fear and shadow of the dragon. My white beastie is eager, as am I. I say we move, decisively!" He rose quickly for his size, jarring the table. "The time is now and we must act! What do you think Raj? Are you with me?"

All eyes turned to the dark man, who raised a hand and slowly clenched it.

"We have much to decide before we loose the dragons. Sit, sit," he implored, and Hugo reluctantly descended upon his chair. "One of our number has yet to speak." He glanced sideways toward the man who had poured the wine. "What is your mind? Are you with us?"

The host reached to refill Hugo's cup, then his own. He took a long draw from his cup and returned it to the table.

"I have been at work for some time, tilling the soil, you might say." He paused, looking Raj straight in the eye. "Though our dragons are the decisive advantage, we will need more. We need the people to be with us. We need them ready to welcome our rise to power. I have been working toward that end, on many fronts, undermining their leaders in various ways." He took another long drink from his cup. "I am committed to our course. Soon, the dragon masters will rise."

"Good," the dark man said. "And *are* the people ready?"

The man laughed.

"You've quickly gobbled up Thurmond's realm, yourself, Your black hoards cover the land. There's no trouble to be had there." He flashed Raj a patronizing smile. "To the west there is still much regard for Kendrick, though I've managed to raise doubts about him among the commoners. I am presently at work, but there is more to be

done. As for the south and north, those realms are unknown to me," he glanced toward Saniyya and then to Hugo. "I assume the two of you know more?"

"I've been ready for at least a year," Hugo boasted.
"The north country is a harsh land, and only the hearty are able to thrive there. Those few who have tried to gain influence have been pushed out. I am ready to move!" He emphasized his point with a pound of his large fist on the tabletop.

Saniyya leaned forward, speaking confidently in spite of her difficulties with the language.

"In south, clans rule. But clans are divided long years, have shed each other blood since time of ancestors. But divided clans does not make weak clans. Independent, strong, fierce. Clans always ready for fight. All clans will fight, will fight us until dead. It is way of the clans."

The man watched as the three visitors contemplated the situation. He knew it was too early for them to reveal themselves openly to the people. He had called for the meeting to assert influence, to subtly put himself in a place of giving instructions instead of following them. This was the moment he had waited for, the time where he must carefully put himself out as leader of the group, though he would be careful not to use that word.

"It seems," he began, "that we are at the mercy of time. Certain things remain to be done, and they cannot be rushed." He paused to look each of them directly. "If we are to carry out the plan handed down to us, we must wait until the time is right." Hugo began to voice a protest, but Raj silenced him with an upraised palm in his direction.

"Continue," Raj beckoned.

"I am glad for the diligence with which you've each done your part, efforts worthy of the ancestors. I say that sincerely. I too have been diligent, but have had to be very careful. We cannot be discovered too soon. Kendrick is a

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shrewd one, and he has a wife who is especially keen, even suspicious. The people of their realm are fond of them. Undermining their influence has required deceit and patience. I cannot promise when the time for our movement will be, but it will be soon. I have secured a particularly painful hold on them, which I will soon exploit. You can rest easy, my friends. They will do whatever I say, when the time comes."

Raj looked at him curiously.

"What is this hold? Tell us."

This was the moment he knew would come. If he had established any influence over the group, it would be seen now.

"I will not reveal it to you," he stated flatly, and reached again for his cup.

Raj bristled, anger registering on his face. Hugo shifted in his seat. Saniyya did not flinch.

"The power I have over Kendrick is tenuous, at best. It is a situation I must handle with great care. You must trust me. That is all I will say."

The man returned Raj's piercing gaze, being careful not to flinch. He knew he must win the battle of wills; everything depended on it. Saniyya broke the tense silence.

"We are one. It has been said, it has been agreed. Trust must be. I do not like it, but it must be."

"I don't like it at all!" Hugo erupted. "If there truly is some kind of power you have over Kendrick, which I am not sure I am ready to believe, it is something we all must know. It is inconceivable that we should be purposely kept in the dark! Unless you are saying that one of us is not to be trusted with your precious information!" Hugo's hot temper rose red up his fat neck. His meaty fist once again assaulted the tabletop. "I demand you tell us!"

The man sat motionless, untouched by the outburst. His mannerisms were calculated. He knew their subtle

power. Like a great oak, standing against the howling wind, he sat, staring into his cup. Hugo shifted again, breathing heavily in the higher altitude. Saniyya's lips moved repeatedly, whispering in a tongue unknown to him. But Raj was a master at the same game. He also waited, patiently watching, content to wait for a response.

"I will *not* reveal it," the host emphasized. "Too much is at stake. The time will come, but not yet. You all must trust me," he said, staring across the table at Hugo.

From the corner of his eye, he could see a barely perceptible smile on Raj's face, then it was gone.

"Saniyya is right," Raj said, turning to Hugo, and then glancing at their host. "He must be trusted. This time has been planned, for centuries. It cannot be jeopardized because of impatience. Only our friend here knows the details that will allow him to freely share with us. We must wait."

Hugo continued to puff. Saniyya smirked from the shadows.

"I still don't like it," Hugo mumbled.

"I will send word when my efforts are finished," the host said with a look around the table. "Thank you for coming."

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At the sound of the visitors rising from the table, the girl pressed the side of her head against a sack of grain, pushing the folded cloth back into place over her left ear. She hoped her defiance would go undetected. If not, she knew the harsh punishment of the lash would soon follow. But what she had discovered was worth the risk.

Escaping the cruel hold of her master had been uppermost in her thoughts the past eleven years, and he had been careful to allow her no such opportunity. But with

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what she knew from the dark conversation she'd just overheard, the desire to escape rose like a fire in her breast. These were no ordinary conspirators. They were people of uncanny ability and ambition, and their resources were beyond what anyone could know. Though her captor had refused to share the information with his guests, she knew the hold over Lord Kendrick to which he referred. Eleven years of captivity told her that he would not utilize his advantage any sooner than he thought prudent. He was a patient, calculating, truly evil man. His cruelty had proven it to her.

Though she had not seen them, she could tell that each of the visitors were evil in their own way. But from her experience with their host, she knew that the three visitors were the ones at a disadvantage in the partnership. They did not know the power of the conniving intellect with which they had aligned themselves. Time would teach them, she had no doubt.

She was a servant, a slave, but still had one advantage. It was the secret that her captor withheld from the group. It was who she knew herself to be. She was Camille, daughter of Lord James Kendrick. The time had come to summon every ounce of resolve and courage within her, and plan an escape.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

As sunlight was cresting the edge of the world before him, Hon had traveled miles since rising. He had just made the turn around the southern end of The Ridge and was headed eastward at a good trot. Glancing up and to his left, he saw the last manned outpost of Kendrick's realm, high on the shoulder of The Ridge. It was too far away for him to see any movement, but he was sure he was being watched. He was making good time. If he could keep the same pace, he would reach Brookhaven within another day.

The horse beneath him had proven herself steady and reliable. Though it had been a very hard morning of travel, she had borne it well. Morning passed into afternoon, with one quick stop beside a creek to rest his mount and stretch his legs, then he moved on. The road stretched far before him, straight as an arrow. He could see for miles. The only travelers he'd encountered so far were going in the direction from which he'd come. A family in a rickety cart, loaded with what looked like every possession they owned. A solitary rider on a dirty old hack, and most recently, a pair of soldiers, dressed in black, riding hard toward the border.

As the light of day faded into evening, pink, orange, and gray spread across the thin, high clouds. Far ahead he could see the light of a large fire; the crossroads. Storm huffed beneath him, still willing, but tired from the day's journey. There was little cover along the road, other than a scattering of boulders 100 yards to the south. He made for them and set up camp while light remained. Both he and his horse would be better suited for what they might encounter at the crossroads after a good night's rest.

He woke while it was still dark and lay still, listening to the sounds of the wilderness. An owl hooted. Mice scurried in the brush. The wind blew softly. He could hear Storm's heavy breathing from the makeshift pen where he'd stabled her. Her occasional stomp indicated that she was awake and ready to ride. It was the first time Hon had ever been entirely on his own, apart from the night he spent in the forest after being snatched from his home. Thankfully, that memory was fading more and more into the fog of the past.

Hon wondered what lay ahead, what he would find in Brookhaven? Would he remember it? Would the people remember him? Would he even recognize his own father? He ached as he thought of it. He rose, eager to know the answer to those questions, but intentionally waited for the full light of day. He desired his encounter with the crossroad sentries to be as routine as possible. He decided to ride slowly, giving them time to see his approach.

Arriving at the crossroads, one man stood in the center of the road, his insignia designating he was the commander of the checkpoint. He was a man of average height, but powerfully built. The hair on his thick forearms was streaked with the scars of past conflicts. Two other swordbearing men rose from the fire and joined the commander as Hon approached. All wore black and bore the coat of arms of the mysterious new lord of the land; a snarling leopard hovering atop two crossed katar.

"Whoa!" the commander called, with an upraised hand. Hon brought Storm to a halt, ten feet away.

"What's your business in Rajic?"

"Visiting family," Hon replied, "in Brookhaven."

"Family? What's the name?"

"Stewart, my father. He's a huntsman, or was."

"Was? What's your meaning?" asked the man.

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"It's been long since I've seen him," Hon answered.
"When I was a boy he was a huntsman but now, I don't know. I have news that he's been injured."

The man looked carefully at Hon.

"How old are you, boy?"

"Eighteen."

The man cocked his head to the side, assessing Hon from the corner of his eye.

"One your age should be enlisted. It's your responsibility to the lord of the land," the man replied.

"This is not my land," Hon answered, with a bit too much bluster. "I live in Newtown, north of the Twins, in Kendrick's realm."

The man grinned.

"My point exactly, *boy*. You *are* enlisted, under Kendrick, and this father of yours is a ruse to get into our land."

The man stared him down as the other two moved to flank him, their hands on their swords.

"You can suspect what you like, but it doesn't make it true. I am not enlisted, under Kendrick or anyone else. The only ones I serve are those of my village, and them by choice. We live as neighbors in Newtown, for the common good, and we are far off the beaten path and are left alone." Storm shifted her weight. "And, Lord Kendrick does not impress soldiers from among the people. We are free to join his ranks, but it is not required, or needed. He is a good lord. Men of quality flock to him."

The commander looked at his fellow soldiers, obviously amused.

"The boy aims to teach us a few things about the world!" He joked. "Get off your horse, *boy*. Do it now."

All three soldiers drew swords. Though they had accused him of being a spy, Hon also knew they might want nothing more than to use their authority to rob him.

Still being in the saddle, his first instinct was to bolt past them. He was confident he could push through without too much risk to himself or his horse. But it would only be a matter of time before they caught up to him, and they knew where he was headed.

Dismounting, Hon raised his hands, hoping to show them he did not intend to resist. One soldier took hold of Storm's bridle near the bit, another removed Hon's belt. He was forced to his rump beside the road. A soldier stood behind him, sword drawn, squeezing Hon's interlaced fingers atop his head while the other two went through his belongings. Hon knew they would find nothing, either of value or of importance. Once the search was complete, the leader turned toward Hon, scowling.

"You can go. But it's to Brookhaven and back here within four days. If you are not looking me in the eye come the morning of the fourth day, the whole of Raj's army will be on the lookout for you, boy. Get on your horse and go."

The soldier released his hands with a shove and Hon moved to retrieve his weapons.

"No weapons," the leader commanded. "You'll do less mischief without 'em. If you are here on the fourth day, they'll be returned."

Hon glared at the man. Everything in him wanted to fight.

"Move along, boy, while I still allow it," the leader said with a mocking grin.

Hon got on his horse.

"What is your name, commander?" Hon asked. "I want to make sure I ask for you when I return."

The man looked at his companions, then back to Hon.

"Eadric," he said with a laugh. "But you won't have any trouble finding me."

"I'm counting on it," said Hon.

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He took a last, hard look at commander Eadric and headed north.

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The road north was wide and clear, surrounded by open plains most of the way. Hon passed a handful of wagons, loaded with produce, supplies, and people. He rode hard, only allowing Storm the opportunity to water and rest. At the second of his few stops, his eyes were drawn to a plume of dust rising on the road ahead; another band of travelers moving south. But as the party drew near, he could tell there was something unusual about it. Ten men with skin as dark as night rode silently atop regal white horses that were lean and muscular. Each man held a spear, their gleaming points raised toward the sky, purple flags flapping gently atop their shafts. Curved swords hanging from their belts gleamed in the sunlight. A powerful man at the head of the group had noticed Hon, and was keeping a watchful eye on him. The dark warriors surrounded an ornate cart, enclosed by patterned curtains of the same purple hues that adorned the spears. It was clear to Hon that a person of prominence traveled inside. Lumbering along, tethered to the cart, followed a stocky, speckled mule.

Hon nodded as the group passed, receiving a wary nod in return from the large man at the point. As the wagon passed, the curtains parted briefly and a veiled face peered out at him. The mysterious, dark eyes were beguiling and full of intrigue. The woman's gaze made him feel weak and small, insignificant, in the wide, exotic world. With along blink and a nod of the head, the woman let the curtain fall closed, and the party continued its journey south.

The press of Storm's soft nose against Hon's arm roused him, drawing his mind back to his journey. The sun moved ever higher and eagerness rose in his soul. He

mounted again and by mid-day the edge of the northern woods rose from the horizon. He quickened his pace. Brookhaven lay just inside the forest. The trees loomed high and tall before him, his heart beat heavily in his chest.

Entering the woods, he rode another two miles, and the small village took shape before him. He slowed his pace, aware that a sudden approach might cause alarm. He rode the last 500 yards at a walk, giving his horse and his heart time to settle. Each step brought the scene into clearer focus. A woman carried a basket. A girl heaved a bucket of water from the lip of the well. A small boy threw a stick and a dog retrieved it. An old man sat before a small hut, smoking a pipe. The familiar sounds of village life greeted him, welcoming him.

He rounded the corner into the village, walking Storm alongside the largest structure. From the amount of smoke billowing from the chimney, and the repeated, rhythmic ring of the hammer, he knew it to be the blacksmith's shop. Hon dismounted, took a deep breath, and stepped into the doorway. A muscular, lean man more than twenty years his senior was bent over the anvil, his hammer forcing sparks from the glowing metal. He worked diligently and with obvious care.

"Hello." Hon called. "Could you help me?"

Looking up, the man shaded his eyes from the afternoon glare that outlined Hon's dark silhouette.

"Be happy to," he replied, moving toward Hon. "If I can."

Hon hesitated at the thought of saying words he never imagined possible.

"I'm looking for someone, my father."

The man's head cocked to one side.

"What's his name?"

"Stewart," Hon said with a crack in his voice.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The hammer fell to the ground as the man stepped closer. A disbelieving face emerged from the shadows. The blacksmith stopped before him, his lower lip trembling.

"Hon?"

Hon nodded, unable to speak.

"Praises be..." the blacksmith whispered.

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The blacksmith's strong hand pushed open the door, and the two of them stepped inside the small cottage.

"Stewart?"

A voice replied through a back doorway.

"Back here, Fulton."

Following the blacksmith through the length of the hut, Hon stepped outside again, into a small, clear area. Stewart was hunched over a small, leather-bound book, clearly struggling to make out the meaning of the words.

"Stew, your prayers have been answered. Hon is home."

The seconds that passed seemed eternal as Hon looked into the eyes of an older version of himself; the square jaw, the dark hair, the bright eyes. There was no doubt it was his father. A visible shiver ran through Stewart's body as he closed his eyes and whispered something Hon could not make out. Tears trickled out as he opened his eyes, and he rose from his chair. Stewart's open arms beckoned Hon and the two of them were immersed in joy. Stewart's wavering voice broke the silence.

"Long have I prayed... so long..."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

All of Brookhaven celebrated Hon's arrival, but more, his very existence. He felt honored, far beyond what he'd felt even at his birthday celebrations among his new family at Newtown. Though he was the center of attention, he began to realize that it was not really him that was being honored. The villagers honored the culmination of their hopes, and the answer to many prayers that his return represented. For that day in the life of his father's small village, uncertainty was gone and hope had turned to reality.

In his training, Rowan had spoken of the need for manly sacrifice, but it had been nothing more than an ideal, something he aspired to but did not personally know. As the pieces of his story were placed alongside the accounts of the villagers, the word "sacrifice" took on flesh and bone. It was ironic. Surrounding him, in the midst of the joyous reunion were a handful of widows and even more fatherless children, whose husbands and fathers had made the ultimate sacrifice, for his sake. In addition, there were two men, Fulton and Stewart, who bore in their bodies the marks of the hardships they had endured on his behalf. Hon was humbled beyond words.

He sat up with his father, Fulton, and Ida, late into the night, listening eagerly as the gaps in his memory and life were filled in. The death of his mother. The search for him. The ambush. The long winter of healing in Gerrard's hut. The journey home and the years since. Hon mixed in his own tales, filling in the corresponding blanks for the three of them. It was a rich time, but also a time of regret over

things lost and experiences that should have been shared, but were not.

On the second day after his arrival, Hon sat with his father in front of Fulton's blacksmith shop, looking across the square as they reminisced. His father told stories of his mother, of how her simple faith had guided and sustained her through every hardship of life, and had held her safely even as she closed her eyes in death.

"Hon, it embarrasses me to say it, but your mother was the *true* strength of our family. I had the brawn, the muscle, but a family needs a different kind of strength than that, a spiritual strength. She took on that heavy burden of responsibility, a burden intended by Providence to be mine. She did the praying. Her father taught her how to read and passed on some fragments of scripture to her. Nest to you, they were her treasure, and she pondered them constantly. I'm ashamed of it now, but I wasn't interested, in reading or the scriptures.

"I don't mean to say that she was domineering, not at all. She was always gentle, and sweet, and supportive of me. But her faith was the strength that made our home the haven it was, I see that now." Tears began to trickle into his beard. "Hon, I was a stubborn man, full of pride. Still am in ways." His throat clenched momentarily. "I thought that in order to be a man I had to be self-reliant. But that only meant I was a fool."

Hon was slow to respond.

"But men are supposed to be strong, able, the ones to bear the weight of the hardships," his voice trailed off.

"Yes," his father said with difficulty. "But we are fools to think we have the ability to do it alone." He pointed to Tess, who passed by the well in front of them, a basket in her hands. "Her husband was one who came to search for you. He showed me what a true man is." They paused to

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

watch Tess pass by. She noticed them following her movement and smiled. Stewart waved a greeting.

"While we were on the road, I was suffocating under the weight of grief. It seemed impossible to find you, and I was despairing. North, her husband, said something to me that day that I'll never forget." Stewart stared into the sky, as if the statement were etched in the clouds. "North said, 'If we go wisely in the strength the Lord gives us, we'll do alright, even if suffering comes with it.' "I hadn't been looking to the Lord for strength, I'd been expecting myself to be strong. But the good Lord didn't design us to bear that kind of weight. Every person who tries will wind up breaking."

The sound of Fulton's hammer rang from the building behind them. Stewart listened to the rhythmic blows a moment, then resumed with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder.

"Listen to that, the sound of creation. But have you imagined what it must be like for the metal he shapes? What if it could feel, Hon, what if it could talk? What would it tell us about its experience? It endures fire, the blows of the hammer, the shock of the cold water, all to become what it is meant to be. It's not a gentle process, but it's got to happen if the horse is to have its shoes, or a farmer his plow. God didn't make us strong enough to bear the hardships of life, but by it, He molds us into something strong."

The trees across the way shimmered in the soft breeze as their conversation continued. They spoke of the past and delighted in the present. It was a wonderful time. They also spoke of the future. Hon did not want to leave his father, and the deadline the crossroads commander had set was looming. He was also torn between his obligation to his father and his responsibility to his friends in Newtown. There were people there he truly loved, as much as he did

his father. He wasn't sure what he should do. Stewart chuckled as Hon described his dilemma.

"I've been thinking on it too, and I have no easy answer for you, son." He paused to wipe a tear from his eye. "You know I would love for you to stay on here. We have missed so much of each other's lives. But it sounds like you've become part of something important across The Ridge, and it shouldn't be tossed aside either." He sighed. "You will know when the time is right."

"But I don't *have* time. I leave tomorrow if I am to reach the crossroad by the deadline. Once I am there I don't know what to expect. The commander there didn't seem eager to trust me, no matter the..."

He was interrupted by the excited shouts of children across the square.

"The woodsman is coming!"

Hon looked to his father questioningly.

"Gerrard. You remember?" Hon nodded. "He comes to visit us often. Though Fulton has healed up quite nicely, I think my condition still concerns him." He smiled and whispered, "He's a bit of a mother hen, but don't tell him I said that. Whatever his reason, I'm always glad to see him."

Angus' deep bark echoed across the square as the old, donkey-drawn cart rolled into view. Children scampered out of their huts to welcome the old man, whose humorous stories had won their hearts. Mothers stood on their stoops, shading their eyes, waving and smiling as the cart creaked past.

"Whataya been feedin' these wee ones?" he called.
"They've sprouted a sight since last I laid me eyes on 'em!"

Fulton stepped out to join them as the cart rolled up in front of the forge. The three men moved to welcome the old woodsman.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN**

"Gerrard! It's always good to see you my friend. You've been busy, I see," Fulton remarked, pointing to the hides piled high in the back of the cart.

"Aye. Has been a good summer, trapping and hunting, that's for sure lad. I wanted you good folk to have first pick of the lot afore I head to market with 'em."

"You are kind, as always," Stewart responded.

At the sound of Stewart's voice, the old man of the woods noticed Hon, standing next to his father. The likeness must have been evident because his eyes grew, almost filling the open space above his thick beard.

"Dear bliss us!" the woodsman cried, as he jumped down from the cart and barreled over to Hon. Before Hon knew what had plowed into him, he was wrapped in a huge embrace. After releasing him, Gerrard clasped his shoulders and held him at arm's length.

"Has the lost coin turned up after so long? Upon my soul! Such a thing I never thought to see. 'Tis a miracle to top 'em all, lads!"

"Agreed!" said Fulton. "We've been rejoicing these past two days, but are sad that Hon may be leaving as early as tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Gerrard said, with a curious expression.
"Then we come together by the hand of Providence. I have news lads," he said, glancing at Hon, "and I suspect it may be of great interest to you, young man."

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Seated at a rough table inside the smithy, the three men listened to Gerrard's tale.

"Livin' all by me lonesome self, I've got plenty o' time for thinkin', and strangely enough, lately I been thinkin' about you, lad," Gerrard said, slapping Hon on the shoulder. "Like yer good father here, I've been slow to

believe you gone. I don't have much reason for it, but it's true nonetheless. On top o' that, I've been wonderin' why you were snatched away in the first place, and I been wondering why, if you was still a-livin', you'd still be a-livin'. A beastie like that would not be prone to lettin' his dinner scurry away. You can see, I been doin' my share 'o wonderin'!" Gerrard scratched his jaw vigorously through his thick beard. "This old world doesn't spin on of its own will. There's a great purpose behind it. An' I believe there's been purpose in what's happened to you, lad."

Hon nodded, glancing at his father.

"I believe that, finally."

"What's all this got to do with the news you mentioned?" Fulton asked.

"I ain't to be rushed, lad," Gerrard chided with a wink. "Here it is now, so hear me plain; me birds have brought some disturbing news of late, about that dragon of yours," he said, looking to Hon. "Seems she's on the prowl. There's reports of sheep, goats, cows, all of 'em being taken in the night. Sometimes a trace o' blood remains, but mostly just gone. Some have said a ghostly, black form swoops down from the sky, taking children and grown-up alike, just as you were, me lad."

"Black?" Stewart said. "I suppose in the dark of night it could appear so, but the beast we encountered was red."

"That's right," Fulton nodded. "But before any of us saw it, it had already lit up the village. If it attacked before setting things aflame, it would seem nothing more than a dark form swooping from the sky."

"We feared this before," Stewart said. "That the dragon would develop an appetite for the easy prey the villages provide. It was one of the reasons we pressed on with our quest to find you, Hon. Even if you were lost to us, we wanted to do what we could to rid the land of the beast."

Hon turned to Gerrard.

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"You said this news may be of great interest to me. It is curious, but I don't follow your meaning. I *have* had closer contact with the beast than anyone, but that was years ago, when I was a child. I have no better sense of what to do about this than any of you."

The beard curved into a smile.

"Lad, I don't presume to understand the mysterious hand o' Providence. He's put me, a man with book learning, in a hovel in the woods, and content to be so! To what purpose?" The old man released a hearty laugh. "I haven't the foggiest idea! But one thing I do know: unlike any man alive, you were placed into the claw of death itself, and per chanced to walk away! There's purpose behind the fact."

The puzzled expressions on Fulton and Stewart's faces told Hon they didn't know what to make of Gerrard's words any more than he did. The sound of Angus' heavy breathing rose from under the table.

"Just this morning Hon and I were speaking of his future," Stewart added. "Whether he should stay here or return to Newtown." He looked at his son. "This question about Hon's place in all of this makes things even more difficult to ferret out, am I right, Hon?"

Hon nodded.

"I want to be of help if I can be, but I'm no dragon slayer. I honestly don't know what I could do."

"Neither do I, lad," Gerrard emphasized with a slap on Hon's shoulder. "But here you sit, come back to us at the exact time the beast has begun to threaten more innocents. Just yesterday morn before I set out I got word that it's moved to the west, over The Ridge."

"Over The Ridge?" Hon said, gripped with greater concern. "Where?"

"Can't say the exact place, only that it's been spotted a few times at dusk, from atop the monastery tower. Mostly seen ranging south of there and east of the great river."

"Newtown," Hon said, shooting a look at his father.

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By mid-day Hon had decided that he must return to Newtown. The threat of the dragon was something he couldn't ignore. There were only two legitimate ways to travel. The first was the way he'd come, to the south, but he didn't want to take the chance that the commander at the crossroads might detain him. That left the main road to the north. It was a shorter distance than the southern route, but posed its own unique set of obstacles. The realm of Rajic was entirely unknown to him, and Gerrard emphasized that much to the north had changed. He'd be moving directly into the heart of the strange realm, and would be sure to encounter more Rajic troops. Gerrard cautioned against it, saying that he'd likely be pressed into service with no questions asked, especially if he didn't make it all the way through before his crossroads deadline arrived.

"But there *is* another way," Gerrard suggested. "A bit slower, but one that is sure to give a wide berth to old Raj's troops."

"What is it?" Hon asked.

"Crossways from here, through the wild," he explained, gesturing toward the northwest. "Tis a rough way, don't be mistaken. Through thick woods you'd venture, but eventually come out at the east shoulder of The Ridge, at the foot of the Widow's Peak. Do you know it?"

"We see it from Newtown," Hon responded, with a curious nod.

"There's an old pass there, called the 'Widow's Way,' and I swear to you by all that's holy, it comes by its name honestly. It's a treacherous piece of traveling." Gerrard tucked a rebellious lock of his long hair back under his fur

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cap before continuing. "I've only known a handful who've made it over and lived t' tell of it."

Hon looked nervously at his father.

"What do you think?"

Stewart smiled.

"What matters now is what you think."

Hon bit his lip, looking from his father to Fulton, to Gerrard, and back again.

"Gerrard, can you point me in the right direction?"

"I'll do ya one better, lad," the beard smiled with a wink. "Angus and me are among that handful that's made it over the Widow. If yer good father here can arrange for me goods to get to market, we'll see you over and back again, if you've a desire for it."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The dragon-clad banner that once flew over Lord Kendrick's castle had long been erased from existence. After Camille's disappearance, the emblem was too painful a reminder of his own foolishness, so Lord Kendrick had given the command that every dragon-clad banner and flag be taken down, and every tunic bearing the image be collected. He'd personally taken every one, heaped them together in the courtyard of the castle for all to see, and burned them in a raging bonfire on a dark evening, one month to the day after Camille's kidnapping. As the flames raged upward, so did his anger and regret, but most of all, his grief. They mingled with the smoke and rose heavenward, a desperate prayer for help in his time of helplessness.

Though the dragon emblem was only a memory, in his hands was a parchment, just delivered by messenger. It bore the same dragon emblem, stamped deeply into the wax that sealed the parchment. Kendrick felt his wife shudder next to him as they stared at it in disbelief.

"It must be from Simon," Lord Kendrick said, breaking the silence. "There is no one else."

They sat immobilized as the implications made their way into their still-wounded souls.

"After all this time." Patrice's voice trembled as her eyes began to moisten. "It's been eleven years, James, but my heart is *still* raw. All the false leads and rumors... I don't want this to be another. I'm afraid that it will only bear more pain. James, my heart is full up with pain. I can't take it anymore."

He tossed the parchment on the desk in front of them and wrapped both arms around his weeping wife. Her sobs broke his heart.

"I know, Patrice, I know."

He let her cry, stroking her dark hair tenderly as the deep emotions were released once again. When her quavering shoulders became still and her breathing slowed, he moved her away so he could look into her eyes.

"The pain is fresh every day for me too, love. I have come to believe it will always be so. Like a soldier wounded in battle, I walk each day with a limp, the limp of a shattered soul." He paused, searching for the words to express his sympathy. "There is so much regret Patrice, so much reflection on what I should have and could have done to keep her safe from him. You know my regrets better than anyone." He looked at the parchment. "But as hard as it is, we must face what is before us, for her sake and for ours. We feel we could not live with more pain, but equally so, we could not live with the mystery of an unread message, one that just *might* bear a glimmer of hope."

Patrice sniffed, and nodded her head hesitantly, looking up at him with mournful eyes. He reached for the parchment, then pulled her close.

"Regardless of what is beneath this seal, my love, it is all we have of her, all we have that could lead us to her." Patrice dabbed her eyes with the edge of her sleeve, nodding again. "Lord God, help us," Kendrick whispered as he pushed his shaking thumb under the leading edge of the rolled parchment and broke the seal.

Taking a deep breath, he began to read aloud. The cryptic words were unmistakably penned by the man they knew as Simon.

The little mouse is alive, but I promise she is not safe. She never was. You would not recognize the haggard shell she

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

has become; a pitiable slave who receives no pity at all. But that is not your concern, because you will not see her again. Your ladyship's "calculating cook" has concocted a delicious end for her. She is the first course in a meal for terror itself. Her slight frame will amount to nothing more than an irritating piece of gristle, lodged between its teeth. She is terror's first taste of noble Kendrick blood. The full meal is still to come; the two of you, and your darling son. Soon, I ride on the wings of terror, to laugh as it feasts upon you.

Kendrick's limp hands dropped to his lap as Patrice collapsed against him, sobbing. The purposely cruel words had found their mark. Together, they wept with the pain of knowing what Camille had become. Their lost child, now a young woman, was still lost, and suffering. But through the tears, as it had many times since Camille's disappearance, a powerful and determined anger rose in James Kendrick's heart. For eleven years there had been no word about their daughter, no possibility of finding her. But now, with this painful letter, he felt all of that changing.

"Patrice," he whispered, "the words are cruel and painful, I know. They cut deeply into my own foolish heart. But she is alive, and with that news comes a hope we've never had."

Through tears she looked up.

"Wha... we have always hoped that she was alive..."

"Yes," he interrupted, "but that is not what I mean. Until this day it has seemed that Simon is a vapor, unable to be grasped. But Patrice, he is not. He is a real man and he exists in a real place. The same way this parchment is real." He waved it in front of her, his excitement growing. "Simon has seemed elusive because we have had nothing to point us in his direction, until today. With this message, that has

changed. Patrice, this parchment did not appear suddenly out of the air. It was carried, delivered by human hands brought it here from a real place. Its movement from there to here can be tracked, Patrice!"

Her large, dark eyes looked up with a hopefulness he had not seen in years.

He emphasized again, "Patrice, this parchment can lead us to her."

Lady Kendrick's face brightened with the possibility, and she jumped to her feet.

"The messenger! He cannot be allowed to leave the castle..."

Lord Kendrick extended his hands toward her.

"Patrice, it is already done. I did not know why at the time, but I detained him until we could read this together. We will question the boy who delivered it and find out all we can."

As their eyes met, the two of them rushed from the room as one, eager to find out everything they could. After questioning the boy who brought the parchment, it was clear he was not the original bearer of the letter. He was an orphan and had been traveling alone down the east side of the Rillebrand, in search of food. He had come to a small town to the north, along the river. There he encountered a vagabond who had paid him handsomely to carry the message to Lord and Lady Kendrick. The village where he had received the letter was called Newtown.

Returning to their room, Lady Patrice poured out her heart.

"Oh praise the heavens! James, this is the clue we've been praying for. You will find her now, I know it. You should leave at once, there is no..."

Her words broke off. Lord Kendrick turned to see fear in his wife's eyes.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

"James, we must hurry! He is going to feed her to the dragon!"

Hon had expected the journey through the woods to be much slower than traveling by road, but he had not counted on Gerrard's familiarity with the ground they had to cover. The old man knew the woodland as well as Hon knew the dusty streets of Newtown. Hon followed after him eagerly, his new sword, a gift from Fulton, bouncing gently against his thigh. It was the finest blade he'd ever held, perfectly balanced, with a grip that fit his hand exactly. It was a work of art as much as it was a weapon, forged by a true craftsman.

On the first day, the two cut northwest immediately, leaving Bluewater Pond far behind well before mid-day. By the time evening came, they were into the deepest part of the northern woods, trees so thick they had to lead their horses instead of ride them, and move at constantly shifting angles rather than straight lines. Morning dawned dimly, the lush canopy overhead filtering out most of the sun's light. It created a surreal effect for Hon, a feeling that they walked in a dream, half awake yet fully alive. Were it not for Gerrard's bent for conversation and song, Hon would have felt quite isolated. The tunes were unique, like the man who sang them. Whether they were from Gerrard's childhood or created on the spot, Hon could not tell. The strong voice boldly proclaimed their presence in the soft stillness of the forest.

Off through the woods, my brave little lad Off through the trees go we Off through the woods a-tramping as we go La, la la, lally, la lee

Gerrard was a source of constant amusement and thought, his words flitting from light topics to deeply personal ones with no distinction between the two. Over the days they traveled, their conversation ranged from wood lore to philosophy, and everything in between. The diverse mixture that was Gerrard sparked a thousand questions in Hon's mind. But one outweighed them all.

"Gerrard, how did you come to live in the woods?" The woodsman exploded with laughter.

"That, me lad, is a question only the Lord above truly knows how to answer. 'Tis not the life I planned for meself. But not one I mind, mind you. The silence of a forest morn, breathing the freshness of the dewy pines, listening to the birds chirpin' out songs prettier than a man could ever dream; 'tis a wonderful life and privilege, but only the good Lord knows why I'm here."

"But how did you get out here?"

"Angus! Here, boy!" the woodsman shouted to his straying dog. "So you want to know the means He used to get me here? Now that's a tale," his voice grew somber, "and a painful one, too. From me wee years, I was alongside me father. He worked the land and did sundry odd jobs, out of necessity. Ten mouths to feed besides his own, and by that time, no woman alongside to help him. Mother passed squeezing out me youngest brother, Gerald, so father carried the heavy weight by his lonesome self. Being the oldest of the lads, much was expected of me, and I did my share. I wonder sometimes if I'd have served him better staying on at the farm, but me father wanted more for me than he had for himself. 'Twas a wide world of learning away from the fields, and he wanted me to have it. So, I went."

Gerrard removed his fur cap, tousled his long hair vigorously with both hands until it resembled a dirty, dark haystack, then replaced the cap.

"There was a man in the city who we saw when we went into town, a man of letters and the law. Me father had the thought that such a man could provide an education, so under the man's tutelage I went. I stayed with his family four days of seven, working alongside him, learning the law. I'd head home for the other three days. Me dear father was harder pressed because of me absence, but such is the love of a father, lad, such is the love..."

For some time Gerrard looked off to the distance as he whispered to himself. Hon watched him, wondered, and waited. Finally, the woodsman resumed his account as if he'd never stopped.

"I completed me learning and moved out as me own man, a man of letters, and the law. Word came that a position for one such as meself was open in the north country, far beyond the mountains yonder," he pointed through the trees to his right. "So I inquired and went. Seemed a great opportunity, but 'twas the curse of me life. I came under the service of a fat, lecherous scoundrel who was rising to power at the time.

"He was an odd bird, often flitting off to the eastern snow caves. The wretch would stay days in that frozen waste, always taking a maiden or two from the household along, then return without 'em, as if a week in the snow caves was as common as a trip to market. Not a soul knew what he did there, or what happened to the young lasses. Nary a soul spoke of it, and life went on. Me? I married, and I had me a daughter, a cute, pudgy little lass, full of joy, and smiles, and giggles."

The trees thinned and the way grew steep as they drew closer to the foot of The Ridge.

"Did you have a falling out with him?" Hon asked. Gerrard shot a sideward glance at him.

"Exactly so, lad. We got entirely crossways. I couldn't stomach his nasty habits and lewd ways and he couldn't

stomach that I wouldn't put up with them. The man was the picture of a lecher, using his authority to have his way with, with the maidens," his voice quavered. "When he came near me own daughter as she come of age, well..." he paused to wipe his eyes. "We had words. Alright, a wee bit more than words."

Hon looked at Gerrard curiously.

"Alright then, a *lot* more than words, lad. 'Tis enough to say, Hugo will forever bear the marks of that day, I guarantee."

Breathing heavily with the exertion of moving uphill, Gerrard stopped and turned directly toward Hon.

"Lad, there are things in life worth more than life. The souls given to one's care are among them. They are the only things a body takes into eternity with 'em. Me only regret is that I couldn't have given mine to save theirs."

He paused again, clearly struggling to speak.

"I'm sorry." Hon said uncomfortably. "You don't have to tell me..."

"The villain butchered me daughter and wife," Gerrard pressed on abruptly. "Had me stripped naked as a newborn babe, and cast into the winter night. He thought the night to be a cruelty, but 'twas the means of me salvation. In the darkness, a friend snuck out clothing, food, and a few of me belongings, and pointed me to the south. The long and short of it is that I came to these woods an embittered man who didn't care to ever see a living soul again."

Hon waited, unsure what to say. Gerrard sank onto a log and started rummaging through his pack. He tossed Angus a scrap.

"Did you ever go back? For revenge?" Hon asked. Gerrard's beard fluttered from the burst of a large sigh.

"Wanted to, many times, lad. But never could. The more me mind was set on making the scoundrel pay, the

more it did me in. Consumed me every thought, and sucked me dry, like a leech."

"So what did you do?"

A faint chuckle escaped the beard.

"Do? Well there weren't no magical spell to ward off the pain. Such don't exist. Pain that deep endures as long as life. Sometimes the only thing a body can do is give it up, and move on."

Hon was indignant, and as the words tumbled from his lips he realized he was speaking about the injustices of his own life.

"Give it up? But what happened was unfair! How can you just give it up?"

Gerrard spun to face him.

"Lad, don't hear me sayin' I give up the cause! What I give up is the notion that I have to be the one to see it made right. Listen lad, and hear me clear. I could spill the whole of Hugo's blood, and it still wouldn't be enough to pay for what he's done. Even dead, the mongrel would be gettin' off soft. So, I give the cause to the only One who can make him pay adequate, and I leave it there. He knows it all, more clearly than I ever could. And He's not One for forgetting. The day's coming lad, the day's coming."

Without another word, Gerrard slung his pack over his shoulder, reached for the reins of Gertie, his mule, and started upward through the boulders strewn along the shoulder of The Ridge. Hon scrambled to gather himself and his things and followed after him. The steep climb required many stops, to regain breath and perspective. Boulders and trees were so thick it seemed there could be no way up, yet Gerrard knew where he was going. With every break in the trees the old man peered up The Ridge, pointing out landmarks, identifying a path, then set off toward the furthest point he had noted. Hon did his best to keep up.

"Tree line before darkness falls," Gerrard called over his shoulder, "that's our aim. Leaves us a short climb over the top come the morn, and a quick descent to the valley on the other side before mid-day. Might give us a chance to make your Newtown by next day's end."

Snow was still a month away but the unmistakable signs of winter's approach made themselves evident the higher they climbed. Icy wind shot down from the dark clouds gathering atop The Ridge, cutting to the bone. The last stop before tree line, Gerrard pulled heavy furs from his pack to wrap over their cloaks. Reaching their goal right at twilight, they had a hard time finding a good camp. After much scrambling about in the dark, a fire was made against the flat side of a boulder, and a lean-to shelter was fashioned from fallen branches, its opening facing toward the fire, its back uphill and into the growing wind. Gerrard looked gravely at the black sky as thunder rumbled overhead.

" 'Tis a fearful place to be with this storm coming on, lad," he shouted over the wind. "But we haven't much choice if we're to make good time on the morrow. We must stay dry so the wind doesn't do us in!"

With that, he struggled to throw another fur over the top of the shelter and Hon helped him tie it down. Huddled in the small shelter, shivering with cold, they ate, said little, and fell asleep fitfully.

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Hon woke just as the shelter pitched to the side and tumbled downhill, crashing into the trees. His long hair whipped his cheeks painfully as he fought to rise to his knees in the raging gale. Darkness hid the rain, but his clothes were already dripping from the downpour. Gerrard's blankets lifted from the ground, snagging on a scrub oak on

their way downhill, their owner nowhere to be seen. Embers sputtered in the stone ring, providing little light. Hon strained to get his bearings, unsure what to do. The howl of the wind overwhelmed every sound, even Hon's voice, as he called for Gerrard. Listening intently, he heard nothing.

He crawled toward the makeshift pen they had constructed to stable their animals, suspecting that Gerrard may have gone to check on them. A rail had torn from its lashing and the animals were gone. There was no sign of his the animals, or his friend.

"Gerrard!" Hon shouted, but his voice was swallowed by the chaos. There were really only two options; wait out the storm, or venture out in it to find Gerrard. He chose the latter. Hon assumed Gerrard would be looking for the animals, and knew he'd have a better chance of finding *their* deep prints in the muddy ground, than he would those of the woodsman. On his knees, he located the first hoof print and began his search. The trail was easier to follow than he had imagined, their weight making deep, wide holes in the sodden ground. The distance between prints told him that the animals were running, obviously disoriented and frightened by the storm. Sixty feet from the stable, he found the first of Gerrard's footprints.

Hon picked up his pace, following the trail uphill. The combination of rain and wind were already numbing his face and hands, and he knew Gerrard could be in no better shape. Runoff rushed down the mountainside, cutting a deep swath across his trail. Wading through the torrent, Hon emerged on the other side to no sign of the footprints he'd been following. Working his way up and down the edge of the rushing water, he found Gerrard's prints first. Their up and down pattern revealed that he'd mounted his own search for the trail after crossing the flow. Following

Gerrard's footprints, Hon eventually found where the animals had emerged, thirty feet downhill.

A sudden, piercing howl faintly penetrated the screaming wind. Hon froze, listening. He heard nothing but the wind whistling through the boulders. As he resumed his search the sound broke through again; this time, clearly that of a dog.

"Angus!"

The wails came from the direction he was already headed, so Hon doubled his speed. Sharp boulders and fallen trees blocked the way, forcing the path to narrow. In the darkness, Hon could see the mingled tracks of horse, mule, man, and dog. He had found them.

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Passing through a jagged opening in a massive rock, Hon stepped onto a rocky shelf, almost falling into a gaping abyss that was unseen in the darkness. Angus' deep bark sounded through the wind from his right side and the dog bounded toward him.

"Where are they, old boy?" Hon asked, kneeling.

Responding with a whine, the hound wheeled around and returned the way he had come. Twelve feet along the ledge he stopped, dropped his head over the edge of the shelf and howled. Looking down, Hon couldn't believe what he saw. Twenty five feet down, on a flat area no wider than a haystack were Storm, Gertie the mule, and Gerrard. The mule was laying down, in a pool of water. Gerrard knelt over her, unaware Hon was there.

"Gerrard! Up here!" Hon called.

The woodsman spun around.

"I wondered how the good Lord would get you here, Lad" he shouted. "But you can tell me the tale another time!

We've got an injured beast here, and I can't see me way out of this hole!"

Hon shook his head in disbelief. Rising from the floor on every side of the pit, were sheer rock walls. Along the far wall of the pit was a narrow, scree-covered berm that slanted upward, but in the darkness Hon couldn't tell if it was passable or not.

"How did you get down there in the first place?" Hon yelled.

"The animals must have tumbled right down on top of each other," Gerrard shouted. "I took the leap deliberately when I saw that Gertie was hurt."

"How bad is she?" Hon shouted.

"Bad enough. She can stand, and even if she can be got out of this pit, she won't be bearing me weight any time soon."

"I'm going to take a look around to see if there's a way up!" Hon called over the wind.

Gerrard nodded with a wave and turned back to the animals. Moving to his right, along the ledge, Hon hoped to find a way around to the berm on the other side of the pit, but the rocky shelf upon which he stood, soon fell into nothingness. Heading back the direction he came, the ledge grew wider as he made his way beyond the cleft through which he had entered. The path, if it could be called that, followed the mouth of the pit in a tight curve, until Hon was standing above the berm. It actually turned out to be another ledge, similar to the one he'd been walking. The top of it jutted out from the inside of the pit wall, two feet below him, and slanted steeply downward toward the floor, ending abruptly four feet from the bottom.

"Gerrard! Can you see a way to get the animals onto this ledge?" he asked, pointing beneath him.

The woodsman rose from his knees and moved to take a closer look.

"The gap is too wide, lad," he called. "Your horse may be able to jump it, but with her hurt leg, Gertie won't have a chance."

"Could we fill it in? Maybe a large rock rolled up against it?"

Gerrard scratched his beard vigorously.

"Dear bliss us, it might work! But the shape has to be just right, angled on the top."

"I'll see what I can find!" Hon shouted.

Though there were many rocks to choose from, there weren't many that were real options for him to use. Those light enough for Hon to move were too small for the job, and those that seemed large enough were too heavy to budge. He'd have to improvise. Gathering up every rock he was able to move, he soon had a collection of them perched along the rim of the pit.

"Gerrard! We'll have to create a mound. Can you keep the animals to the other side?" Hon yelled.

Gerrard waved and nodded his head. He moved Storm past the fallen mule to the far side of the pit, then cajoled Gertie to her feet. The mule limped the few feet to join Storm as Gerrard coaxed her along.

Turning back toward Hon, Gerrard shouted, "Do it, lad!"

With great effort, Hon shoved rock after rock over the side of the cliff. Once he finished, Gerrard began arranging them at the foot of the ledge. Three more times Hon had to find rocks to add to the mound, until finally, just as the rain stopped, Gerrard declared their construction finished. Hon eased himself onto the lower ledge and made his way down into the pit, pushing away rocks that had fallen on it, as he went. At the end of the ledge, Gerrard's mini-mountain rose to meet him.

"If it's to hold our animals," Gerrard laughed, "it had better hold the likes of you, lad. Give it a try!"

Hon gingerly stepped onto the mound, making his way to the pit floor. A few minor avalanches later, he landed on the solid rock at the bottom.

"We can shore it up a bit, but it should do, lad, it should do! Can't see the top meself, how's it look up there?"

"There's a two foot gap from the ledge to the top of the pit," Hon answered. "Do you think Gertie can make it?"

"She can make the jump, but I'm not sure about the landing," Gerrard said. "It's her front foreleg that's injured. Not broken, but it can't bear much weight. I'd hate to see her make the jump but wind up in the pit again, nonetheless. Can we make any kind of bridge across the gap?"

"I thought of that, but it would be too narrow."

"Then we'll give it a go, lad. Let's weather the rest of the night down here. It's got a bit shelter to it, and we can get a fire going out of the wind, if there's enough dry wood to be found."

"I'll find some," Hon said. "You stay with the animals."

Within a half an hour, Hon had snapped arm loads of dead branches from the lower trunks of the surrounding trees, and enough dry pine needles from beneath their canopies to get the fire going. In minutes, it was blazing.

"Good that the rain's ceased," Gerrard said. "It looks as though a clear sky may be ahead."

"We can only hope," Hon said, shivering from the cold, in spite of the fire.

With that, both of them lay as close to the fire as they dared, and fell into an exhausted sleep.

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Hon awoke to Gerrard's quiet singing nearby, as the wind continued to blow...

A chill wind blows and from head to toes, me aches and pains be many. So the dawn comes on and the night is gone, me food and drink be empty. And me belly growls as the cold storm howls, me heart fails deep within me. Yet from deep within comes the rising din of me kinfolk's voices plenty. 'Lift yer head me lad,' says me bygone dad 'It's ne'er time fer me to greet thee, Down the winding road are still miles to go Afore you come to meet me.' So I'll carry on as the day is long hoping that I'll see the morrow. Wanting to see him at my journey's end though each day is filled with sorrow.

Gerrard turned at the sound of Hon's rising.

"Well lad, you slept some better than me, I can say that for certain!" Gerrard quipped. "Yer snorin' was near as loud as the storm!"

"Sorry Gerrard," Hon said, rising from his place near the fire.

The beard laughed heartily.

"No matter, lad, no matter. There's more important things to be concernin' ourselves about, this fine day. First thing is to get us all out from this hole! Gertie's going to have a rough time of it, but she's well rested. So methinks now is the best time to aim her uphill. You get a bite to eat and then we'll give her the prod."

Hon wolfed down the sparse breakfast of dried meat and bread, then rose to help Gerrard.

"I was thinking that if Storm went first, it might encourage Gertie to make the effort," Hon said, gulping down the last bite of bread.

"It's as good an idea as I've got. Let's give her a whirl," Gerrard answered.

As Hon expected, the climb, and the leap over the last bit of gap, was no problem for Storm. She did it with little coaxing, happy to be out of the pit and on normal ground again. Hon walked her around the pit and out the crevice. He lay her reins over a low tree branch and descended into the pit again. Taking Gertie's reins, Hon led her onto the mountain of stones they had built, Gerrard bringing up the rear, encouraging her along.

"Up you go me lass, up you go! Hyah! Hyah!

Gertie picked her way up the rubble in spite of her injured leg and up the incline the three went. Upon reaching the gap, Hon jumped across and turned to encourage Gertie to follow. The old mule began to retreat, clearly unsure of herself.

"Go, you stubborn old mule! Go!" Gerrard yelled from behind her.

Hon tugged on the reins and Gerrard swatted the mule on the rear end, but she wasn't having it. She pulled so hard, Hon almost toppled into the gap himself.

"Hold her steady, lad. You got her? Fine, I'll be right back."

Gerrard made his way backward down the ledge, removing his pack as he went. He took out one of the bear skins they had used for a blanket, and approached the dying fire. Using the bear skin as a sort of glove, Gerrard picked up the largest live coal in the fire.

"As soon as I get up there, you move aside, lad. She's coming your way!"

When he reached the mule, Gerrard pulled the skin away from the coal, looked up to Hon with a shrug of his shoulders, and pressed the hot ember against Gertie's backside. The mule brayed in agony, laid back her ears, and bolted forward, clearing the gap with no problem,

continuing around the upper ledge, through the crevice and out into the open.

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Upon finding Gertie, it became clear that she wouldn't be traveling any time soon, at least not at the speed their task required.

"Gertie's going to be a bit in her healin', so you'll have to venture on alone, lad. The best I can do is describe the route ahead, and trust to Providence that ya' actually find it and stay on it."

"Are you sure?" Hon replied. "I don't feel right leaving you up here alone."

"You get yourself down the other side o' this ridge and leave me to meself!" Gerrard interrupted. "I been living out here alone since before you was weaned. I'll get on fine."

After receiving Gerrard's instructions, Hon bid him, Gertie, and Angus farewell, and set out. Passing the spot where they had camped, he was amazed to see no trace of them having been there. The wind had seen to it. The clouds were still dark, lying low on the peaks, but were holding their rain. Though the wind continued to howl, Hon climbed into the saddle and turned his horse up The Ridge.

The area surrounding the "Widow's Peak" was devoid of vegetation, a field of boulders that was difficult enough for a man to traverse, much less a horse. Hon was quickly forced to dismount and pick a careful route through the rocks. Upon reaching the top, he found the way blocked by a wall of tall, smooth boulders on one side, and the jutting needle of rock known as "the Widow's Peak" on the other. Searching for the signs Gerrard had described, Hon found a narrow gap between two enormous stones, through which the wind blew hard into his face. Bracing himself against

the blustery onslaught, he plunged in, leading Storm close behind.

High walls reached skyward on either side of the passageway. It narrowed with every step. The trail wound along, until the wall on Hon's left side disappeared altogether, leaving him perched at the start of a barren ledge, no wider than the face of Fulton's oversized anvil. Twenty feet ahead, the narrow trail vanished around a rock, curving tightly to the right. The rushing wind in the passageway created a suction that threatened to push Hon backward. Storm stomped nervously behind him.

"Gerrard told me about this," he spoke aloud to his horse, "and it's worse than he made it out to be. I don't know girl, it would be hard enough without the wind, but this..." He fell silent as he realized that the only way out was to push Storm straight backward through the tight crevice, which he knew was not an ability horses come by naturally. Turning back into the wind, he gathered his courage and stepped out.

Thankfully, the wind pushed him toward the wall instead of away from it, but once he reached the curve, that could change. He decided to worry about it when and if it happened. His main concern was for Storm. He turned to face her, keeping his left hand on the wall, her reins in his right hand. Though the ledge was wide enough for the horse's normal foot pattern, it did not allow the normal room needed for her girth. If she could walk the ledge at all, she would do so with the right side of her belly rubbing the side of the cliff. Hon eased backward on the ledge until he was ready to lead her out. Taking a deep breath, he tugged gently on the reins and she stepped out without hesitation. Her nervousness was evident, ears pinned back and tail swishing, nevertheless, she continued her forward trek until her hind legs were fully on the ledge. The horse walked with her neck turned to the left, her head hanging out over

the chasm. She was keeping her eye on her back foot so that she didn't step off the edge.

"Good girl," Hon reassured loudly over the wind. "Good girl."

Rounding the corner, Hon glanced over his shoulder to assess the way ahead. Ten more feet, and they would step up on to a large boulder jutting over the ledge, and begin down the westward side of The Ridge.

"This is it girl, only a little more."

Without warning, the outer edge of the trail collapsed under Hon's weight. Slipping over the edge, Hon came to rest dangling from Storm's reins, face-first against the wall, below the horse's feet. Storm raised her head high, leapt over the newly-formed hole in the ledge, and bolted toward the far end of the path, bumping Hon along the face of cliff below her.

"Whoa, girl!" Hon shouted, to no avail. The animal's instincts had taken over.

His knees, chest, and shoulders scraped along the rough cliff face as he was jerked over the chasm. With a hard yank, Storm lurched up and over the boulder, dragging Hon upward, and out of harm's way. Once safely away from the ledge, Storm slowed to a trot, then stopped. Gasping for breath, Hon lay sprawled over a rough patch of rocks. Storm turned back and nuzzled him with her soft nose.

"Yes girl, I'm fine." he panted, reaching his bloody knuckles up to rub her muzzle. "Thanks to you. Give me a bit to catch my breath."

Pulling himself into the saddle, Hon thought of Gerrard. There was no way he would be able to get Gertie over the ledge with her injured leg. Thankfully, she was smaller than Storm and would be able to turn around to head back through the crevice. He wished for a way to get a

message to Gerrard to save him the trouble, but knew it was impossible.

Turning Storm downhill, Hon raised his eyes to the horizon. Though the wind still howled, the clouds had lifted. The deep blue of the Rillebrand split the fertile plain into opposing sections, each vying to outdo the other with brilliant green hues. A faint movement to the north caught his attention and he turned.

A dark column of smoke rose from the direction of Newtown.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

"... and need I remind you, Brutus will be watching?" Silas threatened in his usual way. "Be sure of it. If he sees anything amiss, you will regret it *milady*."

The same threats were made every time Silas left the hut, whether he was gone for a few minutes to retrieve firewood, or for days to purchase supplies. Camille had learned that Silas did not make idle threats. What he promised was done, and painfully so. Like an obnoxious, old friend, she wished to be rid of but could not be, his words had come to cause Camille nothing more than mild irritation. She had learned to live with them simply because she had no other choice.

The young woman watched him turn as usual, to cast a final glare in her direction as she lie on the floor of the pantry, bound and gagged. Then he was gone. She had grown accustomed to the humiliating posture in which she was left each time he departed for a longer journey. The discomfort of her hands, tightly bound behind her. The lethargic rise of hunger. The strain and awkwardness of stretching her neck so that her mouth could reach the wineskin, hanging on the wall above her, and the difficulty and relief of sucking the tepid water through cracked lips. She had even grown accustomed to the inevitable humiliation of wetting and soiling herself. It had all happened before, many times. But she was determined, it would never happen again.

For the past few months she had watched, waited, and calculated Silas's comings and goings. She knew how often he gathered firewood, and how often he went foraging in the woods. She could accurately speculate, to within a day's

time, how long he was prone to wait between trips down the mountain to get supplies. She also knew it would take two full days of travel for him to go there and return. Camille had watched carefully so that she could learn how to manipulate the timing of his trip. She had used slightly more wheat flour each day, had wasted a morsel of meat here and a splash of wine there. By doing so, she subtly pulled the journey forward in time. It was her carefully crafted opportunity to escape.

As for Brutus, the crazed hermit of Silas's threats, she wasn't at all convinced that he existed. She had never seen him, though Silas had attributed many of the eerier forest sounds to him over the years. Silas claimed that the mad recluse once lived in the stone hut as a child, and had watched helplessly from behind a sack of grain in the pantry, as his own mother was abused and then murdered. Silas had told the story in great detail. Camille could still remember hearing it for the first time, shortly after her arrival. Silas had relished the story's affect on her innocent imagination a little too much. It was a calculated attempt to keep her in fear, and it had worked, until his own wickedness had begun to callous her otherwise tender heart. The cruelty she had endured at Silas's hand made everything else, even the crazed hermit of the forest, seem like an improvement.

Camille had planned her escape carefully. For months she had been preparing, tensing her muscles ever so slightly each time Silas bound her wrists. It was an attempt to create slack in the rope without him being aware of it, and it had worked. She was already working herself free of the ropes wrapped around her slender wrists. Soon after, the gag was off, and she turned to remove the broom and bucket from their place in the corner of the pantry. Lifting a plank from the rotting floor, she reached into the space below and

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removed a carefully hidden bag, containing dried meat and a bottle of cloudy water.

She would wait three hours before setting out. By that time, it would be late morning and Silas would be far enough down the trail for her to feel safe. There would be plenty of daylight left for her journey down the mountainside but it would be a route she had never traveled. What is more, she would do her best to stay off the path in order to better conceal her movements. It would slow her down, but she did not want Silas to discover her absence. If she were careless enough to leave a trail, her chances of vanishing from under his nose would be gone.

As Camille, daughter of Lord and Lady Kendrick prepared to step out the door onto the cabin stoop, her heart fluttered like a thousand moths, drawn to a lantern's flame. A multitude of harried thoughts danced in her mind.

What if Brutus is real after all? What if Silas forgot to take something and I meet him on the way back home? Will I have adequate shelter, and enough food? I could get lost in the woods and die of exposure.

These and a thousand more fears urged Camille to abandon her plan, but the hunger for freedom and dignity forced her into the bright day. The creak of the cabin door had a different timbre as she closed it behind her. In her lonely mind, it seemed to be the well wishes of one who had helplessly watched her suffering, and was finally able to rejoice in her escape. She stood for a moment, closing her eyes, inhaling the clean air of freedom then, made her way off the side of the stoop, forging a tentative path into the woods.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Hurtling down the west side of The Ridge, Hon rode hard and fast toward Newtown. The smoke continued to rise ahead of him as he met the main road along the base of the craggy peaks. Every beat of Storm's hooves took him into increasingly familiar territory. Within an hour he made the turn toward the west, heading directly toward the column of smoke. As mid-day approached, the village rose before him. Memories of the most devastating event of his childhood merged with the scene he saw. Flames leapt to the forefront of his mind, darkness engulfed him, as the dragon's claw snatched him from the ground once again. He fought off the memories, trying to focus on the needs of the village before him. Half the structures in the village were still smoking, but no sign of flames remained. Hon's best estimation was that the attack had happened the night before. As Storm slid to a halt, an odd stench greeted him. Death had visited Newtown.

Rowan looked up from where he and a group of uniformed men were rummaging through what was left of the smithy. He spoke to the man closest to him as he pointed to Hon, dropped the rubbish in his hands, and moved toward him.

"I am surprised to see you so soon," Rowan said. "It's a long way to Brookhaven from here."

"I came over The Ridge." Hon replied. "Gerrard, one of my father's friends, had heard rumors of dragon activity on this side of The Ridge. Something told me I should come right away. Rowan, who are the soldiers?"

"Lord Kendrick's men. They arrived a few hours ago, and Kendrick with them."

Hon raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"They came here tracing the origin of a letter Kendrick received. It has something to do with his missing daughter. Hon, I'm glad you came, we can use your help," Rowan said as he wiped his sooty hands across the front of his tunic. "There is a plan in the works to go after the beasts, and we'll need every man able to..."

"Wait, wait Rowan. Beasts? There was more than one?"

"There were two of them, one red, another black. It was last evening. A chilling shriek came from the sheepfold, just after dark. I looked out the window to see the red one gobbling up the poor creatures, two and three at a time. I reached for my sword and ran outside just as the black one swooped low overhead." Rowan paused, clearly disturbed. "Hon, I've seen some frightening things in my day, but this... it was beyond comprehension, like a nightmare come to..."

Rowan stopped short, obviously concerned how his description might affect Hon.

"It's alright Rowan. The nightmares are something I've learned to live with. Was anyone injured?"

Rowan's face turned as pale as the ash smeared across his chest.

"Many. Hon," he paused, clearly choosing his words carefully. "It's hard to tell at this point, but we fear Abigail may not last another day."

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Victoria looked up as Hon passed through the scarred door of the hut, her face drawn and weary with worry. She knelt over Abigail who lay on a pallet near the hearth. Hampton sat quietly beside her too, his eyes never leaving Abigail's still form. Victoria rose and met Hon as he

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crossed the room, almost collapsing into his arms. Her body heaved with sobs as the weight of the past few days was released in tears. Hon held her close, looking at Abigail over the top of her auburn covered head.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered.

"She was one of the first to step outside," Rowan explained, "just as the black one descended upon us. Before she could move, it spewed a sticky liquid from its mouth." He placed his hand on Victoria's shoulder and lowered his voice. "It wasn't fire, but it burned her nonetheless."

Hon drew Victoria with him toward Abigail. There were bandages on her face, neck and shoulders.

"The wounds are bad, but they are not what concern us." Rowan said.

Hampton mumbled, "Poison."

"What?" Hon inquired.

Hampton looked up to meet Hon's gaze.

"The substance not only burns like an acid, it's also a poison. In only a few moments it penetrated her skin and she was lying helpless, destitute, weakened, like this," his eyes floated back to Abigail.

"Leechy has administered a tonic and treated the burns, but there's nothing more he can do," Victoria whispered, turning toward her mother. "We just have to wait."

Hon released Victoria as she moved back toward the pallet, his hands falling limply at his side. Rowan's hand on his shoulder guided him outside.

"Hon, I know this is hard for you. It's hard for all of us. Abigail has been, well, she's been a blessing to all of us in one way or another. But Victoria is right, all we can do is wait." He paused until Hon's eyes met his. "But Hon, we must fit ourselves like men. No matter what happens with Abigail, we've got to mount a search to find and destroy those creatures, or else this will happen again and again.

Lord Kendrick is in agreement to a point. He is hard pressed to find his mysterious letter writer, understandably so. But he thinks the two goals might be the same. I am meeting with him in half an hour so he can explain what he's thinking."

The emotion of the last two weeks churned in Hon's chest. The shock of meeting Rosamond after so many years. The nervous ride to Brookhaven. Embracing his father again, crippled and frail. Gerrard's tale of the dragon attacks. The wild ride down The Ridge as the smoke of Newtown rose before him. Now, Abigail struggled for life. Each experience contributed its own emotion to the cauldron that had bubbled within him since he was a child. All of them joined forces and came to the surface as a smoldering, hot anger; a hatred for the beasts.

He focused his eyes on Rowan and clenched his jaw. "I'm with you. They must be stopped."

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Fifteen well-bred horses were stabled in a makeshift pen along the side of a barn, their bridles and saddles carefully arranged on the rails of the pen. Norman, one of the village boys Hon had helped Rowan train, brushed out their coats. Seeing Rowan and Hon approaching, the boy waved vigorously, clearly enjoying the honor of being a part of Lord Kendrick's entourage. Hon shot him a half-smile and waved back before disappearing into the building.

Passing through the wide doorway, the two men were instantly in another world. The normal rustic atmosphere of the barn was gone. In its place was the orderly efficiency of a military barracks. The deep green and vibrant blue associated with Lord Kendrick was everywhere. The small group of soldiers moved with precision, even in the

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mundane task of situating their belongings. Two fully armed men just inside the door moved to block the entrance until Rowan was recognized and they were allowed to pass. Rowan made a direct line to the rear of the building, where a large green and blue tent was erected against the back wall. A soldier posted outside the tent vanished inside, but returned before they reached the tent. He held the flap open for their entrance.

Rowan went first, stooping through the opening, with Hon close behind. Two men stood around a map spread across a table fashioned from two logs and a shield. Hon immediately knew the taller of the two was Lord Kendrick. Rowan took a knee immediately, and Hon followed his example.

"Rowan, rise! There is no need for such formality. We are your guests here, nothing more. Please, come forward. We were just discussing how to combine our task with yours. Rupert has a few ideas about which I'd like your input."

"Thank you Lord Kendrick," Rowan said as he rose.
"We are grateful for your help. May I introduce the young man I mentioned to you yesterday when you arrived? This is Hon, son of Stewart."

Lord Kendrick thrust out his strong hand with a weary smile.

"Hon, I am pleased to make your acquaintance, genuinely. Rowan tells me that as a boy you were taken as prey by one of these beasts, and lived to tell the tale. Remarkable. I have seen one of the beasts close up. They are fearsome."

"Yes, Lord Kendrick. I was a child when it happened. Images of the experience are all I have, really. But I don't have to recall every detail to know the destruction they leave in their path. It is very fresh for me. I am just returning from visiting my father for the first time since the

dragon took me. The wounds the beast has inflicted are deep sir, for both of us."

Lord Kendrick's eyes bored into Hon's.

"I'm sure you have much insight from your visit, and I would truly like to hear it. But it must wait until a later time. It is most pressing that we determine the wisest course forward, and I believe we should find a way to work together. Your primary concern as a village is to find and destroy these beasts; a worthy and necessary cause. I have come in search of clues as to the location of my daughter, taken from us eleven years ago.

"You see, my wife and I received a letter just a few days past, from the man who took her. He is known to us by the name of Simon. The letter was borne by a vagrant boy who says he received the message here, in your village."

Kendrick paused, looking from Hon to Rowan.

"Here is how the two issues are connected. This man, Simon, not only has my daughter, he also has some sort of control over at least one of the beasts."

Hon looked at Rowan, both of them clearly shocked. Kendrick continued.

"The night when I saw the dragon, a man sat astride its shoulders. It was him. It was Simon. I know it sounds outlandish, but I saw him with my own eyes!" He extended a parchment toward them. "And you can see for yourselves, from his letter, he is clearly threatening that our Camille will be devoured by the beast."

Hon hesitantly took the parchment. It was just as Lord Kendrick said. He released a sigh and spoke through gritted teeth.

"Hatred for these creatures burns inside me, because of the devastation they bring. People like my father and mother, and Abigail who lay across the village struggling for life; their lives become misery and pain because of these beasts." Tears filled his eyes as he met Lord Kendrick's

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gaze. "If there is a man behind these beasts, then my hatred has been misplaced. We are coming against more than the instincts of an unthinking beast. We are facing a man, an evil man who is using the beasts to hurt innocent people."

He paused to regain his composure.

"I don't know this Simon's reasons for what he does. I don't need to know. I just know that I hate him for it... and.. and... I want to see him suffer."

The room was heavy with the weight of his words. No one spoke. As Hon looked from face to face he realized that he'd never expressed the depth of his hatred for the dragon before. He had not known it was there. His words were the culmination of years of fear, pain, and regret, finally taking shape. The knowledge of Simon's existence was the final piece that pulled it all together. To see a man behind his agony gave him a target for his anger, someone to blame besides God, who had allowed it all to happen.

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Morning's light broke over the eastern horizon, the clouds erupting with brightly colored hues of gold, pink, and orange. It reached across the sky, to the small village of Newtown, to a humble, fire-blackened hut. Seeping around the edges of the thick, burlap curtain that hung across the front window, the sun's soft glow cast shadows across the room. Hon stood silently in the growing light, a watchman over Abigail's sick bed. His dirty face was streaked with tears, his eyes etched with weariness. Hampton lay beside Abigail, her hand held limply in his as he snored softly. Victoria lay in the far corner, huddled in a rough, wool blanket. She had finally given way to an exhausted sleep.

Since meeting with Lord Kendrick, much about himself and his life had become clear. Hon had spent the long night thinking about it. In Kendrick he saw the noblest

of men, a lord known throughout the land as a good, fair, generous provider. He truly cared for those for whom he was responsible. Hon had seen it in the way he related to the people of Newtown. Instead of being brash or pushy, as one in his position might normally be, Lord Kendrick was considerate, seeing himself as their guest. He asked for their help instead of commanding it. He appealed to them, rather than demanding their loyalty.

It was the contrast that made things so clear for Hon. He had lived eighteen years, saturated in insecurity and fear. He couldn't remember a time when he truly felt noble, or true, or generous toward others. He was always vying for his own protection, positioning himself for his own advantage. It was painful to look back at such a life and to be forced to admit that it was his. He realized that much of his actions had flowed from two realities; youthful immaturity, and the crucible of suffering. But the fact didn't bring him much comfort. He'd been taught better. His mother had started him on that road, and Abigail and Rowan had led him down it. But their counsel had not been heeded, at least not very often. He had long been unable to look outside himself, to the ones who needed him to be more than his collective pain.

As Hon looked down on Abigail, she breathed erratically. Her body was fighting to overcome the dragon's toxic saliva. Regret bore down on him. He had always tried to avoid guilt, to run from its implications, in a vain effort to make himself feel competent, or right, or good. But for the first time he saw guilt rightly. He *was* guilty, of considering no one but himself. Hon hoped and prayed he would have the opportunity to make amends.

Victoria stirred. Hon looked to see her soft green eyes peering out from a gap in the blanket. He smiled and she pulled the blanket away to reveal a half-smile of her own. He extended his hand toward her, beckoning her to join

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him. She rose, the long blanket trailing on the floor behind her, and joined him standing over her mother. Hon was instantly aware of the awkwardness he'd felt toward Victoria for years. It was there, between them, like an unseen buffer, keeping them apart when they longed to be closer. She needed him now, and Hon knew it. Mustering his courage, Hon spoke quietly as he turned toward her.

"Victoria, I've been selfish, for far too long. You and your mother have done so much to help me, to love me, and I've pushed it away. I'm sorry." He was instantly aware that Hampton might overhear, but pressed ahead anyway. "I want to be more. To be a man who is able to do what is best for those he cares for, in spite of his own fears. I want to be what, what... what you need me to be." His voice trailed off as the awkwardness overtook him.

Victoria let the blanket fall open at the front and reached out to take Hon's hand. She raised it above her head and stepped beneath his strong arm, wrapping it around her shoulder. The light from the window shone across her auburn hair as she lay her head on his chest.

"I know all that Hon," she whispered. "I've known it for a long time. But mamma taught me that love is patient. It can bear anything, even mistreatment, because it knows how to hope." She turned to face him. "Hon, mamma and I have always had hope for you. We've known there is more to you than a wounded, frightened little boy. God has a better purpose for your life than that. But it takes time to discover it, doesn't it?" she asked with a knowing smile.

He nodded.

"Hon, this is the day we've prayed for, the day when you have realized that you are more than your pain. Mamma would be so happy. She'd be crying tears of joy by now."

She snuggled back under his arm. The awkwardness had vanished. Enjoying the feeling of her against his side, Hon spoke again.

"Victoria, I'm going to go with Lord Kendrick to find his daughter." He felt her body tense. "He believes that the man who has her also controls one of the dragons."

Her head snapped around, a look of fear in her eyes.

"I have to Victoria. I have a feeling it's what I'm meant to do."

Victoria looked into Hon's dark eyes for what seemed forever, and then her face relaxed.

"I think so too," she said, sadly.

The glow of the early morning rays peeking around the curtain, revealed a solitary tear as it trickled down her cheek. Hon brushed it away and held her close. They stood over Abigail a few moments more before Hon pulled away.

"I should go. They'll be almost ready to leave by now."

"Yes, I understand," Victoria muttered.

"I will be praying for her," Hon said, turning to look at Abigail one last time.

"I know you will," Victoria answered.

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"Glad to see you're awake," Rowan said, with a sparkle in his eye. "I was starting to think I may have to come rouse you from the sack."

Hon smiled and said nothing, his thoughts still on Abigail, and Victoria.

"Lord Kendrick and his men set out half an hour ago. They plan on waiting for us at the crossroad at the foot of The Ridge, if we don't catch up before then."

"We shouldn't keep them waiting," Hon said as he swung onto Storm's back. She was already saddled and

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ready for the trip. Rowan turned his horse to the east. Hon called after him.

"Rowan?"

The older man stopped his horse and looked back. "Yes?"

"Thank you, for saddling my horse, for teaching me to fight, for... for believing in me."

He paused, uncertain what more he should say, but knowing there was much more that needed to be said. Rowan eyed him curiously, waiting.

"The last few weeks I've come to realize that you, Abigail and Victoria, Hampton, you've all been the best family an orphaned little boy could have asked for. You've believed in me more than I've believed in myself, and I'm grateful."

Rowan smiled broadly as he backed his well-trained horse toward Hon, who sat unmoving astride Storm. When the older man came alongside, he stopped and looked Hon squarely in the face.

"I've always seen greatness in you, Hon. It's a rare trait in a man, and it's been obvious in you since you were small. But you're outgrowing my vision. You're becoming more than I could see. I'm glad to have had a hand in who you've become, and in who you will be. Something tells me that our venture today is only the beginning."

"Thank you," Hon said again. "Truly Rowan, thank you for all you've done for me."

"You are welcome," Rowan said, with a genuine smile. The two men looked at each other for a long while then urged their horses toward the east.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

"Our path leads down there, and to the north," Lord Kendrick said, pointing down the east side of The Ridge. "The boy said that the man who transferred the letter to him had come from that direction. But I do not think it would be wise to enter Rajic's land uninvited. I've never met him, or even seen him, but I know from my spies that he's not one given to mercy, or understanding. I doubt our concerns would garner any consideration from him."

"Agreed," Hon said. "My father's village is inside his borders. I had a run in with one of his checkpoint commanders, and got anything but a warm welcome. He accused me of being one of your spies, Lord Kendrick. He took my weapons and... oh no! I was supposed to return there within four days to prove my story true, but I didn't. I came directly to Newtown by another way. By now, they will be looking for me."

"Well," Lord Kendrick chuckled, "that settles it, then. Rajic's land is not for us, unless we discover our goal lies inside his borders. If we find that's the case, we'll determine what to do then."

Rowan was standing, looking out across the vast northern woods that lie below them. It was a land he knew well from his previous life under Lord Thurmond. To the north, mountain peaks much taller than The Ridge jutted out of the gray clouds. On the far horizon, he thought he could see the forest road that led to Thurmond's old estate.

"We could stay atop The Ridge and head into the northern mountains," Rowan offered. "That way we can swing east once we are beyond Rajic's northern border. It would be a slower trek, by a bit, but safer. And, if the

stories told are true, we'll more likely find a dragon's lair in the mountains anyway."

"I agree," Lord Kendrick said. "Pack it up, men! We head north!"

"Lord Kendrick," Rowan interjected, "may I point out another concern?"

Kendrick nodded.

"I know these lands from my days in Thurmond's service. The mountains to the north, are harsh and unforgiving. I don't exaggerate when I say it will be a slow trip. Our party is heavy and slow. You are a man of action, so I must ask you to look at our situation less like a lord and more like a warrior who marches to battle. We have got to rid ourselves of some things, and some men." Lord Kendrick looked surprised. "Hear me out, my lord. If we are to find these beasts, we will do it by stealth. Our greatest weapon must be surprise."

Lord Kendrick raised his hand to his golden beard, rubbing his palm over a small patch of gray on the side of his jaw.

"Rowan, you are right. We are too many," he said, as he looked at his own clothing, "and too finely dressed. Men, gather 'round!" he shouted.

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Five men headed north, through the jagged rocks atop The Ridge. Fifteen others headed down its western slope toward Newtown. Except for the swords that hung beneath their cloaks, the five appeared as any other woodsmen. They moved quickly, in spite of the rugged terrain, and in two days time found themselves turning east. The urgency of Lord Kendrick's burden drove them. An evening later, they made camp around a small fire, under a large pine, just

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO**

northwest of the tiny town of Montfall, high on the shoulder of the mountain.

"In Thurmond's day, Montfall was the northernmost village in the realm," Rowan explained. "As you have seen, these mountains are too inhospitable for villages. No place to grow crops, very little fishing, and the cold... brrr! You don't want to be here in the winter."

"I can believe it," Hon said. "I remember my first winter at Lord Thurmond's. It was bitter cold, and it wasn't even in the mountains."

The men continued with small talk well into the night, each one silently wondering where they should move next. There had been no sign to indicate the presence of a dragon, and they had not met a soul to question.

As the waning moon made its way across the sky, the conversation fell off and the men began settling down to sleep. Hon stayed awake, looking down at the firelight in the hovel far below. He knew that further south was the forest road where Rowan had found him and wondered how his life would be different, had someone else been on patrol that day.

The moon had reached its apex, almost straight overhead. It was clear, bright, and beautiful. The stars glimmered around it like jewels around woman's neck.

Thank You, God, for Rowan and Abigail, and their care for me. Thank You for carrying me through years of fear and anger. Thank You for bringing me here, on this day, with these men. Show us what to do. We need your help.

The moon's light dimmed for an instant, but by the time Hon's eyes reached it, the glow was full again.

"Rowan, are you asleep?"

The soldier turned village leader stirred.

"Not anymore. What is it?"

"There's something strange going on. The moon, it dimmed just a moment ago, only for a second. It was like..."

The moon dimmed again as he gazed upward, only this time he saw the cause.

"Rowan, get up! It's the dragons!"

Rowan scrambled to his feet, his neck craned skyward.

"Where, what did you see?"

"Both of them are up there. They're shooting back and forth across the sky. It's like, like they're playing with each other."

Rowan watched, eager to catch sight of them.

"There!" he whispered, thrusting his finger skyward, "I see one of them. And there's the other! Hon, this is incredible!"

"Yes," Hon said soberly. "It's an answer to prayer."

Rowan woke Lord Kendrick and the three men watched the wild sky dance of the dragons the whole night. As dawn approached, the two beasts parted ways. The darker of the two flew east, gliding down, down, into the thickest part of the northern woods. The other disappeared much sooner, flying directly over their heads and vanishing over the mountaintop.

Lord Kendrick sighed.

"Well men, we have two options. What say you?"

"No sir," Hon replied instantly. "We only have one."

Rowan raised his eyebrows at Hon.

"Lord Kendrick, you said that the beast you saw, the one Simon rode, you said it was red, right?"

Lord Kendrick nodded.

"My lord, that's the one that went over the mountain, so that's where your daughter will be."

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Kendrick's lower lip trembled. He turned to look up the steep, rocky slope above their heads. Hon moved beside him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"We will find the beast, and Simon. It can't take more than a few more days."

Kendrick turned to him, a faint smile breaking through.

"Yes. Yes, you are right, Hon."

"Lord Kendrick, a friend of my father's once said, 'If we go wisely in the strength God provides, we'll do alright, even if suffering comes with it.' There may be suffering ahead. The prospects of fighting a dragon tell me it's inevitable. But Lord Kendrick, you've already been suffering these eleven years. So has your wife and your daughter. It's time for it to end, and in a few days, it will."

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The five men made their secret way up the side of the mountain. They traveled with greater care now, aware that at any moment they might come upon sign of the dragon, or worse, could be found out by the beast. They climbed ever higher, the steep, rocky mountain resisting them with every footstep. After a weary day of climbing, they reached timberline a few hours before sundown.

"Though I hate to say it, I am not sure we should go any further today." Kendrick suggested. "Darkness will be upon us soon and there is little prospect of shelter. It would not be good to be in the open, exposed to the creature, should it appear."

The company agreed to spend the remaining hours of daylight finding a well covered place to make camp. They would be ready for an early start next morning. It took the better part of an hour, but Rowan finally discovered two deep clefts between jagged outcroppings of rock. The larger

one had room enough to stable the horses, the other would be sufficient for the men to set up camp. As day's light faded the horses were fed and placed in a paddock, a small fire was made, and their evening meal was made ready. Conversation was scant. Hon knew what every man was thinking, because he couldn't get the thought out of his own mind.

Tomorrow, we may meet the dragon.

"It feels like there is a pig in the kitchen and we're all too polite to mention it." Lord Kendrick finally blurted out.

Everyone laughed.

"We are all afraid, and there is no shame in it."

Hon could see the faces of the men relax, like they had just released a breath that had been held for far too long. Lord Kendrick continued.

"Tomorrow, or the next day, we will come upon the beast. None of us has faced such a threat before, at least..." he looked toward Hon and Rowan, "not intentionally. It is a fearsome beast, but it is just a beast. We are men. We have the advantage of our wits. We can outthink it. What is more, we have the ability to work together. If we can discover it without being discovered ourselves, we can assess its lair and surroundings and devise a plan for how to proceed in tandem."

""You are right," Rowan said. "We must continue with great care. To stumble clumsily upon it would be to invite death."

The men pondered that reality as the fire crackled in the center of their circle.

"I remember," Hon said, "as the dragon lifted off the ground and carried me into the night sky, the wind splattered something across my face. It was blood. I saw a crossbow shaft sticking out of its chest. It was inconceivable to my small mind that such a fearsome

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

creature could be wounded at all. But it was, and that gives me hope now. It is fearsome, but not invincible."

"A good word," said Rupert, Kendrick's captain, "and one I needed to hear." A nervous laugh erupted among them as he continued. "I have fought many battles, and I have known fear before. But never like this. With a man, I know what to expect, I know his limits. He is only a man, like me. But with this, this monster... well, it's different, that's all."

Rowan spoke up.

"Hon, tell us all you can remember. I'll pitch in where I can as well. Maybe there are clues to its weakness."

Hon let out a heavy breath.

"You ask me to resurrect the dead. They are memories I've buried, intentionally so." Rupert shifted nervously. "I remember arrows flying, and rocks being thrown at it. My mother set after it with a merciless torrent of rocks, sticks, anything she could get her hands on!" He laughed and then became silent. "But all of them bounced off its scaly hide, like hail against a boulder. It didn't wince. Not a bit." He dug deeper into the fog of memory. "And its tail, it's like a cedar, only it moves powerfully and fast. It could take us all out with one swipe if we were too closely gathered. But most of all I remember the flames. I don't know how it is possible, but it spits fire, so hot that our thatch huts ignited instantly."

"All he says is true," Rowan agreed. "I've seen it myself. But Hon, tell us more about how it was wounded. You said it was a crossbow bolt?"

"Yes, my father fired it. He told me so when I saw him just a week ago. When he saw how the other weapons had no effect, he knew it would take something with more force to penetrate the dragon's hide. Thankfully, Fulton, the blacksmith, supplied crossbows to Lord Thurmond's troops, so my papa grabbed one from his shop. He said if he had

another clear shot or two, he believes the dragon could have been taken down."

The men looked around uneasily. Rupert carried a long bow, but none of them had brought a crossbow.

"Well men, we'll have to find another way," Lord Kendrick tried to encourage. "I've yet to see a creature that does not feel the edge of a good blade."

The conversation continued into the night; plans, ideas, and strategies freely but nervously flowing between them.

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Based on their night-time observation of the dragons, the group agreed that a search for the lair would be safer, beginning mid-morning. By that time they assumed the beast would be back in its lair after its nightly romp, and fast asleep. For the sake of stealth, the horses were left in the paddock they had made in the rocks, and the men split up. They wanted to cover as much ground in as short a time as possible. The safety of Lord Kendrick's daughter demanded it. Each man was to report back to camp a half hour before sundown, with his assessment of the areas he had covered. With a desperate look in his eyes, Lord Kendrick asked to be the one to explore the far side of the mountain. He and his remaining two men would summit the peak together and part ways from there.

Hon and Rowan were to cover the ground on the camp-side of the mountain. Many miles of rocky cliffs would keep both of them very busy. Rowan set off to the west and Hon to the east, each of them ready to search every hole and crevice, if necessary. A strange compulsion pushed Hon forward, as if there was something ahead he was meant to find. He reasoned that due to its size, the dragon could only be concealed by entering a large cavern

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in the mountain, or by bedding down in a field surrounded by a thick grove of trees. He found very few areas of the landscape that lent to such a habitat. His spirits dropped as the day drew on.

As the sun began its downward path, Hon decided to eat his meager meal. He sat against a large outcropping of rock, looking over Montfall far below, and the thick forest beyond it to the south. Though he was certain the dragon would eventually be discovered, he wasn't sure Camille would be found as easily, if at all. Almost ten days had passed since the sealed parchment had arrived at Lord Kendrick's castle. He wondered if Simon would wait that long to carry out his threat.

Movement downhill caught his attention. Someone was coming. Grabbing his pack, Hon scurried behind the rock. He peeked around the jagged stone to see a hunched figure in a worn brown cloak trudging up the rocky mountainside. As the stranger approached, Hon inched his head out of sight. Waiting and listening, he heard the footsteps draw near, slow but deliberate. Upon reaching his rock, the footfalls ceased. After a full minute, he heard the footsteps again, resuming their methodic pace, coming around the far side of the rock. Placing his hand on the hilt of his sword, Hon readied himself, but before reaching him, the footfalls began to diminish, taking on a muffled, shuffling sound. He leaned his head toward their direction and heard them echoing. The sound came from within the rock.

What? Where has he gone?

Hon waited a full minute before moving to explore the visitor's disappearance. Creeping on all fours he found a narrow fissure running vertically along the side of the outcropping. He listened carefully at the opening and heard nothing.

It must be a tunnel going straight into the heart of the mountain, and that has to be Simon. But there is no way that a dragon could fit... Wait, there must be another opening nearby.

His head jerked around as he frantically surveyed the mountainside above him. Nothing promising was visible. He only had one option. Taking a deep breath, as if diving into a cold mountain lake, Hon plunged into the crevice.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Traveling light, Camille intentionally made her way through the thickest parts of the forest, hoping to conceal her route as best she could. Coming upon a small stream running south, she decided to follow it, reasoning that villages are often erected near water. The way was hard. Many trees had fallen over the stream and bushes grew thick around it. She was forced to veer from its banks so often, she decided to move farther away intentionally, though still parallel to it for the sake of easier travel. She stayed close enough to hear its gurgling sound. Before the sun was very high, she came upon a path that ran crossways to the stream. It was well used.

Instinctively, she crouched in a thicket, trying to decide what to do. The path could lead to a village, which could mean help. But such a village could also be the very place Silas had gone. Her desire to find someone, anyone, was strong. Eleven years trapped in Silas's miserable hut had starved her for company. But fear had also taken hold. The risk of running into Silas was high, and she couldn't bring herself to chance it. She decided to cross over the path and continue down the hill.

Branches grasped at her shabby robe. Thorny bushes scratched her ankles and shins as she moved, the babbling of the brook her only company. In time, she came upon a clearing and saw a dark, vast forest in the valley below her. A road sliced through its center, winding south for as far as she could see. Haze filled the sky, below her and to her right. As she watched, it drifted east on the wind without diminishing.

Smoke, from more than one chimney or campfire. It must be a village, and close by!

The same conundrum as before seized her mind. Should she risk approaching the village, or should she venture on? As she fought the battle of decision yet again, a new thought plagued her.

Venture on to where, exactly? I don't even know where I am, so I don't know where to go.

Panic gripped her.

But there is little hope of happening upon another settlement if I keep wandering in the woods!

Her stomach was in knots. She nibbled her ragged, dirty nails, struggling to make a decision. Her typical confidence failed her, expelled by fatigue and lack of nourishment. Loneliness tugged her in one direction as fear drove her in another.

No. The village has to be where Silas gets supplies. He will catch me if I go there. I will make for the road down there. I can follow it far away from here.

Keeping the smoke to her right, Camille inched through the edge of the woods, skirting the meadow as she headed down hill.

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Taking the flint and steel from her bag, Camille struggled to light a fire. Cooking for Silas's greedy stomach the past eleven years had given her plenty of practice, but the problem was her kindling. It was damp due to the heavy dew that had covered the forest floor that morning. In time, and with much smoke, she was able to get a small flame going, and not a moment too soon. Darkness was coming, and she was cold already. Squatting, she gingerly fed the tiny light at her feet, being careful not to smother it. It wasn't long before a comforting blaze had been achieved.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE**

She bore the signs of a hard day's travel. Her tattered robe was more ragged than when she left the hut that morning. Her face showed bloody scratches from tree branches and brambles. Her hair was littered with leaves and pine needles. Huddling by the fire, she emptied her bag, searching for the stale bread she'd stolen from Simon's cupboard, and the small flask of water she'd already almost emptied. The gloom of the woods pressed in on her, threatening to smother the warm fire she had brought to life. She gnawed through the tough crust of bread in her mouth, peering into the foreboding shadows.

She extended her arm to her left.

The road is over there... or maybe over there. A loud sigh escaped her lips. I've gotten turned around in the darkness. Come morning, I'll know better.

Rising, she made a circle through the trees around her small fire, gathering wood to keep it alive through the night. Walking back into the light with her last armload of dead branches, her fearful heart squeezed out tears. She wiped them away angrily.

Be strong Camille! There is no time for self-pity. You must keep your wits about you or, or... Silas is one thing, but entirely apart from him, you must survive. One day at a time.

She sat up long into the night, afraid to sleep but unable to stave off her weariness. Feeling the inevitable grip of exhaustion overcoming her, Camille, daughter of Lord Kendrick and Lady Patrice added a final log to her fire, huddled in her ragged robe, and closed her eyes.

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Misty blackness swirled about her. Silas's wicked cackle echoed, as the sting of rough ropes cut into her wrists and ankles. The lash came down on her raw back...

again, and again, mercilessly thrashing her for no cause. Glowing embers were pressed into her forearms, the whitehot pain exploding in her mind. Camille spun helplessly, frantically into the darkness, the pain of her torment etching itself deeply into her soul. She called for her father. She screamed for her mother, as she had so many times. But they did not come.

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Camille jerked awake, the distorted images of her dream mixing with the scene around her. A barely glowing fire. Dim light prying through walls of trees. Cold, heavy dew covering everything. Her thin robe fell from her bony shoulder as a shiver shook her into the present. Tears of relief began to flow as the dream gave way to reality. She rose, angrily tossing sticks on the barely glowing coals, trying to clear her mind of the horrid images, distorted visions of a dream that were all too real.

She ripped off a piece of bread. It was tougher than the day before. As she chewed it, a ray of sunlight penetrated the canopy across the way and fell on her campsite. Closing her eyes, the haggard young lady turned her face into its warmth, her stiff joints crying out as she rose from the ground. Never in her life had she traveled so far on foot, and it wasn't over. As she had hoped, morning's light enabled her to regain her bearings.

"The road is over there, someplace," she said to herself, as she pointed toward the west.

Filling her bag with her few belongings, she lifted it to her shoulder and began walking.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE**

Upon reaching the road, Camille approached cautiously. There were no voices, no sound of horses or wagon wheels. Stepping onto its dusty surface, she looked up and down its length. To her right, the road gradually sloped upward and vanished around a curve. The mountains stood in the distance, high above the trees. To her left, the thick woods parted where the road pressed its way through, but it was soon enveloped in shadows.

The prospect of an easier journey, afforded by the road, overcame every objection in Camille's exhausted mind, and she set off at a rapid pace on the southerly route. She listened as she walked, hearing little more than her own footsteps and the wind rustling the treetops. Twice she heard the sound of travelers approaching, and hid herself in the woods until they passed. She didn't know who to trust, so she trusted no one.

As mid-day approached, she came upon a crossing. A narrower but well-traveled road met her road, winding into the woods to her right. She looked up to find the sun.

It goes west.

She stood immobilized in the center of the road, struggling again to make a decision. South would take her farther from Silas, but west might lead into her father's lands.

Which way? I don't know, I can't tell if... Oh, if Father were only here... Father...

Camille began to cry, and again, angrily wiped the tears from her cheeks. Filling her lungs with the piney air, she turned down the westward route.

The way was good, though closely pressed on both sides by thick trees. She made good time, not meeting a single traveler. But as the day wore on, her strength and presence of mind wore away. Like a butterfly, her thoughts fluttered away and then returned, over and over. Her composure and presence of mind eroded with each

staggering step. Months of malnourishment were taking their toll. When she realized the road was sloping upward, panic and exhaustion overtook her.

Am I going back the way I came? No, no...

Her legs buckled, and she fell into the dusty road, her head spinning. What reason she had left seeped away, as fear and weakness took over.

"Mother? I'm so sorry I missed our special tea... I, I... what happened? Mother? I was so looking forward to it... Ahhh! He's after me, he'll catch me! Father!"

She lay in the road, barely able to lift her hands. She cried out for her mother. She screamed for her father. And she received no reply.

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Gertie still limped, but was at least able to follow as Gerrard led her through the thick woods along the eastern base of The Ridge. The worst part was over. As was his custom, the bearded woodsman spoke to his oversized hound as he walked.

"Angus me boy, you might call me a miracle-worker were it not for the fact that the Almighty has already laid claim to the title! I didn't think even I could get the old girl down from the top. But you've proved to be a tough old gal, haven't ya?"

He reached back to stroke the mule between the ears. She flicked them in appreciation. Gerrard could tell she was as relieved to be off the rocky crags as he was.

"We should be to the road any time now, girl. That shall make yer going easier. Then we will get up and over the pass to Newtown to find out what happened to our young dragon hunter."

Angus stopped, his head cocked. Gerrard stopped as well.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE**

"Whatdaya hear boy?" he whispered.

Angus looked back at him anxiously. The soft wind stirred the treetops, but Gerrard heard nothing. He led Gertie to where the hound stood stone-like and placed his hand on his dog's head. Angus glanced up to his master but quickly turned his eyes forward again. Through the trees, Gerrard could see the road.

"Somebody travlin' the road, me boy? It'll be fine, likely a hunter this time 'o year."

Then he heard the pitiful cry.

"Mother! Faaa-ther!"

It was a woman's voice, and it came from the road ahead. Gerrard tethered the mule to the closest tree, reached for his axe and moved ahead, Angus trotting eagerly beside him. As he neared the road the woodsman slowed his pace. Angus remained at his side.

"Mother! I'm so sorry..."

Gerrard followed the sound of the mournful voice into the road, his axe ready. In the dust, lay a waif of a woman. He laid aside his axe and knelt next to her. Her hands and feet moved aimlessly, weakly reaching for something that was not there. Her eyes were wild, darting side to side. When she finally focused on Gerrard's hairy face, the young woman screamed in terror.

"Ahhhhhhh! Father! Father, help me!"

Gerrard tried to calm her.

"I'm a friend lass, here to help you. Are you hurt?"

She screamed all the more. The puzzled woodsman sat back on his heels, scratching his chin through his thick beard.

"Angus old boy, we can't be hauling her to Newtown like this. Anyone we meet would think we're up to no good." He looked her over as she lay flailing helplessly in the road. "She seems to be fine, 'cept fer being a bit mad. I

can't see a reason why she shouldn't be on her own two feet."

The dog cocked his head at his master.

"I hate to do it, but I don't see another way."

He leaned over the woman again, looking deeply into her eyes as she screamed.

"Now lass, hear me clear. I'm a kind soul, and don't mean you harm. But I have to stop yer screamin' so I can get you to a village."

Gerrard removed his fur cap and bent over the woman, taking her head gently between his hands. He leaned backward, stretching his arms away from his body for a moment, then hurled his head forward, crashing his hard forehead into hers.

Her screaming stopped.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The passageway was three feet wide at most. Hon held his sword awkwardly in front of him as he edged further in. The crevice extended into the mountain only six feet. Light from outside barely revealed the back wall. There were no tunnels branching off from the one in which he stood. Hon stood in the darkness perplexed.

He's vanished. It doesn't make sense. There has to be another opening in here, somewhere.

Moving along the walls, Hon reached up, searching for any sign of an opening. The ceiling was only slightly taller than his head the entire length of the passage, and there were no indications of an opening. Carefully dropping to his knees, he searched the walls again. Along the back wall of the tunnel he discovered a crack running along the floor, barely over a foot high. He sat back in disbelief.

He went in there?

Hon lay on his stomach, peering into the void at the base of the back wall. His body blocked what light came from the opening behind him. He didn't like the idea of crawling through such a tight crack.

What if he knows I am here and is waiting for me inside? I'd be helpless. I should go get the others and come back. But there's no guarantee that Simon would still be here. He's the only one who knows where Lord Kendrick's daughter is.

The decision was made. Five miserable feet into the darkness of the hole, the ceiling rose and he was able to get to his feet. No death blow came. Blackness surrounded him. Hon listened for the stranger's footsteps but heard nothing. Inching a step at a time along the wall, Hon felt the rough

floor descending. An orange-white light poked through the darkness ahead. As he crept forward, Hon could tell the man had lit a torch, or had built a fire in a larger opening. But there was more light present than either of those would provide. Daylight was somehow making its way into the cavern.

The dragon's entrance.

Over the next 30 to 40 minutes Hon made his way toward the cavern on his hands and knees, creeping inch by inch to avoid making any sound. He was confident that he wouldn't draw Simon's attention to his approach, but wasn't at all sure about the dragon. He suspected its senses would be those of a predator; acute and dangerous.

By the time he had moved forward enough to see into the cavern, the glow of the fire was reaching just inside the entrance to his tunnel. To the right, and forty feet away, Simon knelt beside the fire. Humming a playful but dissonant tune, he picked at a small hunk of meat, skewered on a spit over the fire. As Hon had suspected, light from outside shone through a much larger passageway across the cavern.

Two problems leapt to his attention. First, the dark of evening was quickly approaching, which meant there was no way he could make it out of the tunnel while light remained, much less make it back to camp at the agreed upon time. To make matters worse, he saw no sign of the dragon. At that moment, Simon erupted with a loud laugh.

"Hestia my dear, awake, awake! Feasting time is almost upon us!"

The old man moved toward a flickering torch, wedged between two large rocks near the center of the room. He looked into the darkness, around a corner of the cavern beyond Hon's view.

#### CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

"Come my dear, rouse yourself. Tonight we fly to the stone hut. You will feast on royal blood! Hee hee... awake my darling!"

Hon sighed. Camille still lived. But his relief was soon crushed by the realization that *he* was her only hope. A large movement came from the darkest reaches of the cave, a rough scraping that echoed through the cavern. With it came a deep, pulsing breath that instantly resurrected every fearful memory he had long tried to suppress. The dragon was rising.

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At the entrance to a large cave on the north side of the mountain, Lord James Kendrick stood. His heart pounded such that he thought his chest might burst. His breath came short and quick, as it always did just before battle.

He knew that sundown would come too soon for a return to the camp. Just as well; he did not want to return, not after finding the cave. The compulsion of his fatherly heart was strong. His lost daughter could be inside, and her fate was in his hands. It was the moment he'd been waiting for, praying for, for the last eleven years. He unsheathed his sword and moved into the darkness.

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A shadow briefly broke the light coming into the cave across from Hon, and then was gone.

What was that?

Hon's gaze was fixed on the far entrance, though he kept Simon in view from the corner of his eye.

There it is again!

Someone or something was coming down the corridor. Hon shot a look toward Simon to see if he had noticed. The old man's attention was absorbed in rousing the beast in the back of the cave. Hon watched the entrance and waited.

The light was interrupted again, longer than before. Hon could plainly see the distorted image of a man in the shadow that stretched into the cavern. Someone scurried out of the light and disappeared behind a large boulder, just inside the cave. Hon had come to know the movements well over the past few days. It was Lord Kendrick. Though this was not what they had planned, Hon knew it was the only way to keep the dragon from Camille. A deep, threatening growl emanated from the dark.

"What is it, my dear?"

Hon turned to see Simon facing the entrance through which Kendrick had come. His deeply lined face grimaced as he squinted against the light. Bending to the side, he retrieved a long, thick dagger from a pack beside the fire, and slowly made his way toward the opening. The rumbling of the beast continued.

Hon's heart beat rapidly. Fear gripped him. Memories of the fiery night long ago fought to overcome his mind. One of Abigail's favorite recitations from the scriptures pushed itself to the forefront of his mind.

Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day...

Gathering his courage, Hon looked around. Hoping for the dragon to be fixated on the far tunnel also, he took a chance. Creeping around the corner, he tried to keep to the shadows.

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The unmistakable sound of Simon's voice chilled Kendrick's soul, as did the rumble that accompanied it. His

#### CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

heart leapt at the recognition that there, in a rough cave, worlds away from the opulence of his manor, he had found the man who had vanished with one of his most precious treasures. Relief turned to anger, and anger to boldness. Dragon or no dragon, Simon would be confronted.

Taking advantage of the light steaming through the cave's entrance, Kendrick stepped around the boulder without hesitation and began walking into the cave, sword in hand. Simon was already sneaking toward him, his dagger ready, slitted eyes peering at the shadow-man who had emerged from behind the rock. But Simon was not alone. Behind him, as if floating in midair, a monstrous, scaly head jutted out of the blackness in the back of the cave, its eyes glowing an eerie yellow. At the sight of Kendrick, the beast hissed like an enormous cat, it's hot breath reaching him from across the cave.

Simon stopped in his tracks, obviously recognizing Kendrick in spite of the glare.

"Ahhhhh... it seems you will have the main course before the first course, my pet!"

"Where is she, Simon?" Kendrick demanded. "Where is Camille?"

Simon smiled wickedly, prolonging his reply.

"You should be concerned for yourself, Kendrick," he mocked. "You have just stepped into the pit of hell itself! Hestia, to me!"

With a deafening roar that filled the cave four times over, the monster rose from the darkness, its head rising to touch the cave's roof. A massive, armored body emerged from the shadows, its scales glistening in the light. Legs like oaks pounded across the uneven stone floor, carrying the behemoth to its master.

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The immensity of the dragon threatened to overwhelm Hon's senses as the beast lurched past him, completely unaware of his presence. In his childhood memories, the beast was huge. But as he witnessed it again, he could not believe how large it *really* was. She had grown, in size and in terror. Hon felt his body trembling as he pressed himself against the cold stone of the cavern wall. The dragon came to a halt behind its master. Hon could see the old man through its legs. His eyes still on Lord Kendrick, Simon reached up to stroke the dragon's chin, its breath ruffling his thin hair like a hot, summer wind. The dragon stretched its neck far over the head of its master, letting loose a piercing growl at Lord Kendrick. Hon could feel the stone floor vibrating underfoot.

Taking advantage of the noise, Hon darted across the back of the cavern, watching for the best place from which to strike the beast unaware. In the huge shadow cast by the dragon, he made his way across the cave to the base of a mound of jagged rocks. They stretched high and far across the length of the cave, apparently fallen from the roof. The boulder that had concealed Lord Kendrick was the furthest of the group.

Hon knew that Lord Kendrick only had seconds to live if *he* did not act. With the dragon's rumbling masking the sound of his footsteps, Hon darted up the rocks, trying to get as high up the mound as possible. Simon's taunts spurred him on.

"Your daughter was to be first, but no matter, you can take her place! Then we will pay a visit to your wife and son... Heee-hee! Hestia, go!"

The dragon leaned in Kendrick's direction just as Hon reached the summit of the rock pile. Without breaking stride, Hon launched himself from the outermost edge of the mound, his sword held two-handed, high over his head, its point forward. Just then, the dragon caught sight of him.

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It whipped its head around in an effort to intercept him, but Hon had the advantage. Before the beast could turn fully, Hon's sword found its mark, the sharp blade plunging halfway into the monster's yellow eye.

The dragon exploded with rage, furiously tossing it's head side to side in an effort to free itself from the pain. Releasing his grip, Hon fell to the rocky ground below. He winced as he landed crookedly on the boulder field, his ankle turning painfully. Still, he had the presence of mind to roll away from the flailing dragon. Sitting with his back against a large stone, he tried to locate Lord Kendrick beyond the dragon's huge frame.

His attack had done exactly what he had hoped. The dragon was distracted, and Simon was taken by surprise. In the confusion, Kendrick had rushed the old man, and the two were locked in a battle to the death. Hon rose and hobbled in their direction, but was smashed to the ground by the writhing tail of the dragon as it bowled past him, instinctively heading toward the cavern entrance. His body wracked with pain, and with blood dripping from his nose and mouth, Hon struggled onto one elbow. His eyes focused on the pair of combatants just in time to see Lord Kendrick fall, as the dragon barreled over him on its way out the tunnel. Simon ran screaming down the corridor just behind the dragon.

"Hestia, to me, to me!"

Hon tried to rise, but fiery hot pain shot through his leg. He dragged himself across the rough floor to Lord Kendrick. Kendrick lay motionless, breathing heavily. His body was obviously broken, both legs and one arm bending in unnatural ways. As Hon gripped his shoulder, Lord Kendrick opened his eyes.

"Hon? I thought it was you..."

The dragon's roar echoed from far down the tunnel. Simon's faint voice screamed in reply.

"Hestia, no! I must remove it!"

A moment later the beast howled in pain again, followed shortly after by its master's command.

"Fly!"

Hon tore a long strip from his own tunic and, using wood from the stack near the fire, bound Kendrick's broken limbs tightly. The battle-tested soldier that he was, Lord Kendrick flinched slightly but did not make a sound.

Lord Kendrick tried to sit up.

"Camille! Where is she?"

The battle had pushed the young woman completely from Hon's mind.

"I don't know. The cave is large and dark, and..."

"Camille!" Lord Kendrick screamed, his voice bouncing off the walls repeatedly. "Camille! I am here!"

There was not a sound.

"I'll search the cave, every inch," Hon assured the grieving father. "But it will be slow work. I may too have a broken leg."

"We have to find her," Kendrick cried.

"I will search, but I don't think she's here. I heard Simon say something about her being at a stone hut."

Hon hobbled around the cave, searching every shadow and recess. Camille was not there. Lord Kendrick lay on the rocky cave floor, and wept.

Sunlight shone on Lord Kendrick's face as he was borne down the mountainside, pulled behind his horse on a makeshift litter. Hon could see the thoughtful look on his face and imagined his heart had to hurt worse than his wound. He had come so close, yet his daughter remained lost. Worse, the only man who knew of her whereabouts had escaped, as had the beast who made him such a threat. Hon grimaced as Storm lurched up the rise of a creek bank, his ankle throbbing. Every move caused the pain to pulse through his body. His head pounded. His back ached. He couldn't believe they had faced a dragon; that he had attacked a dragon, and lived to tell the tale. Lord Kendrick looked up from his thoughts.

"She is dead, or soon will be. I know it. Simon will surely see to it now."

Hon looked at Rowan awkwardly. He knew that Kendrick's assessment was probably right.

"There are few places a beast of that size could be hidden, so I think he will likely return to the cave," Rowan said. "Do you want to go back?"

"Even if we did, Camille would not be there," Kendrick responded. "And going back would only mean that we would have to face the dragon again, and in much worse shape than the first time. Look at us; battered and beaten by an old man."

"And a dragon," Hon reminded him.

"Yes, and a dragon."

They moved down the trail in silence, Lord Kendrick's despair smothering all hope. Miles down the trail, he spoke again, clearly trying to change the mood of the group.

"Rowan, I wish you could have seen Hon, flying through the air toward the beast's head. He was like an eagle descending on his prey. Right out of the shadows, he came from nowhere. I was as shocked by his appearance as I was by the dragon's roar. He had no fear."

"It wasn't quite like that," Hon protested. "I was plenty afraid, and I had already climbed up the rocks piled against the cavern wall. I just happened to be in the right place when the time came. When Simon called for it to attack you, well, I had to do something."

Lord Kendrick chuckled then groaned, clutching the bandage across his broad chest.

"Yes, well," he paused to cough, "I'd call gouging out the monster's eye 'something,' wouldn't you, Rowan?"

"I would indeed," Rowan said, with a smile and a wink. "It truly is quite a feat, Hon. You have to admit it."

Hon didn't respond. It felt good to be praised by such able men, and it felt good to have done something for the sake of another. But he wasn't sure it was worth the hurrah they were making of it. Lord Kendrick spoke again, a gleam in his eye.

"When this is all over and I'm back at my estate, the tale will soon be circulating among the maids in my household. You can be sure, they will all want to meet the handsome young dragon slayer."

Hon could feel the heat rising in his face as the men laughed. Secretly, he liked the idea of maids swooning over him, until his thoughts went to an auburn haired young lady across The Ridge.

"That will have to wait," he said, trying to get the attention off himself. "We still have to find your daughter."

Lord Kendrick's face shadowed immediately. "Yes."

"Once we get to Montfall we'll find a place for the two of you to rest," Rowan said. "The men and I will do some

inquiring and scouting, right away. We've only come three or four miles from the cave, so the stone hut you heard Simon mention has to be nearby. Someone will know of it, and when we find out, we'll get there fast."

Again, Hon saw pain etched in the face of the devoted father who lay before him. He wanted to be of help, but wouldn't be up to fighting for at least a week. For the time being, he would have to resort to words.

"Lord Kendrick, you are right. We don't know if she still lives. It's a heavy and disappointing weight to bear, I know. But we can hope, and we can persevere in that hope. More than that, we have got to trust that the hand of the Lord will watch over her, and that He will guide us to her. I believe we have good cause for such trust." He stretched his arms to the side. "Look at us. We've faced a dragon, and yet we live. That is a miracle. And we know who does miracles; the Lord above. He is with us in this quest. To what purpose, I don't know. I just know He is with us. We have to hold onto hope that the lost can be found, with His help."

He paused, looking deeply into Lord Kendrick's eyes. "I am living proof that it's possible."

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Morning broke the third day after their arrival in Montfall. There was no inn in the small village, so Rowan had procured lodging for Hon and Lord Kendrick in the hut of an old widow. He had also asked around regarding Simon, but had only received nervous looks and halfhearted denials in response. So he, Rupert, and Kendrick's soldier had set out to search the mountain again, all of them knowing that Camille's life could depend on every second.

The old woman, known only as "Nan," was a rough mountain woman among rough mountain people. The lot of

them were wedged together in a deep crease, at the foot of the northern mountains. Hon opened his eyes to see Nan peering out the crack between the curtain and the narrow sill of the only window in the tiny hut. Lord Kendrick breathed deeply beside him, still asleep.

"Nan." Hon said softly.

Nan glanced his way briefly and whispered a reply.

"Ah young man, I wondered if you would be the first one up for my porridge again, this good morn."

Steam rose from the wooden bowl Nan had placed on the table, tempting Hon up from the corner pallet. He rose, being careful not to disturb Lord Kendrick, and made his way across the room to the rough table.

"Sleep well, my fine young fellow?" Nan whispered, continuing to look out the window.

"Better than last night. The pain in my ankle has mostly gone, so I could at least sleep."

"Then it must have been his royal highness who did all the moaning in the wee hours, " Nan joked, still peeking around the edge of the curtain. "How is he?"

"Better too, I think," Hon answered. "He's hurt much worse than I, but he seems to be... Nan, what are you doing?"

The old woman never looked away from the window.

"Oh, just keeping myself apprised of the activities of my good neighbors. You might say it's a past time of mine; knowing what's here and there, who's doing what to whom. I can't keep up my place as the village know-it-all if I don't know what it all.... now, I say! That's a spectacle!"

"What is it, Nan?"

"I've never seen such a thing!" she exclaimed.

"What?"

"There's a gangly, hairy chap wearing a bear skin rug, and he's staggering into town like a drunkard. The old boy has a gimpy mule and a big hound dog trailing behind him,

and he's got... I say! I do believe that's a young woman he's carrying!"

"What? Nan, let me see," Hon said, pulling back the curtain. "Gerrard!"

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The ache in his chest had become like the morning rooster for James Kendrick, only it didn't wait until sun up to wake him. The past three days he'd been stirred by the pain off and on throughout the night, never able to get comfortable. But as he opened his eyes that morning, he found himself turned toward the rough wall in a room bright with the sun's glow. He'd actually slept until sunrise. Behind him, on the cramped pallet, he felt the weight of Hon's body.

He's usually up by now.

Hon's presence reminded him of a passage of scripture...

Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall...

He sighed heavily.

Weariness is the only thing I feel. I'm weary of this wound, weary of hoping, and weary of life. The last real opportunity of finding Camille is gone. I know it. And what about Patrice? She sits alone, days away from here, hoping for good news that is never to come. It will destroy her to know I've failed, again.

He rolled painfully onto his back, trying not to disturb Hon. He could hear a deep voice outside the window, loud enough to hear, but not quite loud enough to comprehend. Nan's unmistakable laughter joined in. The deep voice spoke again, and a voice familiar to Lord Kendrick replied. It was Hon.

Hon? But he's...

Lord Kendrick turned his head. He found himself looking into the gaunt, sleeping face of his long lost daughter, Camille.

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It was two days before Camille woke, and she was delirious. Her first response was panic; screaming and flinging her arms about wildly, afraid of everyone, even her own father. Hon watched as Lord Kendrick painstakingly consoled her, working to soothe her troubled mind. Eventually, after hours of patient entreaties, he convinced her that he was her father. In time, and with the recitation of many old stories from her past, his efforts bore fruit and her memory returned. The look on her face at the first realization of who she was, and who her father was, brought tears to Hon's eyes. Hope was born anew.

Shortly afterward, Rowan and the two soldiers returned. They had found the stone hut, recently abandoned, perched on a high ridge above the town. Standing outside, Rowan pointed out the hidden ridge to Hon and Lord Kendrick, who was perched precariously on a crude set of crutches. The ledge was many miles above the tiny village.

"It's a shack, nothing more. From Camille's description, I'd say it was the place she's been held all these years. But Simon is no longer there. The place is stripped clean. There were hoof prints heading east along the shoulder of the mountain, but they played out soon enough; it's extremely rocky terrain. I'd say Simon is giving up this part of the country. It looks like he actually does have another place to lodge his dragon."

"I have to agree," Kendrick said. "He's taking a fallback position, for now. But I'm certain we've only delayed his plans, not ended them. As soon as Camille and I

are able to ride, we must get home. Simon has his eye on my family, and he does not threaten idly."

A sound from the door of the hut drew their attention. Camille leaned against the doorpost. Somehow, in spite of the abuse and neglect she'd endured, she glowed with a natural beauty.

"What threats, father?"

"Oh, do not concern yourself with such things now," Kendrick replied. "Things are well in hand."

She smiled.

"When I was taken from you, I was a child. But it is no longer so, father. I am a woman now. And father, these eleven years have shown me that I am a strong woman, at that. I can bear the weight of whatever you have to tell me."

Kendrick moved toward her, chuckling to himself.

"You are your mother's daughter, no doubt. Yes, I believe you can bear the weight. It is only right that you do." Turning to Rowan and Hon, he continued. "Let us all move inside. There is much for us to learn from my grown-up daughter before we make our plans."

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The conversation around the fire painted the landscape of the past eleven years. The men filled in the blank spaces of Camille's life, and she soaked in every word. There were tales of home, of her faithful mother who longed to see her safely there, and the recounting of two births; that of Camille's younger brother, Cedrick, and that of a delightful village along the River Rillebrand, known as Newtown. Camille's deep, dark eyes stared in wonder as she tried to imagine the things and people being described.

"I can't wait to be on our way!" she said excitedly.
"I've missed so much. I want to soak in every morsel of

what's out there, until I can't contain any more. Mother, Cedrick, Newtown, I want to see it all!"

Hon smiled and nodded, trying to comprehend the zest for life she was expressing. Considering his past alongside hers, he wasn't so sure he could have weathered what she had, and still been so eager. It was an admirable trait, and he was drawn to it. As she sipped a mug of Nan's vegetable broth, Hon noticed that color was returning to her cheeks. He also noticed that she was lovely, in a way he'd never seen before.

"But first we have to get home, father." Camille continued. "I know better than anyone, Silas will make good on his threats to come after our family."

"You mean Simon," Hon said.

Camille looked shocked for a moment then, a flash of recognition showed in her face.

"Oh, don't you know?" She looked around the confused group of men. "I didn't realize that I'd neglected to tell you that part. His name is not really Simon, it's Silas. Around here he's known as 'Silas the Screw.'

A bowl crashed to the floor across the room. Hon turned to see Nan catching herself on the edge of the table.

"Nan, are you alright?"

"I am always alright, my fine young man," Nan replied curtly. "The bowl was wet, and slipped from my grip, nothing more."

"Nan," Rowan inquired, "do you know this Silas?"

Nan wiped her forehead with the back of her hand, her eyes darting here and there, as if the mention of his name would bring Silas out of the woodwork.

"The man you described to me at first sounded like it might be the man I know as Silas. But you called him Simon, so I gave it no more thought. But Silas, yes, I know him. He comes by the name "screw" rightly. He's a wicked old man." She looked in Camille's direction. "You poor

girl! I can only imagine what you've suffered at his cruel hand!"

"Nan," Hon interrupted, "Do you know of any other places he may lodge, a place he might go to in a fix?"

Nan crumpled into the one rough chair at the table.

"I don't, but I can ask about. But truly, you should not expect to get any more information about Silas than you did about Simon. Folks around here are scared of the man, with good reason."

"We've got to find him," Rowan said, "those two dragons are under his control. If we can find him, we'll be on our way to finding them."

Camille shook her head.

"Two dragons? It's worse than that. I believe there are at least four of them."

A stunned silence filled the room.

"Four of them?" Hon said. "How can there be four?"

For the next 20 minutes, Camille recounted how she had overheard the meeting of the dragon masters. The men listened in shock, each one realizing that their quest was far greater, and more dangerous, than they could have imagined.

"I know you didn't see them, but did you hear any names?" Rowan asked.

"Yes, but only two. The woman from the south, her name was Saniyya."

The men looked askance at each other, none of them recognizing the name.

"And there was a man all of them, except Silas, deferred to. They called him 'Raj.'"

"Raj." Kendrick said somberly. "He is the lord of this land, the conqueror of all of Thurmond's territory. He is a hard man by all accounts, and no wonder. He's got a dragon at his back."

Subdued moans of recognition bounced around the circle, until Gerrard's deep voice emanated from the corner where he had been lurking.

"Here's a piece to add to yer puzzle lads," he said, turning to Camille. "Ya didn't hear the name lass, but the fat one from the north; that's Hugo. I'd bet me life on it. He's a nasty one, don't be mistakin' that. Hon here knows some of what I speak. Sounds to me like these four, and their beasties, are a force to be reckoned with. 'Tis like disaster, just waiting to strike."

The gravity of the situation descended on the group. It had been wishful thinking to believe they could slay two dragons. Now there were four, and each of them had a cruel master directing its actions. Hon broke the heavy silence.

"We can't do it. But we can't *not* do it either. The dragons must be slain and their masters subdued, no question. No land, or its people will be safe until that happens. But it's not going to be done by just the six of us. We need help."

"I've a whole army," Kendrick said, "and you're welcome to it. But I don't think that's what you have in mind, is it Hon?"

"No, it's not. An army can't move quickly or secretly, and the men who go after these beasts will have to do both. The first hint of such a plan will make its way to one of the dragon lords, and then our plan is up. We need brave fighting men who know how to be discreet, and we need a place to train together that is hidden away. But more than that, these men have to be willing to risk their lives, willing to take on impossible odds, without a promise of glory, or reward."

Rowan laughed sarcastically.

"It's not exactly an inviting proposition, is it?"

"No, it's not." Hon answered. "It's one that would make most men cower in fear once they realized what they

were up against. I know it all too well. So does Lord Kendrick. The beasts are fearsome and terrible, and we only faced one."

All were silent as the task before them became clear.

"Who's going to find these men? Who's going to train them and lead them?" Camille asked.

"Lass, I do believe you're looking at the man," Gerrard answered, as he slapped Hon on the shoulder.

# A word from the author...

I can't express how thankful I am to you for giving this novel a try. It is touching to know that you were willing to take a chance on a new fiction author, like me. Thank you!

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