

The background of the cover is a vibrant fantasy landscape. In the foreground, a character with a grey beard and fur clothing sits on a brown horse, both facing away from the viewer. To their right, another character with long blonde hair, wearing fur and carrying a bow and arrows, stands with their back to the viewer, looking out over the scene. The middle ground features a lush green valley leading up to a city built on a cliffside. The city has a prominent white tower and is surrounded by a stone wall. In the distance, a large wooden ship is visible on the blue sea. The sky is a mix of blue and green, with several birds flying. The overall atmosphere is one of adventure and discovery.

LEGENDS of AGORA

Whill of AGORA

Michael James Ploof

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Also by michael ploof

Whill of Agora

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Michael James Ploof

I would like to thank John E Barron III, who for years listened and encouraged the making of this story. His enthusiasm to see the work finished and his support in the publishing of the book were vital in making this a reality. I also thank my son Devin, who spent many late nights with me working out the kinks in the story.

This finished work I dedicate to my children, Devin and Destiny.

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Chapter 1

The Travelers

The full moon lingered like a magnificent pearl in an ocean of black. Fresh snow gave a faint crunch as the riders' horses made their way down the old road. Cold, tired, and hungry, Whill and Abram rode silently toward Fendale.

Usually they would make camp with the setting of the sun, but not tonight. The storm they had encountered the previous two days had set them back many hours.

"We should still be in time for the Winter's End Celebration," Whill said.

"As long as we do not wander into another of those damned storms, we should be plenty early," answered Abram as he scoured the woods. Something was on his mind, but Whill did not bother wondering what; he had thoughts of his own, like the feast they would enjoy the next night, and the music. The Winter's End Celebration of Fendale was always a great treat. It had been going on as long as anyone could remember. People came from all surrounding towns and villages to take part. Abram had brought Whill when he was only eleven years old, and Whill had marveled at all the dancers, jugglers, acrobats, and animal tamers that had performed. The knights of Eldalon had put on a mock battle, and Whill sat in awe for hours watching them dual and joust. He had read their history in the books Abram had given him as a young child. To see them in person had been a surreal experience. The celebration had lasted all day and long into the night. The food had been fit for kings, and the children had received candy. Whill, now nineteen years old, was no less excited than he had been when he was eleven.

"Do you think that King Mathus will attend this year?" wondered Whill. Abram did not reply. He lifted his hand, motioning Whill to stop. Whill gently slowed his horse and was about to ask what was wrong when Abram put a finger to his lips.

Whill surveyed the surrounding forest, but saw only the silhouettes of trees and the darkness beyond. Pine branches bent under the weight of the snow, as did the birches, which in some spots bowed down almost to the road. It was a

world of white and black, shadows and moonlights. Minutes passed, but still, Whill neither saw nor heard anything. He looked over at Abram, who sat like a statue upon his steed. Something indeed was wrong. Abram was not suffering from his usual excess of paranoia; it was too quiet. Lost in his thoughts of Fendale, Whill had not noticed until now. In an almost inaudible whisper, Abram told him to ready his bow. He did so as silently as he could, with a sudden and intense feeling that someone was watching, waiting. He resisted the urge to turn and look, and sat as still as he could— bow in hand, his arrow ready. Abram had also readied his bow, and with a quick dart of his eyes, indicated a part of the woods in front and to the left of them. Whill peered at the spot and, at first, saw nothing; then he spotted sudden movement beyond the trees. It was a strange black shape, quick and silent, darting from behind one tree to hide behind another. It moved like a shadow, and Whill would have mistaken it for one if not for the moonlight reflected in its eyes. Whill's horse gave a whine and began to stir, now alert to some danger. With a jerk Abram turned to scowl at the scared beast, and as he did the forest erupted with movement.

Abram hollered, "Ride, boy, ride!"

His heart hammering in his ears, Whill kicked the flanks of the horse, which was eager to comply. As it began to speed into a full gallop, Whill saw five black wolves dart out of the woods in front of them with alarming speed. Without looking he knew that more raced at them from behind. Before he could think he let loose an arrow at the closest wolf. With a cry the beast went headfirst into the snow, the arrow protruding from its neck. Even before the blood could flow, Whill had pulled another arrow, and Abram took down another of the approaching pack.

Instead of scaring the remaining beasts, the fall of the two wolves only seemed to infuriate them. Baring teeth, they charged ever faster toward the riders. In unison Whill and Abram let loose their arrows and dropped the two closest wolves. Whill reached for another arrow to take down the last wolf when suddenly two more jumped at Abram's horse. Teeth snapping, they bit fiercely at its legs. A terrible cry issued from the horse as yet another wolf attacked; distracted by the others, they had not seen it coming. The wolf jumped, its jaws snapping at the face of Whill's horse. He struggled to stay mounted and lost hold of his bow as the horse reared, almost throwing him to the ground. Alert to his trouble, Abram shot the wolf in the side as it rebounded and prepared to lunge once more. Whill was now facing the right side of Abram's horse, whose legs were being ripped apart by the other three attacking wolves. It jumped and kicked as it tried to throw off the beasts, but they were too many. Whill drew his sword, ready to charge, when another wolf attacked his own horse from behind.

He turned to see it clawing its way up his horse's back and, with a swift blow, chopped its head clean off. He turned and, to his horror, saw Abram's horse go down under the relentless attack. Immediately, the three wolves lunged on top of him. Jumping from his horse, Whill could not see his friend— only thick black coats of matted fur, thrashing and jerking where he had been.

With a cry, Whill attacked with his sword, and in a frenzy of slashing metal, blood, and flying fur, he quickly killed the beasts. In his fury, he barely heard a low growl behind him. He turned to see a nightmarish sight— six more wolves less than ten feet away. They stood, hair raised, teeth bared, ready to attack, and uttered low, menacing growls; all except the largest, which barked ravenously at him. Whill knew why they hadn't yet attacked. They were afraid.

Not knowing if Abram was alive or dead, Whill was not afraid but angry. Rage welled in him and erupted into a primal scream. The wolves tensed and backed a step. "Come on!" he screamed, challenging the wolves. "Come on!"

The wolves backed up further, confused. They looked at each other, then at Whill, and then again at one another. Then the leader answered Whill's challenge and charged straight at him. Drool falling from his open mouth, he lunged for Whill's neck. The young traveler dropped to his knees and, as the wolf passed over him, gutted the beast from neck to tail—it landed in a dead heap. Another charged, and Whill impaled the beast with a sickening crunch. Heaving the limp wolf to the side he ran at the remaining four, eyes wild and his own growl now echoing through the forest.

With their leader dead, the wolves quickly retreated in the presence of this fearless foe. Whill ran after them, actually wishing they would fight. He was so enraged, he had forgotten about Abram.

As the wolves ran for the forest, Whill returned to his fallen friend. Abram was pinned under the great weight of his dying horse and three dead wolves. Whill heaved the beasts off and was devastated by what he saw. Blood covered every inch of Abram's face. He knelt next to his injured friend, tears in his eyes, and began to wipe the blood away. Abram moaned and opened his eyes. Then, to Whill's surprise, he smiled. "I thought we were in trouble there for a minute," he said.

"Are you all right?"

"Knock it off," Abram grumbled, swatting his hand away. "I'm hurt but I'm not dying. The blood is mostly from the wolves. Now help me get out from under this poor horse."

Whill heaved the saddle in an attempt to lift the horse and free Abram's leg, but to no avail.

“Don’t bother. My leg isn’t broken. Just help me pull it free before those damned wolves get their courage back.”

Whill pulled on Abram’s leg above the knee and, with many grunts and curses from his injured comrade, it came free.

He now saw the wounds on Abram’s arms; shreds of fabric hung from his sleeves, his hands were scratched and bloody, and large puncture wounds covered him where he had tried to fend off the beasts. Whill was amazed that Abram’s leg had not broken, but he guessed it was on account of the soft snow. He took some clothes from his bags—to use as bandages—and a bottle of redclove.

“You did well,” said Abram as Whill began tearing the cloth into strips.

“Not well enough. You’re a bloody mess, and the horse is dead.”

“Stop being negative. It doesn’t become you.” Abram returned the smile. “You killed many wolves and haven’t a scratch. That’s quite a feat for any man.”

Whill began applying the redclove to Abram’s wounds. A quick hiss escaped him as the liquid touched his torn flesh. Redclove worked well on such wounds but burned like a hot brand.

“Besides, we still have your horse,” said Abram through clenched teeth. “She can carry us both, and we can get a good bit of money for those wolf hides.”

Whill marveled at the way Abram could always find good in anything. He thought of the time their boat had sunk in the ocean. With no land in sight and their cargo lost, Abram had said, “Well, at least we still have our arms to swim to shore.” Whill had almost drowned laughing. Now he could only smile and thank the gods that Abram was with him; to lose him would be to lose his whole world.

Abram had taken care of Whill since he was a baby. His earliest memories were of living in Sidnell, a small town on the eastern edge of Shierdon. Abram had entrusted him to his sister for most of his childhood. Whill called her Aunt Teera, and she was a stout woman with an even bigger heart. She was the healer of Sidnell, and he had lived comfortably with her and her three daughters until he was eleven.

Abram stayed with them often but was usually gone for months at a time. Whill would beg him to stay, but Abram would tell him he had to go, and that one day he would understand. Before leaving, Abram always gave Teera a list of things he wanted Whill to learn in his absence. In this way, he learned the medicinal and culinary uses of every herb and plant in the known lands.

When Abram was home he taught Whill a great many things. He learned to speak Elvish and Dwarvish, though he had never met anyone of either race. He also learned a great deal of the history of the kingdoms of Agora, and also about

its peoples and geography. He learned sewing, cooking, tying a variety of knots, and countless other skills. He never complained but mastered all that was set before him—out of sheer love of learning and his own pleasure in making Abram proud.

Whill knew that Abram was not his father, for he had told him so when Whill was old enough to understand. When he asked who his parents were, Abram had only said, “I will tell you when you are ready, and I will judge when that time is. I know that it is the one answer you seek to know most, but you must trust me; some things in this world must not be known until the time is right. Bear no hard feelings for me because of this. I only do it to protect you.”

Whill had wondered about his true lineage since that day but never asked again, knowing Abram would not tell. Still, the question burned in him every day of his waking life. Perhaps it was this burden that led him to apply himself so strongly to learn all else that he did not know.

Eventually the day came when Abram said he was leaving again, but that this time Whill would go with him. On that warm June night, Abram took him to the seashore and said, “You have been very patient, and you are an excellent student. There is nothing more for you to learn from my books, and Teera has taught you much that I cannot. You are nearing manhood now, and I must now teach you how a man protects himself with the fist and blade, and how to live in the wild and on your own.”

From that day on Whill had been at Abram’s side as they traveled from one end of Agora to the other and back again. They sailed the seas together and braved the mountains, and always Whill was eager to learn more. Every day they sparred and practiced with fists and weapons. Abram had taught him to hunt, use a bow, throw a spear, use an axe, and wield a knife. Eventually Whill’s skill surpassed his own.

Now, sewing Abram’s larger gashes with needle and thread on this cold March night, that June day on the shore seemed like decades ago. Whill had become wise beyond his years and stronger than most his age. When he had finished suturing, he looked at his work. “They should heal with little scarring,” he said, and began to bandage Abram’s arms.

“You are one of the most skilled healers I know. I’m sure they will heal fine.” Abram grimaced as he put on an extra shirt and coat. “I will remove what supplies I can from my horse and make a fire while you skin all those hell-born wolves. I would help, but I don’t want to ruin your stitch work with too much movement.”

Whill collected the carcasses and went to work while Abram gathered his supplies and searched for wood dry enough to burn; with flint and dried moss

from one of his bags, he managed a small fire. Whill worked tirelessly for hours until the first morning light appeared in the sky. When the last hide was finished, he washed his knife and arms with snow Abram had melted. After a breakfast of dried meat and cheese, they set out once again toward Fendale.

With two riders, the extra supplies, and ten wolf hides to carry, the horse's pace was slow. "We are about twenty miles from Fendale," Abram said. "At this pace we will be there in about seven hours, including a couple of breaks for our poor horse."

"It will be nice to lie on a bed and eat warm food after that night."

"Indeed it will."

Chapter 2

Fendale

The sun hung low in the east, an orb of orange bringing warmth to the world below. The land was alive with the sounds of the wild. Birds flew from tree to tree singing their songs of joy, and squirrels scurried here and there, cheeks bulging with winter's rare treasures. It was a landscape of pure white with a sky of clear blue, a pleasant change from the endless grey that had plagued the previous two days of travel. The storm they had encountered had not been typical for this time of year. Already it had begun to warm considerably, and in a few days the snow would melt and be gone.

"It will be a good night for the celebration," Whill noted.

"That it will," Abram agreed. "We should reach Fendale by noon and have plenty of time to rest, though I won't be in any shape to dance. Shame, really. This celebration brings some of the finest ladies this side of the Ky'Dren Mountains."

"You old dog. If you have half your usual charm they'll be flocking regardless. Just don't get us into the kind of trouble we had in Brindon. Steer clear of blacksmiths' wives and we'll be just fine." Whill chuckled at the memory of it.

Abram laughed and started to make a rebuttal but could think of none.

"I'm surprised that after almost getting your arms ripped to bits, all you can think of is women and dancing."

Abram smiled. "Life goes on. Those who dwell in the past have no future, as my father used to say. Besides, it could have been much worse."

Whill looked forward to staying in the city. When not in the wild they stayed briefly in small, out-of-the-way towns throughout Agora. They had no true home, and swore allegiance to no one but each other. Abram kept them constantly on the move, never making themselves known in any place for too long. Life with Abram had the feeling of running away from something or someone. But Whill fancied his life of adventure and never questioned Abram's

motives. He knew that Abram hated the Uthen-Arden empire, for he regularly spoke of King Addakon of Arden with a mean tongue. King Addakon had come to rule after the death of his brother Aramonis not twenty years before. Within that year, the Ebony Mountains had been invaded by Draggard and thousands of dwarves slaughtered. There had been many battles between the peoples of Agora and the Draggard. Abram said that a great war was coming, that Addakon would see to it. He suspected that Addakon would move to conquer all of Agora and make it one kingdom under himself. Already there was strife between the kingdoms. It was for these reasons that Whill and Abram seldom traveled within the realm of Uthen-Arden. If they were to travel to Shierdon or Isladon, it would be by water rather than land.

They rode on; the hours passed. The rising sun brought small but welcome warmth to the world. Stopping only twice for the sake of the horse, and for only a few minutes, they made good time. Soon Fendale was in sight, as was the coast.

“There it is,” said Abram with a smile. “The great coast city of Fendale.”

Whill had not laid eyes on the city in eight years, but he remembered it well. Now he looked upon it with the same awe he had as a child. Fendale sat upon the northern coast of Eldalon, and a large stone wall, thirty feet high, surrounded its entire border. At Fendale’s center stood a great lighthouse seven stories high, the oldest standing building in Fendale. The lighthouse, called by the people “the Light of the West,” was also home to Rogus, Lord of Fendale. The thriving coast city was a main source of trade for most of Agora. Its wealth was very evident in its beauty. The exterior wall boasted ten magnificently crafted mermaid statues, each more than fifty feet high. They lay with fins curled, long flowing hair falling over their breasts, watching guard over the city. Four looked west to the sea, and two each to the north, east, and south. Within the eyes of all sat a guard, and so the statues were called the Eyes of Fendale.

The wall itself was as smooth as marble, with an arched overhang making it inaccessible to ladders. The main gate stood thirty feet high and twenty feet wide, made of oak five feet thick and covered in iron.

The rear of the city was built on a cliff in such a way that the wall actually hung over the ocean. A large cave under the city acted as its harbor, with four points of entry capable of admitting the largest vessel. Each entry point had a massive iron gate that could be closed in seconds, effectively making the harbor inaccessible. Aside from being a port city, Fendale was also Eldalon’s main naval base able to house more than one hundred warships.

As they approached the main gate, which stood open, Whill marveled at the mermaid statues that loomed overhead. Already he could hear the crowd within.

A soft buzz of activity emanated from the city.

“This will be a night to remember,” he said with a grin.

Abram nodded. “But do not forget, these are times of war, and a pair such as we may look slightly suspicious. Most outsiders coming to the celebration have done so in great numbers. It is not often men travel alone these days, so act naturally.”

Whill laughed nervously. “I was acting naturally until that bit of advice, thank you.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll do the talking.” He slapped Whill on the back.

Upon reaching the gate, four guards on horseback approached Whill and Abram. They were fully armored, with swords at their sides and shields in hand.

“What is your business?” asked the guard closest to them.

“The celebration, of course,” answered Abram with a smile. “We also hope to sell these here hides.”

The guard looked suspicious. “Not much of a cargo for traders.”

“We are not traders, so to speak; we were actually attacked by these rascals last night. Luckily we escaped with our lives, though my horse was not so fortunate.”

The guard looked them over closely. “You must be great fighters to take down so many wolves without harm to yourselves,” he said in a skeptical tone.

Whill had the urge to ask if they would like to find out, but held his tongue. Abram gave a small laugh. “Oh, they drew blood, friend, but not enough. Great fighters we are not, but a man must know how to defend himself these days. We are simple men who only wish to enjoy your great city. That is all.”

Not looking completely satisfied, the guard, nevertheless, said, “Go ahead.”

Abram nodded. “Good day.”

Upon entering the city, Whill saw more people than he had ever seen at once. The city was alive with the excitement of the celebration. Crowds filled every street. Already there were booths set up and people digging in their pockets to buy a trinket or treasure. Many women gazed longingly at fine silk and jewelry. Men tested the weight of a blade or looked over various tools. Children ran wild, candies in hand, chasing each other with gleeful laughter.

The city was shaped in a half circle with the wall spanning its entirety. It consisted of mostly stone buildings, with the exception of a few wooden houses here and there. Twenty streets arched throughout the city. One main street ran the length of it from gate to ocean wall, effectively splitting the city into two parts.

“Follow the main road for a while, then turn left onto Third Street. I know of a good place to find drink and lodging,” said Abram. Soon they came to a

beautiful, two-story stone building with finely carved windows.

Abram told Whill to stop and dismounted with a groan. A boy of about ten with shoulder-length blond hair ran up to them. “Welcome to Ocean Mist. Will you be needing a room tonight?”

“In fact we will, young lad. What is the price?”

The boy lit up. “You’re in luck, we have a few rooms left for only ten coins a night.”

Abram scowled. “Hmm. That is a little steep, is it not?”

The boy gestured toward the crowd. “Well, you can look around if you want, but you’ll not find better quality for your money, and when you return you’re sure to find us booked.”

“A born businessman, eh? What is your name, lad?”

The boy gave a slight bow. “I am Tarren. My father is the innkeeper.”

“Well, Tarren, see to it that our horse finds a stable and our belongings are not touched, and there will be more of these for you.” He tossed him a coin.

The boy looked at the silver with glee. “Yes, sir, thank you, sir, I will, sir!” He led the horse to the stables.

Whill followed Abram inside. The main room was a large tavern with a bar extending the length of the back wall. A staircase wound its way up and over the bar on both sides of the room, leading to the living quarters. They went to the bar and sat down. After guzzling two tall beers, they banged the cups together and said, “Lelemendela”—in Elvish, “to life.”

Whill wiped the foam from his mouth with his sleeve. “It’s been a while since we could do that.”

“Too long.”

After two more beers, hot stew, and fresh bread, they were feeling the effects of their long night. The bartender gave them keys to their room and accepted a fine tip. They made their way upstairs and were pleased to find a full water basin, fresh bedding on both beds, and a good view of the city.

“It’s about one o’clock now,” Whill said. “We should be able to take a good nap and be ready for tonight.” But Abram was already snoring softly. Whill laughed aloud and plopped down on his own bed. Soon he was asleep, dreaming of fair maidens and fine music.

Chapter 3

Winter's End Celebration

Whill woke with a start. He looked around, bewildered, trying to figure out where he was.

“Dreaming of wolves, are we?” Abram asked, chewing a green apple.

“No, I don’t think so. What time is it?”

“About seven. Don’t worry, the real party hasn’t started yet.”

Whill got up and washed himself, the basin water cool on his skin. When he had finished, Abram handed him a new set of clothes. “I sold the wolf hides while you were sleeping. We got fifteen coins each. Not too bad, eh?” He looked out the window at the busy street.

“One hundred fifty coins for ’em, that’s damn good.” Whill grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl that sat on a small table. It was delicious. Moving to sit at one of the chairs, he started tying his boots with the apple in his mouth.

“I also entered you into a sword-fighting contest,” Abram said with a mischievous smile.

“Eyu ut!” He spat out the apple and said again, “You what!”

“Lord Rogus has put up a challenge for tonight: whoever can beat one of his best knights with a blade wins his own weight in gold.”

“And you think *I* have a chance?”

“Yes. Besides, I have already made a side bet of one hundred coins in your favor.”

Whill was speechless. He had only ever fought Abram and the occasional troublemaker. He knew he was good—but to beat a knight?

“You underestimate yourself, my friend. You surpassed my own skill years ago. I know no better contender.”

“I don’t know...”

“Don’t worry yourself, the competition is a while off. Now let us eat.”

They made their way down the stairs and out of Ocean Mist. The city was abuzz, and as the sun set, lights were being lit all over. Green, blue, red, orange, purple, and yellow lanterns hung from every building and were stretched across

every street. Children now wielded sparkle-sticks and pop-balls as they ran the streets, leaving loud bangs and crackles in their wake. Abram gave a teenage kid a couple coins and motioned for Whill to get in a strange, two-wheeled cart. Once they were seated on the heavily cushioned seats, the boy picked up the two poles that pulled the cart and began to run. Abram gave Whill a wink.

“Beats the hell out of walking. This is a big city, and if you go on horseback, you have to worry about finding a stable. This is a nice way to get around.”

Whill sat admiring the city. “This is a beautiful place. I could get very comfortable here.”

“You might as well—we’ll be here for a while, at least until my arms heal a bit.” Abram rubbed his forearms.

After about ten minutes they had reached the middle of the city. To the left loomed the great lighthouse. Seeing it up close, Whill noticed that its surface was made entirely of pure white marble tiles that curved perfectly in intricate shapes. Between the tiles were strips of fine silver, and at the top was a glass-encased room which emanated a white light in all directions— so bright that it illuminated most of the city. It was a gift from the elves of Elladrindellia, given to the king of Eldalon more than four hundred years ago. It was rumored to have been made by elven magic and that it would burn eternally.

After another ten minutes of silent travel, during which Whill thought of the upcoming competition, they reached their destination. Getting out of the cart, Abram threw another coin to the driver and thanked him for the ride.

They ascended the steps of an expansive building. “This lodge boasts the best dining this side of the Thendor Plains, my friend. I hope you’re hungry,” Abram said.

Inside, the large room was filled with soft music and hearty laughter. Four huge pillars stood in each corner of the great room, carved with exquisite craftsmanship. Large paintings adorned the walls, depicting naval battles of old, dragons attacking ships, underwater scenes, and various figures of renown. The walls themselves were made of fine oak. At the rear of the room was a window that made up the entire back wall. Through it, the moonlit ocean was so still it appeared to be made of glass itself.

Abram gave Whill a nudge. “Come, you can marvel while we sit.”

Thanks to a handsome tip to the host, they were seated at a table next to the large window. After ordering the “celebration feast,” they toasted Fendale. The wine was sweet and warmed their bellies till the food arrived— a feast of seafood fit for a king. Upon large plates sat lobster tails and shrimp, scallops and crab. There were heaping bowls of vegetables and a variety of cheeses. Fresh

bread and butter and a delicious-smelling soup were set before them, along with roasted duck and snails bathed in a thick white sauce.

They ate mostly in silence, speaking only to comment on one item of food or another. They had not eaten this well in a long while and Whill savored every bite. When they were done, Abram lit his pipe and gazed out at the ocean beyond.

“It will be nice to sail again, to get away from land for a bit and feel the free wind on my face.”

Whill simply smiled as he took a long drink of wine.

“Not too much of that, or you will be in no condition to fight tonight,” Abram warned.

“You know, I had hoped to enjoy myself tonight and not worry about using my sword. We are here to relax, are we not?” Whill asked, a hint of aggravation in his voice.

“I understand, but will you not enjoy yourself the more if you win your weight in gold? Besides, there are certain people that are anxious to see you fight.”

Whill frowned. “What people? And why should they want to see me fight?”

Abram took a drink from his glass. “Lord Rogus, for instance, and King Mathus.”

“The king!” Whill exclaimed. “The King of Eldalon wishes to see me fight? How in the world would he know of me and why—?” Suddenly he sat up in his chair. “Abram, what is going on here?”

“Whill, listen. There are a great many things you do not know about yourself.” Whill started to speak, but Abram silenced him. “Let me speak. Your lineage being what it is, the king and a great many other people have a keen interest in you. I have told you of the oncoming war; soon you will have a choice to make—a very great choice that will shape your future in ways you cannot imagine.”

Whill stared at Abram, his brow bent with anger. “What choice? For years you have kept my heritage a secret from me, and now you decide to hint about it here, in this place? What is the harm in my knowing? I am a man now. I have waited patiently for years to hear the truth from you.” His eyes burned, but Abram stared back kindly.

“I intend to tell you all you wish to know, soon—very soon. Trust me, Whill, it pains me to keep such secrets, for I know that you deserve to know all that you should.” He looked out at the moon that lingered among faint clouds. “I love you like a son, and I do what I think your father would wish. I have helped you

become a man—prepared you to face whatever road you choose, be it a road of peace or of war. And I will stand by you until the end of either road.”

Whill listened to Abram with a feeling of both anger and relief. Tears welled in his eyes at the mention of his father, a man he had never known—a man who had not been mentioned to him in fifteen years. He had seen his father in dreams only: once he was a sailor; another time, a farmer; another, a knight. Sometimes he had brown hair and green eyes; other times, his hair was raven black and his eyes blue. His mother too had haunted his dreams; on those nights, he had awakened with an intense feeling of loss and regret.

“I will trust you as I always have, but know that I do not demand answers only out of respect for your judgment,” said Whill. “If you say I will know soon, then I wait for the day with all my heart, but it pains me to wonder, still. As for the competition, I will fight, and these people you speak of will see me for what I am.”

With that, Whill rose and Abram followed him into the night. They joined a gathering crowd that made its way down Twentieth Street.

“I assume they are going to the competition,” Whill said.

“Yes.”

Abram tried to keep up. Soon they reached the competition area. It was a small coliseum built against the western wall of the city. It was not an extremely large building, but it still seated more than two thousand spectators. However, only the wealthiest people or personal friends of Lord Rogus could attend. Now Whill knew how he and Abram had been allowed to watch the competition when he was eleven: Abram was a friend to Lord Rogus.

“Why didn’t you tell the guards that you knew Lord Rogus when we arrived?” Whill asked as they made their way toward the main entrance. “They would not have given us a hard time.”

“Because they would not have believed me.”

Guards were keeping a walkway clear for the distinguished guests as people tried to sneak, lie, or buy their way in. Abram led Whill to the entrance.

“Name?” the guard asked.

“I am Abram. This is Whill. He is a competitor here tonight. His number is two-seven-nine-four-eight.”

The guard looked at a long scroll for a moment, tracing his finger down the length of it. “Very well. After entering, go left to the fighters’ quarters. And good luck.”

Inside, the crowd roared as trumpets sounded the beginning of the competition. Whill and Abram made their way to the fighters’ quarters. A hall led around half the length of the circular building under the crowded seats. Soon

they arrived at a great oak door. Abram repeated Whill's fighter number to the standing guard and they were admitted to the room. The quarters, nothing more than a large room with about a dozen benches, were crowded with about fifty men who had signed up to challenge the knights. They eyed Whill and Abram as they entered. Some were fitting themselves with armor while others practiced for the fight. There were small men and large men, but a few rough-looking fellows towered over the rest—their shoulders broad as tree trunks with arms like thick branches. Armor hung from the walls; above each set was a numbered cloth. Whill found his number and was astonished to see the armor that hung under it. He looked at Abram.

“This must be a mistake. Surely they do not lend such armor to just any fighter.”

“You are not just any fighter. Lord Rogus himself has given you this to use, and he said if you win tonight, you may keep it.” The armor consisted of fine chainmail and a chest plate made of silver embellished steel. The arm and leg guards were of the same make.

“To accept such gifts from someone I do not know would mean that I owe him something. No matter what he knows of me, I will not accept what I have not earned.”

“Don't be foolish, Whill, wear the armor. It would be suicide not to.”

Whill raised an eyebrow. “Who says the knight's blade will get close enough to cut me?”

“It would be an insult not to wear it,” Abram warned. “You owe nothing in accepting this, and it is not yours until won. Come, try it on.”

Whill reluctantly put on the armor. It was of fine make, light and unobtrusive. He was impressed with its flexibility. He attached his sword and flexed his arms. Drawing his sword he made short, circular slashing motions. Satisfied, he sheathed his sword and said he was ready.

Exiting through the other side of the room, they entered another hall that led to the tournament grounds. The roaring crowd was deafening. Cheers and stomping feet emanated from the coliseum and shook the ground beneath them as they came to the open end of the hall. From inside, the coliseum looked gigantic. People sat or stood upon cushioned seats of stone that circled the building in thirty ascending rows. The fighting grounds were in a ring at the center of the building. A ten-foot wall separated the crowd from the sand-covered fighting grounds. Directly across and on the top row was a large booth adorned with great banners. One was blue with a white tower topped by a brilliant star. The other was white with a great ship upon a blue sea and the sun

above, its ray stretching out behind the ship. Within the booth sat Lord Rogus and King Mathus.

Beyond the doorway in which Whill and Abram stood was a segregated section of seats. These were the fighters' seats and were made up of three levels. Whill followed Abram to the top and they sat. Once again the trumpets sounded, marking the address of Lord Rogus. All fell silent and turned to the royal booth as the lord stood and extended both arms to the crowd.

“My dear people of Fendale, and travelers from afar.” His voice echoed throughout the coliseum. “Tonight you will witness the skill and splendor of the great defenders of Eldalon—those who keep our oceans safe from pirates, who keep the dragon menace at bay, and who keep this land free of the Draggard. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you...the Knights of Eldalon!”

The crowd erupted into a frenzy. The coliseum roared like thunder breaking on a quiet day. A shower of roses fell onto the white sand as the entrance gate opened and the knights marched out. At the sight of them the cheers escalated to the point of pandemonium. They marched four wide, with two leaders carrying banners of both Eldalon and Fendale. They wore full armor that shone like highly polished silver. At each of their sides hung a dark blue sheath holding their sword. A brilliant blue gem rested within the center of each silver hilt. Upon their left arm, each knight carried a broad shield of the same make as their armor. The tops of the shields were the shoulder-width of their owners, gradually narrowing down its length into a sharp point at the base. At the center was the emblem of Eldalon.

Whill watched as the knights made their way to the center of the ring. Much like the child he had been, he sat entranced. Knowing the legend of the knights and having read of their glory, they now seemed to Whill like the single most powerful force on earth. Light from the lighthouse gleamed off their armor so that they seemed to glow. Together, they stopped and turned to the royal booth. They stood tall—the proud fighters of the free peoples of Eldalon—and numbered one hundred, a small percentage of their Order. As one, they drew their swords and raised them high toward the king, and, as one, drove them into the sand before them and knelt upon one knee. The crowd's enthusiasm was rampant. Still more roses rained down onto the sand and the kneeling knights. Whill's head was light. He felt drunk with excitement. Abram gave him a light elbow to his side and looked amused.

“Don't forget to breathe, Whill.”

Whill was surprised to discover that he actually had been holding his breath. He now let it out, feeling slightly foolish.

The knights once again stood tall and sheathed their swords as the king stood and took Lord Rogus's place at the front of the booth. The entire crowd fell silent and bowed before King Mathus as he looked upon his loyal subjects. Whill and Abram did the same. With one knee to the floor and an arm resting upon the other, Whill sneaked a look at the king but then quickly lowered his head again. He was sure that the king had been looking right at him. He quickly discarded the thought as the king began his speech.

“Good people of Fendale, arise, for I look upon you as my equals. I am privileged only by the honor of being your leader. Tonight we celebrate brotherhood and the joy of life itself. The winters of our lives will always come, and they will seem to linger with the cold of remorse, regret, and despair. During such times each of us will question ourselves and this world. We will wonder how such a bleak and miserable time can ever end—the seemingly eternal misery that is our darkest hour. But end it does, for to every winter there is a spring, and to every tragedy there is newfound joy. A cold heart is one that has forgotten hope and knows no love. We will stay warm throughout the most bitter cold and have hope when all else is lost because we are the people of Eldalon; we know no defeat, and we are all brothers. No force on this earth or from the heavens will ever break our spirit. It is in love that we find our greatest strength... and our unwavering hope.

“So I ask you all now to look upon each other as family, and to put aside differences and petty quarrels. I ask you all to look around at the beautiful city you have created. Its magnificent splendor shines above all things. Without you, it would be only stone and dirt. Without the great people of Eldalon, it would be nothing. This celebration honors the light in the darkness, hope in times of despair, and love in the face of hate. It signifies the beginning of an end. May your sails forever catch the warm wind, and may your families prosper.”

The coliseum was as quiet as a forgotten tomb. It had the feeling of the calm before the storm. All eyes shimmered as one in the presence of the king, and upon every face there was a smile. The king looked around at his people, his own smile bright. At last he said, “And now, let the competition begin!”

The crowd broke into deafening applause. Whill stood with them, cheering. A new and foreign sense of belonging sent a pain through his chest as he clapped vigorously, hot tears welling in his eyes.

Chapter 4

The Tournament

As one, the knights turned and filed out of the fighting ring. In their place came men carrying dividers for the first competition: the joust. Within minutes they were finished and the first of the knights entered the ring on horseback.

“Do you remember who won the joust when last we were here?” Abram almost had to holler to be heard.

“Yes, it was Rhunis the Dragonslayer.”

“That’s right.”

“And he’s won every year since.” Whill had heard stories of Rhunis from Abram. Rhunis had lived in Senteal, a small coast town at the southernmost tip of Eldalon. When he was only sixteen he had killed a dragon that had been terrorizing the town. The Knights of Eldalon had been sent to defeat the beast but instead found it lying dead upon the beach, a spear protruding from its left eye. Rhunis lay next to it, half dead himself, suffering from severe burns. The boy had recovered and been honored by the king, who made him a knight and personal guard.

“Do you think Rhunis will win tonight?” Whill yelled over the crowd, which was now cheering the knights entering the fighting circle.

“I have yet to see him lose to man or beast, in competition or battle.”

“Does he still ride the white horse or—?” Suddenly he stopped. “Did you say battle? Have you fought alongside Rhunis?”

Abram laughed. “I told you of the many battles with the Draggard in which I took part.”

Whill shook his head in admiration. “You never fail to surprise me.”

The scoreboard was now uncovered, listing the names of thirty-two knights. There were sixteen names on each side of the board, with winners’ brackets leading inward to two spaces for the final match. One scorekeeper stood at each end of the dividers, ready to place the scoring flags. A hit to the other rider gave a knight one point, while a dismount was an instant win. The winner was the first to score three points.

The first match began with a loud blast of trumpets. The knights raced toward each other—sand flying from their horses' hooves, long lances gleaming. They collided with a clang, splinters flying in all directions. The scorekeepers marked double points. The crowd loved every minute; cheers and screams filled the coliseum as the knights charged once again.

Soon Rhunis entered the fighting ring upon a horse of white. His challenger entered behind. Moving to the opposite end of the dividers, Rhunis bent forward as if speaking to his horse. Whill watched with excitement as the match began. Rhunis' horse reared, and his master lifted his lance high. The crowd answered with a loud cheer. His opponent charged, his horse's muscles rippling with every thrust of its legs. Rhunis also charged forward with alarming speed. The riders descended upon each other, lances aimed at one another's chest. They came together with a loud clash of metal. Rhunis had shifted toward his adversary, dodging his lance and at the same time thrusting his own weapon. The other rider was lifted clean off his horse and thrown ten feet before landing on his back. The crowd went berserk, feeding on the great energy around them. Rhunis dismounted and lent a helping hand to his dazed comrade. Together they slowly exited the arena.

More matches followed as the list of knights was cut in half. Rhunis won his second match hands down with another instant dismount.

"I have never seen such a competitor," said Whill.

"He is the best that Eldalon has," Abram agreed. "I can think of only one other I would want next to me in a battle."

"Who would that be?"

Abram laughed. "The Wolf-Slayer."

With eight knights left, the tournament now reached its third round. Rhunis would next be going against the knight Ebareal. Whill's cheers matched those of the crowd as the riders hurried towards each other. Time seemed to slow as they collided, both breaking their lance upon the other. The score was now one to one. Again they charged, but this time there would be no tie. Rhunis got the better of Ebareal and sent him flying into the soft sand.

Rhunis was now among the top four. Abram predicted that the knight Amadon would be against Rhunis in the final battle. Amadon proved Abram right, not winning by dismount but bettering his opponent all the same. Rhunis also won the fourth round, defeating his adversary in the same manner. Now it was down to Rhunis and Amadon in what seemed like a friendly battle, but with this victory came a year's worth of bragging rights; there was no doubt about the seriousness of both riders.

They readied themselves, and a hush fell over the crowd. It seemed that even the stars stared down upon the coliseum to witness this test of power. Whill sat at the edge of his seat, tense as a bowstring. As the riders advanced upon each other, the crowd broke into a deafening chant: “Rhunis, Rhunis!” Beams from the great lighthouse gleamed from the knights’ lances and the crowd rose to its feet. With the force of two great storms, they collided. Each scored a direct hit to the other. Amadon’s lance caught Rhunis in the shoulder, while Rhunis hit him square in the midsection. Their wooden lances disintegrated under the impact as both knights struggled to keep balance. As Rhunis was thrown sideways across his steed, Amadon was pushed off his saddle to the rear of his horse, struggling to stay mounted. But as they passed each other and their horses rode on, it was Rhunis who managed to stay mounted. As Amadon fell, the crowd broke into frenzy and the chant for Rhunis echoed throughout the building. Whill too found himself chanting the knight’s name. Rhunis was the winner.

With the joust complete, the second competition began—the knight’s challenge. In his excitement Whill had forgotten about the fight. He was now reminded as the jousting scoreboard was replaced with a new one. The names of all fifty challengers were listed, and Whill was one of them—in fact, he was the last. Thinking this fact slightly odd, he turned to Abram.

“If I go last, won’t I be fighting an exhausted knight?”

“No. There are fifty challengers but many more knights. The same knight will not fight all of the challengers. They have matched everyone with a Knight of his own size, out of fairness. The idea is that no challenger can beat a knight of Eldalon.”

“Has it ever been done?”

“Of course it has, but only a few times. Usually a winner will become a knight himself.”

As the jousting dividers were being carried away, Lord Rogus arose and stepped to the front of the booth once again. “And now the challengers will please step into the fighting circle,” he said in a loud voice. With a nod from Abram, Whill followed the other men into the circle. Lord Rogus continued. “These men have taken upon themselves the challenge of fighting a knight of Eldalon, be it out of sheer courage, the want for gold, or simple stupidity.” The crowd erupted with laughter. “No matter their motives, they should be commended for their bravery and the excitement they bring to the competition.”

The crowd’s laughter turned to applause. “Let me remind you all of the rules,” Lord Rogus went on. “There is only one: he who betters his opponent wins. The reward is the winner’s weight in gold. Now, all fighters be seated again but for the first of the brave challengers”

Whill made his way back to his seat as the first challenger now stood reluctantly in the ring.

“Well, that was fun,” he said as he sat next to Abram.

He gave Whill an amused look. “You just watch and see why others fail.”

The knight’s entrance opened as the first challenger readied himself. Out strode a knight in full armor but no shield. The crowd cheered as the two fighters began to circle each other, waiting for the other to attack. It was the challenger who moved first, with a lunging strike at the knight’s chest. The knight easily blocked the attack and spun around the man, kicking him in the backside. The crowd roared with laughter as the man turned furiously toward the knight and charged. His advance was short-lived as the knight moved to the side, tripping the attacker. This comedy went on for several minutes until finally the knight disarmed the man and put his sword to his throat, ending the dual.

“He didn’t stand a chance,” Whill said. Abram nodded in agreement, too bent with laughter to speak.

None of the other fighters were a match for the knights’ skill or speed. One after another, they went against the knights and were quickly outdone. As the last of the men lost to the knights, Whill stood, ready to enter the arena. Abram grabbed his arm.

“Remember, Whill, while you enter this fight unsure of its outcome, the opponent thinks he will win. Use this to your advantage. An underestimated foe can hold the biggest surprises.”

Whill nodded and descended the steps to the ring. Thousands of eyes were upon him; never before had he known such attention. His throat became dry and he began to sweat, though it was cool in the coliseum. He looked around at the crowd, which seemed to him like a venomous mob. They stood in the aisles or upon their seats, screaming like demons. Whill suddenly felt lightheaded. He knew he must look ridiculous to them now— a silly young man with a sword, ready to challenge a knight. He tried to remember why he had agreed to this. What had he been thinking? He wanted nothing more than to be far away, out of the city, with no more eyes watching him.

The gate opened and a knight walked out. With large strides he entered the ring and then stopped and removed his helmet. He seemed about Abram’s age, with long brown hair and handsome features, but for the burn scar which covered the right side of his neck and cheek. Before the crowd could chant his name Whill realized who his opponent was: Rhunis the Dragonslayer. A powerful dread came over him. How could Abram have done this to him? He searched for his mentor but could not spot him in the frenzy. The crowd began their chant for Rhunis. The name which had earlier rolled so enthusiastically

from Whill's own tongue now filled him with anxiety. Rhunis put his helmet on once again and slowly walked toward him. He stood frozen, as if his feet had fused to the sand beneath him. Still, Rhunis advanced until he was not five feet away. He stopped and drew his sword offering a challenge. Whill instinctively withdrew his own sword and took up a defensive stance. Rhunis began to circle him. Whill simply moved in circles, holding his ground. *You can do this, you can do this, he is only a man*, Whill thought, but quickly doubted his own advice. Finally Rhunis lunged with a powerful overhead strike, almost knocking Whill to the ground as he blocked it. Before Whill could think of a counterattack Rhunis was swinging again, this time at his side. Whill blocked the attack as Rhunis stepped back. The crowd was wild; the chant for Rhunis became unbearably loud. Again he attacked, and Whill parried every blow. Around they went, Rhunis attacking and Whill blocking, until it seemed the fight would never end.

He's playing with me, Whill realized. *He thinks he has me*. He played along for a moment, pretending to barely block the blows, acting tired and weary. Then with all his might he parried a side attack and began his own. Blade gleaming, he swung at Rhunis again and again, unrelenting, as the knight blocked his blows. Rhunis backed a step and gave Whill a nod.

"Do you wish to have my best fight?" he asked.

"That I do, sir."

With that the dual escalated to a point that none had seen yet that night. Rhunis showed no sign of tiring, nor did Whill. The crowd was on its feet, as were Lord Rogus and King Mathus. Cheers filled the coliseum and fists pumped as the crowd chanted for the Dragonslayer. Whill, however, was oblivious to the crowd. It was as if he and Rhunis were suspended in the sky upon the sand, and nothing existed but the ring and his opponent. Rhunis made an overhead attack and Whill quickly blocked it, bringing them together in a struggle. Swords pointed at the sky, they circled, hands upon each other's wrists. Rhunis quickly moved to the side and smashed the side of his helmet against Whill's face. Whill was thrown back, their swords still tangled. Rhunis thrust the hilt of his sword at Whill's face, sending blood spraying from his nose. Whill fell back onto the sand. Tears welled in his eyes as he fumbled to get up. Rhunis was upon him and kicked him back to the ground. Then he stepped on Whill's hand, pinning his arm and his sword as he brought his blade around to end the match.

With his free hand Whill grabbed the leg that held him down and simultaneously brought his leg up and around Rhunis's midsection. With all his might he pushed and managed to send Rhunis falling on his back and jumped to his feet. With nose bleeding profusely, and eyes still blurry, he lunged at his

opponent—who had also gotten to his feet. Attacking with the fury of a caged beast, he sent Rhunis stumbling backward and noticed that the sound of the crowd had changed. They had taken up a new chant, faint at first but growing louder.

“Whill! Whill! Whill!” they cried, as steady as a drumbeat. Rhunis seemed to weaken but Whill felt stronger than he ever had. With powerful thrusts he came down on his now backpedaling opponent—he was winning. In fact, it was now he who was toying with Rhunis; all he needed to do was decide when to claim his victory. With this revelation, he left an intentional opening for Rhunis to exploit. When the knight took advantage, he blocked and, in one circular motion, sent Rhunis’s sword flying. He quickly brought the tip of his blade to Rhunis’s neck as the defeated knight’s weapon soared through the air and stuck into the sand with a wobble. The crowd went into frenzy; the chant for Whill now sounded throughout the arena.

Rhunis slowly lifted his arms to his helmet and removed it. Whill lowered his sword. Rhunis looked upon him sternly as he got to his feet, but then his face broke into a smile.

“That, my friend, was my best fight, but it seems yours was better. I hope you are never an enemy to Eldalon, for you would be a dangerous foe.” He gave a small bow.

“Thank you,” Whill panted. “But I will never be an enemy to your great kingdom; I will remain ever its ally.”

“Then maybe one day we will draw swords together.” Rhunis retrieved his blade and returned it to its sheath. With another small bow he made his way to the knights’ quarters. Whill stood on the sand, roses showering him as the crowd cheered. He looked up to the royal booth and saw the king staring down at him. He nodded at Whill, and Whill nodded back.

Chapter 5

The Award Ceremony

Whill raised his hand and waved to the crowd. In return they cheered loudly, fists pumping in the air as the chant for Whill grew louder still. Among the cheering fighters he saw Abram and a large smile spread across his face. Whill gave a bow and walked to the fighters' section. He was greeted with many congratulations and pats on the back as he ascended the steps to his seat. He stopped before Abram, who extended his hand and shook Whill's heartily.

"I never had a doubt." Abram pulled him into a small hug, still shaking his hand, and offered him a towel for his face. "That was some of the best swordsmanship I have ever seen. I see you've come up with some of your own moves."

Whill wiped the blood from his face. "I have only you to thank. You have been a great teacher."

The blood had stopped flowing from his nose, but his cheekbones throbbed. He was going to have two magnificent black eyes. He touched two fingers to the bridge of his nose with a grimace. "I think it's broken."

"We'll have you fixed up after the ceremony; you still have your reward to receive."

Whill had forgotten completely about the reward. His weight in gold—he could hardly fathom the wealth he had won. Lord Rogus again went to the front of the royal booth to speak. The crowd quieted.

"I offer my congratulations to the young fighter, Whill. We should all take a moment to congratulate him." Rogus began a slow clap which was taken up by the crowd. The coliseum filled with loud applause that sounded like thunder breaking over crashing waves. Abram nudged Whill, indicating that he should stand. He complied, a smile spreading across his blushing face. He extended a fist into the air, sending the crowd into loud cheers and whistles. After a moment he sat, and the applause died down as Rogus continued.

“And now for some light-hearted entertainment.” The gate opened and a mob of jesters, jugglers, and dancers filled the ring, followed by more than twenty men carrying great drums. The drummers circled the ring and began an intricate, upbeat rhythm. The pounding echoed throughout the coliseum. The dancers jumped and spun, putting on a grand performance. Four men costumed as dragons took up the center of the ring. Facing each other at a safe distance, they blew fire from their mouths. The crowd cheered, the drums pounded, the dancers reeled.

To Whill the night had become surreal. He had beaten one of the most legendary knights in Agora. He thought of the gold he had won, and a possibility occurred to him. What if King Mathus made him a Knight of Eldalon?

Soon the show was over and the colorful performers exited the ring. Trumpets blared as King Mathus himself entered the ring, followed by ten knights. He shone with a brilliant light as he walked to the center. He wore light armor of silver underlain with light blue fabric. Upon his back was a large cloak that could easily have covered his entire body if pulled around. Light reflected from it in a way Whill had never seen— a dragonhide cloak, he guessed. The knights followed King Mathus in two rows of five. The front four carried a large iron chest between them. Behind the knights, ten more men entered the ring pulling a strange-looking mechanism. Made of wood, and with four large wheels, it resembled a large battering ram, but in the ram’s place was a long wooden beam teetering upon two shorter ones. At one end was a large basket, and at the other, a chair.

“Is that what I think it is? Do they mean to weigh me here, now?” Whill asked.

Abram laughed. “Yes, I’m afraid so. It is a better show for the people to see you weighed. Have fun with it. Give them what they want.”

King Mathus raised an arm and the crowd quieted again. He turned and addressed Whill. “It is time for your reward, young man.” He extended a hand.

Whill felt the thousands of eyes upon him once more, but he didn’t mind the feeling this time. He descended the steps and entered the ring. He approached the king, who stood among his guards. He regarded Whill with a curious smile. He looked to be slightly older than Abram. His long black hair hung to his shoulders, and his face was covered with a full, neatly trimmed beard. Within his soft brown eyes Whill saw compassion and kindness. He liked the man’s face, and not merely because he was about to give him a pile of gold. The king gave off an unmistakable energy, one of great power and pure goodness. He was not the type to sit upon his throne and enjoy a life of lavish luxury while his people went without. Any attack on them was considered a personal attack on him,

Whill knew. King Mathus traveled often among the cities, towns, and villages of his kingdom, personally witnessing the lives of his people.

The king took Whill's hand in his own. With a firm grip, he shook it and congratulated him. He then led Whill to the seat positioned on the scale.

"My good people of Fendale, and those of far cities, I ask your assistance. This chest is filled with twenty-pound bags of pure gold coins. I ask that you count aloud as they are put into the weighing basket. Let's see this lad's weight in gold."

The crowd cheered and Whill sat upon the scale, feeling a little awkward, with his feet still on the ground.

"The first bag of gold, please!"

A knight took a bag of gold from the chest and put it in the basket.

"One!" the crowd cried. Another bag was put into the basket. "Two!" More bags were added. "Three! Four! Five! Six!" Whill had started to rise slightly with the additional gold, but his feet still touched the ground.

"Seven!" the crowd cheered as the knight put in yet another bag of gold. "Eight! Nine!" Whill's feet finally left the ground. "Ten!" At last the beam evened out. Whill was bursting with elation. Two hundred pounds of gold!

Knights on both sides took hold of the beam as he was lowered. The king again shook his hand. "Congratulations, Whill. I look forward to meeting privately with you soon."

"Thank you, Sire. I also look forward to such an honor."

"If you like, the gold will be kept safe for you until such time as you are prepared to take it."

Whill had wondered how he and Abram would leave with two hundred pounds of gold. He thanked the king and returned to his seat. Then he and Abram made their way out of the coliseum and into the noisy street. They quickly found another wheel cart and, with a coin toss to a young lad, were on their way.

"Where are we going?" Whill asked. "The king said he wants to meet privately with me."

"Of course he does. But the meeting will not be for a while, and it will not be in Fendale."

"What do you mean?"

"First we have a small journey to make, one that will better prepare you for the counsel of the king."

Whill had no idea what Abram meant, but he wasn't going to ponder the issue. Tonight was to be a night of celebration. "So where are we headed?"

"To the best pub this side of—"

“Let me guess: the Ky’Dren Mountains.”

Abram grinned. “No smartarse, I was going to say the best pub this side of the ocean. But you get the point.”

They rode for about ten minutes towards the heart of the city and stopped in front of a rustic-looking pub. The crowd had not subsided at all, though it was now well into the night. People laughed and cheered in the streets as they followed one of the many parades that had been snaking their way through the city all day. Whill followed Abram into the pub.

The pub was called the Wet Whistle and was aptly named. It was filled with music and laughter, and packed from wall to wall with men and women drinking the house beer. All smiled or nodded as Whill and Abram walked to the main bar.

“They sell one thing in this pub and one thing only: the house ale,” Abram hollered over the crowd and the band that played in a far corner. “At one time the owner of this place was a sailor. He ran a merchant ship from here to Del’Harred, the port city of Isladon.”

A fat bartender with a merry face approached. Abram ordered four beers and continued his story as the man began to pour the ale from large barrels.

“One day old Barlemew—that’s the owner—one day he was sailing his normal route, which happened to bring him within fifty miles of Drakkar, the dragon island. Suddenly off the starboard side he spotted a dragon flying high. This is a regular occurrence with merchants of that route, so Barlemew didn’t worry much—that is, until the dragon flew directly at them.”

Abram laughed and went on. “You won’t believe what happened next. Old Barlemew gets scared and tells his men to ready the harpoons. Well, the dragon flies right over them but, to everyone’s surprise, doesn’t attack. Instead he drops a pile of dung on the ship, covering old Barlemew.” Abram pointed at the bartender.

“That’s Barlemew?” Whill asked. Abram merely nodded, so choked with laughter he couldn’t speak. Whill laughed also at the thought of a dragon taking a giant shyte on the poor fat man. With tears in his eyes, Abram continued.

“So there’s old Barlemew, covered in dragon shyte, his men on the floor in laughter, and the poor fool has an idea. You see, Barlemew had always fancied himself a gardener. He had been trying to grow hops and barley for years, but his ale had always been only tolerable at best. So he had his men save the dung until he docked here in Fendale, and then he used it as a fertilizer for his garden. Come to find out, dragon dung is the single best fertilizer for a garden. Crops grown in it are the finest any farmer has ever seen. To make a long story short,

old Barlemew stumbled upon the secret to the best beer that has ever been brewed, and he has made a fortune on it.”

The bartender put their beers on the bar. “So, you told the young lad my story, eh?”

With great effort, Whill managed to speak. “I’m glad to hear of your good fortune, sir.”

“Uh huh, Try the ale and you’ll wish a dragon had done his business on your head,” Barlemew said with a laugh.

Whill complied and took a long drink from the large mug. The ale was superb— hands-down the best he had ever had. It was rich and thick yet smooth and satisfying. Putting down the mug, he looked at the bartender with astonishment.

“This is the best ale in all of Agora, no doubt. I congratulate you, sir.”

Barlemew smiled with pride. “I thank you, lad. Folks say it’s magical, too, you know. I drink a glass of my Dragon’s Brew every day and have had perfect health since. Even feel stronger.”

Abram gave Whill a wink. “I don’t doubt that, good sir.”

Barlemew gave them two more. “These are on the house. Don’t worry ’bout drinkin’ too much, neither. You’ll feel like new men after a night of this stuff.”

They both thanked Barlemew and toasted the man. After two mugs each, Abram said, “Maybe I’ll be able to dance after all.” And with that, he headed in the direction of the music. Soon he was surrounded by a crowd of both women and men cheering him on. Abram was good at a great many things, dancing being one of them. He performed the Jolly Two-Step, to everyone’s delight, and soon motioned for Whill to join him.

Three hours and six beers later, they stumbled into the street singing. The crowd had thinned and the first light of dawn was slowly making its way into the sky. They got a ride on a wheel cart and soon were back at their inn. Abram fell out of the cart in a fit of laughter and tipped the boy his entire sack of coins.

“Be here at high noon and there will be more of that.”

The kid smiled in disbelief and bowed frantically. “Thank you, sir, thank you!”

They made their way to their room and quickly fell asleep, Whill in his bed and Abram on the floor.

Chapter 6

Plans for the Sea Maiden

Whill awoke from strange dreams of dragons and gold. A faint breeze drifted in from the open window along with the new day's light. The scent of cherry pipe tobacco lingered in the air. Abram was not in, but he was not surprised. Abram always arose before he did. Whill realized that, though they had drunk heavily, he did not have the usual headache. He actually felt great, refreshed and alert, but he was very hungry and his mouth was as dry as desert wood. He got up and undressed. His clothes and hair smelled like beer, smoke, and women. Whill laughed as he began to wash. The water basin had been filled with fresh hot water, probably at Abram's command. Clean and clothed, he went downstairs and found his friend sitting at a small table in the main room, a steaming cup of coffee and long scroll in hand.

"Ah, so the great fighter awakes," Abram said as Whill took the seat opposite. "I've ordered eggs, bacon, and toast. Two orders each, which is not quite enough if you are as hungry as I."

"Good, I'm starved."

A startlingly beautiful young woman about Whill's age walked up to the table. "Will you be wanting coffee also?" she asked him.

"Yes, I would, if you would be so kind, with six lumps of sugar."

"Six? Do you have a thing for sweet stuff?"

He smiled. "That I do, though I would be ill-fated to try to find anything as sweet as you."

The waitress blushed and gave Whill a coy smile. "I'll be right back."

Abram grinned. "You didn't learn that one from me. I'm impressed."

"What?" Whill feigned ignorance. "The truth rolls from the tongue easier than anything rehearsed."

"That it does, my friend."

The waitress soon returned with Whill's coffee, which was in a larger glass than Abram's and topped with a thick coat of frothy cream.

“Thank you very much.”

“If you need anything else, please don’t be afraid to ask.”

Soon the large plates of food arrived, and Whill and Abram dug in with a hunger they usually only knew on the road. After finishing, Abram ordered another coffee for each of them and lit his pipe. Whill cleaned his plate and sat back feeling very content.

Abram blew large smoke-rings into the air and watched them rise and linger. They sat for a moment in silence. The coffee came shortly and they again thanked the waitress. Whill watched Abram’s smoke-rings hang high above them, as still as stone.

“You know,” said Whill, “we could buy a nice ship with that gold I won.”

Abram laughed. “With that much gold you could buy a whole fleet. But a ship would be a very good investment.”

Whill thought for a moment. “You said we would be here for a while. Do you think it will be long enough to have a ship built?”

Abram raised his eyebrows. “I suppose we could. I do know an excellent shipbuilder—if he’s still alive, that is. I haven’t seen him since last we were here, and he was an old man then.”

“We should go and see him today. I’ve been tossing a ship design around in my head for years—just a daydream, really—but now it seems we can have it made,” said Whill as his excitement grew.

Abram nodded as he sipped his coffee. “I had planned to buy a small boat, but now that you have won this grand prize, perhaps we won’t have to. I have to take you somewhere so that I may finally tell you all you wish and deserve to know. But it is far from here, and by sea we will get there much more easily. Dy’Kore,” he said, before Whill could ask. “The dwarf city in the Ky’Dren Mountains.”

Whill regarded him with utter astonishment. “We are going to the dwarf city?”

“Long ago I fought alongside the dwarf king Ky’Ell against the Draggard. He has since been a good friend. These long years since your birth, he has kept heirlooms of yours safe. Within the mountains lies your past, and there your story should be told to you.”

Whill had read about and heard many stories of the dwarves. They were a race who kept to themselves, mostly, and were not seen often beyond the mountains. They were made up of three clans, the Ky’Dren, the Elgar, and the Ro’Sar. The mountains they inhabited had been named after the dwarf kings who had first settled them. The Ky’Dren dwarves were allies to Eldalon and watched over the Ky’Dren Pass, the only land route into the kingdom of Eldalon. In

return the king supplied the dwarves with a means to transport and trade their gold and jewels, as well as safe passage by ship to visit their kin—the Elgar. The Ro’Sar, who had lived within what were now called the Ebony Mountains, were all but wiped out. A great host of Draggard had come by sea twenty years before and invaded the Ro’Sar Mountains. All but a handful had survived by fleeing to Dy’Kore.

“Then it’s settled,” Whill said. “We’ll build a ship and sail to the mountains, and finally I will know my past.”

They finished their coffee and ventured out into the street. It was high noon and the day was mild. The outer walls of the city gave good protection from the wind. The streets were littered with paper confetti and bits and pieces of pop-balls. Already people were cleaning up, and it appeared that not only hired cleaners, but also many citizens, lent a hand. As Abram had expected, the young man from the previous night was waiting by the door with an expectant smile. Abram threw him a coin and told him their destination.

They again traveled towards the center of the city and soon stopped before a large three-story building. It was made of exquisitely crafted stone that had a shiny gloss. It boasted four large pillars, each of which was decorated with Fendale’s emblem. A large set of marble steps led up to the main door. Upon the very top of the building, stone letters as tall as a man declared “Bank of Fendale.” Whill noticed that archers were positioned every ten feet along the top of the building. There were also four armed guards at the base of the stair.

“This is where your gold is being kept. I assumed that you would want to make a withdrawal.”

“You assumed correctly. You’ve paid my way long enough; it’s high time I treated you for once.”

Abram laughed as they climbed the marble steps to the front door. An armed guard stood at each side.

“What is your business, good sir?” the guard on the right asked Abram.

“We are here to make a withdrawal,” Whill said.

“What are your names, please?”

“I am Whill, and this is Abram.”

The guard gave Whill a queer look. “You’re the one who beat Rhunis?”

“This would be he, good sir,” said Abram. “And if you don’t mind, we have pressing business that must be attended to—unless you want an autograph from the young lad, that is.”

The guard looked embarrassed. He put on a serious face again. Leave your weapons at the check-in or you won’t be permitted inside.”

With that he turned and, together with the other guard, opened the great doors. Whill and Abram entered a small room with bare walls. Another great door lay directly in front of them. To the right there was a guard behind a three-foot-square opening to another room—the weapons storage room. He told them to sign in on a scroll and gave them a quill.

“All weapons must be surrendered here,” he declared in a flat voice.

They complied and handed over their swords and knives. Satisfied, the guard went to a small slit in the wall and said, “Ocean blue.”

The door opened and they went into the main lobby of the bank. It was a large room with many doors. At the other end was a large oak desk. A short little man with large glasses hurried towards them. With an exaggerated hello and handshake, he led them to the vault where Whill’s winnings were being kept. Inside, the twenty sacks of gold sat upon a large wooden table covered with a red velvet cloth. He opened one of the bags and let the coins fall out onto the table with a heavy clang. Abram took a coin and tested it with his teeth, then eyed it in the torchlight. The light reflected on the surface was deep orange. The emblem of Eldalon was stamped on both sides.

“I’ll be taking a half a bag today,” Whill told the little banker.

“Of course, sir, and it will be our pleasure to hold the rest for as long as you want—at one percent interest, of course.”

Abram scowled at the little man. “In that case we won’t be keeping it here long.” He grumbled and left the vault, mumbling something about damned vultures.

After retrieving their weapons and leaving the building, they headed to the shipbuilder’s home. It was a nicely built and decorated house near the city’s ocean side. This time Whill tipped the wagon boy himself, throwing him a gold coin from his bag. The kid looked at the gold in his hand, astonished. Abram laughed. “You *do* know how much that’s worth?”

“A wise man once told me there is no point in having wealth if you cannot use it to spread joy.”

Abram smiled. “You’re a quick learner.”

They left the astonished boy standing in the street and went to the front door of the house. After two knocks the door was opened by an old man in a green vest with a white undershirt. His pants were a fine brown fabric, and on his feet he wore thick fur slippers.

“May I help you?”

“Freston, you old dog! Are you so senile you don’t remember old friends?”

The old man’s frown turned into a wide smile. “Abram, I hadn’t expected you. Folks say you were killed in one of your crazy journeys.”

Abram laughed. “There are more stories of my death than there is sand on the beach.”

Freston chuckled. “Come in, come in. I was just about to have a little tea. Now I have someone to share it with.”

Whill and Abram entered the house, which was just as nice inside as out. Paintings of ships adorned every wall, and numerous shelves were dedicated solely to small ships in bottles. Whill looked at these closely, wondering how they had been put inside. Freston led them to his study and offered them each a seat at his scroll-covered table. “Sorry for the mess, but a builder’s work is never done. I’ll return in a moment with the tea.”

Whill noticed that the scrolls were ship drafts and designs. He cocked his head at one plan that caught his attention as Freston returned with a tray and three tea cups.

“Feel free, young lad. Those are just new ideas I’ve been working on.”

Abram and Freston talked while Whill pored over the drawings. Freston’s sons now built most of the ships, he said, as he was too old for much of the work. But he was very excited about the proposition to build a ship of Whill’s own design.

“Usually I build merchant ships or small sailboats, though I’ve made a few for the royal navy over the years,” he said. “Helping you bring your ideas to life would be a rare pleasure.”

They talked for a while about Whill’s vision for his ship, and Freston wrote one detail or another down on a piece of paper. Abram added his recommendations to the plans. After a few hours of drawing, planning, and calculating, they had a rough draft of what the ship would look like.

Whill held the sketch up to the light. “She’ll be a beauty.”

“That she will, and if done right, also one of the fastest that ever sailed these blue waters,” Freston agreed.

They made plans to meet the following day and said farewell. Upon leaving, Whill and Abram stopped in their tracks—outside Freston’s house were fifteen kids with pull carts, all offering them a ride.

Abram laughed aloud at the sight. “It looks like the word is out.”

Whill said politely that they would be walking, to the lads’ disappointment. “We could use a good walk anyway,” he told Abram, who simply chuckled.

The kids followed them for a while but soon gave up on the prospect. Whill and Abram walked in silence as the sun set beyond the city walls. The streets were not crowded; only the occasional horseman or guard rode along. Women in long gowns and men in an assortment of spring colors strolled from shop to

shop. Couples walked hand in hand, laughing and talking in excited voices. Some children still ran about, letting off small fireworks from the previous night.

After about a half hour, Whill and Abram reached the Ocean Mist and enjoyed a fine dinner of seafood and wine. They talked over their plans for the ship and made more for the days ahead. They had estimated that it would take a month to build the ship, and by that time, Abram would be almost fully healed.

The next day Whill brought his horse out beyond the city to give it some exercise. He rode for hours up and down the coast, the fresh saltwater spraying his face as his horse raced along the beach for miles and miles. It was nice to be out of the city. As much as he liked it, he liked the freedom of the open land much more. He had always loved his life of travel, going from town to town and never making any one place his home. He figured he would settle down one day, but not any time soon. He looked forward to setting sail on his own ship, with nothing between him and the setting sun but the gentle blue ocean. There was nothing better than a night on a ship in calm waters. Sometimes the stars seemed so bright and close, he felt as though he could reach up and touch them. When the sky was clear and the water was still, there were times when he could not tell where the world ended and the sky began. He was truly at peace on the sea, where the mysteries of the water were more complex than his own. It was a place where he could let go of all his worries and be lulled into quiet tranquility.

As he sped along the beach, he thought of his childhood home. The beaches of Sidnell had been his favorite place to think. He would sit for hours on the sand and read. Abram brought him the most interesting books—some with facts about Agora, some a complete history of each kingdom. Then there were his favorites, the books of the elves. As soon as he had learned to read Elvish, he had been fascinated by them. They had come to Agora five hundred years before Whill was born. Their story was one of great loss and suffering. They had lived in a land called Drindellia, far to the east. The elves thrived there for tens of thousands of years and built great cities within. The books then told of a great foe, the Draggard, who were created through the evil works of the Dark elf Eadon. Using what people call magic—the elves call it Orna Catorna—he combined an unborn elf with a dragon egg in the hopes of creating a powerful breed of elves. The Draggard had the shape of the elves and the features of dragons. Their skin was dark green, and rough and scaly upon their backs. They had hideously sharp teeth and claws, and strong thin tails that could whip or impale a man. They were stronger than elves but, like them, could live for centuries—dying only from injury and not age. Like their dragon kin, the Draggard also laid eggs, which was where they found their real strength: great numbers. A queen could lay thousands of eggs a year.

Eadon had proclaimed himself lord of all Drindellia and with his followers, and the Draggard, began a bloody war against King Verelas, ruler of the Elves of the Sun. The war raged for nearly 110 years. The Draggard were many in number, but the elves were skilled in body and in mind. Slowly the elves were pushed to the west of Drindellia where they were to make their final stand. It was then that Verelas sent a great number of his people over the sea in hopes that, even if the war was lost, the race would not perish. Across the sea and into unknown lands went a thousand elves. With them went Verelas' wife, Queen Araveal; their three daughters, Zilena, Avriel, and Kiella; and their only son, Zerafin. The king insisted that he stay and fight with his fellow elves, though the queen begged him to leave. He told her to go and find a safe land where the elves might prosper again and live in peace. That day a fleet of ten great elven ships left Drindellia forever, and as the land faded from sight, the Draggard army could be seen advancing upon the beaches.

For five long months the elves sailed ever westward until they finally reached Agora. They landed on the easternmost coast of Uthen-Arden and made contact with the people of Opalmist. Soon, the ruler of Arden— at that time, King Thoerolus— heard of the refugees and went personally to see them. Whill knew many songs, in both human and elven tongues, that told of the meeting between the queen of the elves and the good king of Arden. The king agreed to help and gave the elves a great land in the southeast, which they called Elladrindellia. Since then, the elves had lived there quietly and built great cities—the likes of which had never been seen in Agora.

Whill had heard countless stories of the elves from Abram and never tired of them. He longed to meet one someday, but that was not likely since they did not leave their territory often, and humans had been banned long ago, by King Thoerolus, from entering without permission. Most people regarded the elves with fear, mostly because of their use of what humans called magic. The dwarves particularly despised the elves and blamed them for the appearance of the Draggard in Agora. For two hundred years both men and elves had kept the Draggard at bay. They always came from the east and were always defeated by the navies of the five kingdoms. But recently the Draggard had been attacking from all sides, and had already overtaken the Ebony Mountains and made them their own. This only infuriated the dwarves more, intensifying their distrust in the elves.

Whill thought of the stories and wondered if he should indeed become a knight of Eldalon. Abram had told him of the war that would come, and suspected that Abram would expect him to become a soldier. Whill headed back

towards the city as the sun climbed higher in the sky. He didn't want to be late for his meeting with Freston.

He entered the city and rode to the shipbuilder's house. Abram was already there, and they soon continued the plans for the ship. Freston calculated what it would cost in materials to build, and estimated the time in labor for each of his three sons. This brought the total to one hundred gold coins, hardly one percent of Whill's fortune.

That night Whill and Abram enjoyed a hearty dinner before visiting the Wet Whistle again. For hours they listened to Barlemew tell his tall tales of dragon attacks and mermaids.

The next day Whill awoke to find a light rain falling on Fendale. From the grey sky, thin sheets of mist lazily fell to the earth. He was unsure of the time since the sun failed to shine through the thick clouds. He guessed it was only a couple hours past dawn. He got up and stretched with a great yawn, and was about to begin washing when he saw a note on the small table:

Whill,

I've gone to take care of some small business. I'll be back after dusk.

-Abram

Whill wondered what business Abram was tending to. He was a little disappointed that his friend would not be at the docks; today began the building of his ship. He finished washing and dressed. After a small breakfast he headed to the Fendale Bank, on horseback, and withdrew enough gold to pay Freston in advance and buy Abram a gift. After stowing the gold in his saddlebags, he headed for Freston's house. Making his way down Fendale's main street, he felt as though he was being watched. Since the tournament, many people recognized him as he passed by; he gave rise to many hushed whispers and pointing fingers wherever he went, and some children even asked for his signature. But this was not the feeling of adoring fans watching him. It was more like the feeling he had in the woods before the wolves attacked.

He stopped his horse and looked around. Rain fell softly on the cobblestones as a woman shook a rug from a second-story window. Only a small crowd moved about the fairly quiet street; three children hurried after two women; men on horseback rode by, talking loudly; a kid pulling a wheel cart ran past. The strange feeling did not ebb as Whill searched for its source. He began to ride again, slightly faster now.

The feeling followed him all the way to Freston's door. Once inside, he peered out through its small window. A lone horseman slowly rode by, coming from the same direction that Whill had. He could not determine whether the man

had been following him, for he looked straight ahead and showed no interest in the house.

“Are you ready to begin work on your beauty?”

Whill jumped. The old man looked at him oddly. “Are you alright, Whill?”

“Uh, yeah, fine, a little jumpy. I brought payment for the ship.” He handed over the heavy bag of gold coins. “That is the agreed-upon amount.”

Freston’s eyes grew wide as he felt the weight of the gold. “You know, you could have just transferred the gold from your vault to mine.”

Whill felt like an idiot. “I’m sorry, it didn’t cross my mind. I should have assumed that a man such as you would have his own vault. Now I feel like a genuine ass.”

“No matter,” assured Freston. “But you shouldn’t travel the city with so much gold. There isn’t a person in Fendale who doesn’t know about your victory—or your generosity. You have become a target of bandits and thieves already, I’m sure. But they will not be bold enough to try to rob you here in the city. They will wait until you set sail.”

“I could just leave the money here in Fendale.”

“That you could, but they will assume you have the gold on you anyway. Your best bet is to trade whatever gold you might take for jewels, which are much easier to carry and less difficult to conceal. As for setting sail, I would ask for a naval escort if I were you.”

Whill pondered the situation. “Maybe you’re right. Would Lord Rogus grant such an escort?”

“He could spare at least one ship, I’m sure. Don’t worry yourself about it. Abram has been through worse than a pirate raid. I’m sure he is prepared for such things.” Freston smiled reassuringly. “Now let’s see how my boys are coming with the frame.”

Whill followed Freston the short distance to the dock entrance. There were many ways to get to the docks; at least twenty passages led from different parts of the city down into the great cave. They headed down a wide spiral stairway lit by large torches mounted every few feet. As they descended, Whill’s excitement increased. He had, of course, read about the great cave-harbor of Fendale, and had even seen elaborate drawings of it in many books. Now he was having his own ship built there. They reached the end of the stairway and Whill beheld the great harbor.

The cave was bigger than Whill had envisioned—at least a half a mile across, as far as he could tell. Its ceiling was more than two hundred feet high in some places. Light from the sun, along with the ocean waters, came in through four great gates carved out of the cave wall and reflected off its shiny mineral

rich surface. He guessed the distance from the back wall to the gates was about a thousand feet. It was hard to believe that above them sat the great city of Fendale. Within the immense cave there were over a hundred ships docked. The harbor was abuzz with movement. There were fisherman unloading their latest catch from giant nets and merchants loading their cargo for distant cities of Agora. Others unloaded cargo that had just been imported to the city, carrying large bags of grain or hauling large barrels from the decks.

Whill was in awe. He followed Freston to where his ship was being built, and noticed a large section of the docks that was for use only by the royal navy. Great warships the likes of which he had only seen in books loomed overhead. They were massive, nearly three hundred feet long. Down the large ramps of some came soldiers in full armor, while on others, soldiers were boarding to spend a few months patrolling the great ocean. It was a very emotional sight; while the returning soldiers were greeted by their loved ones—with open arms and many hugs and kisses—the departing soldiers endured the tears of theirs. Women and children waved and blew kisses as one of the ships launched, the great many large oars protruding from its lower sides rowing in perfect unison. Freston stopped and bowed his head as the women began the farewell song. Taking his lead, Whill did the same as the voices of the women rose to the ceiling and echoed throughout the vast harbor.

*Goodbye, my love, till your ship returns
To the city of light, where the elven torch burns.
May the ocean be kind, may the wind catch your sail
May the stars guide true, and may your vessel not fail.
As the light from the sun rises each day
In my heart you will dwell, and forever stay.
Though foe you may find, and fell they may be,
You will vanquish each threat, you are kings of the sea.
If darkness doth find you, and find you it may,
Think of the clear light that shines night and day.
I'll wait for you here till your ship returns*

To the city of light, where the elven torch burns.

The song ended as the ship left the cave and entered the open sea. Freston raised his head with watery eyes. “My father was a soldier for the royal navy. I was only ten when my mother and I sang that very song. I was forty when my wife sang it for my eldest son.” He gave the women a nod and smile as they

walked by— some with children, some without. “Their ships never returned, my father’s nor my son’s.”

He started for the building site. Whill followed, not quite knowing what to say. His mood had been greatly dampened by the sight of the leaving ship—and by the song. “This city has lost many men to the sea, be they fisherman or soldiers,” Freston said. “Dragons, pirates, storms, and the Draggard wars are a constant threat to all who venture over the great waters. Every month one or more ships do not return, and lately their number has doubled. There is a need for more and more soldiers to hold the eastern borders of Agora. Ships that used to be gone for only weeks are now on duty for months. There is hardly anyone in this city who has not known loss to the ocean. Yet, we love it still. And we will remain people of the blue waters until the day they overtake this land.”

Whill looked at the old man as he spoke, and saw him as he had not before. Within his weathered face and pale blue eyes, he now saw a quiet sadness.

“I never knew my father,” Whill said. “All I know of him is that he died when I was just an infant. I sympathize with your great loss and hope that no other befalls you.”

“Tragedy is a storm we all must weather, my friend. To let it break you is the worst tragedy of all. Instead, we stand tall in defiance and wear a smile when all reason for smiling has left us. Let this great vessel of yours be a symbol of defiance of your own tragedy, and let us take joy in it.”

Whill wondered if Abram had gotten his optimism from living in Fendale. He was never discouraged by anything—a virtue he had tried to instill in Whill at an early age, and for which he was now thankful. Without such an influence, he could have easily become a very different man.

“Ah, here we are.” They had finally reached the building platform. Three men were busy at work on the frame of what would become Whill’s ship. Freston put two fingers to his mouth and gave a loud whistle. The men stopped what they were doing and greeted their father.

“Come here, boys. I’d like you to meet a friend.” The men put down their tools and joined Whill and Freston on the walking platform. Whill extended a hand and shook with each of them in turn.

“Aye, Kellis is the name. Nice to meet you,” said the first and biggest of the three men. He wore brown pants and boots with a white shirt cut off at the sleeves. His long brown hair was pulled into a tail to keep it away as he worked. A thick beard covered his jolly face, and his father’s eyes, as bright as his smile, peered at Whill above a proud nose.

“Name’s Trelen,” said the second man. He was dressed like his brother with the exception of a black shirt. His hair was brown like Kellis’s, but it hung in

curly clumps about his face. His smile was like his father's also, though his face was clean-shaven.

"Nice to meet you, Whill. I'm Leukas," said the third and youngest man. He wore white pants that had been soiled with sawdust; his shirt was blue and long at the sleeves. His hair was long like his brothers', but blond rather than brown, and it was pulled back like Kellis's. He wore a thin, pointed beard on his chin and long thin sideburns. He was the best-looking of the three, with a well-defined jaw and sharp features.

"So, boys, how goes it?" Freston asked, eyeing the frame of the ship.

"It's going as well as it can. We're actually ahead of schedule," said Trelle with a proud smile.

Whill gazed with pride at the one-hundred-foot-long skeleton that would become his ship. He could hardly wait until the day they launched.

"You gentlemen mind a little help?" Whill asked, ready to get his hands dirty.

"The more help the better," answered Leukas.

Kellis put a hand on Whill's shoulder. "It's good to see a man with money who is still eager to work."

Together the five of them went to work. Whill enjoyed the company of Freston's sons and was eager to learn all he could about the building process. He asked many questions, which the men were happy to answer. He was impressed by their passion for building. Even Freston, who had been building all his life, still went at the project with great enthusiasm. As the sun set over the ocean, they called it a day and agreed to start again at first light.

Whill left the dock feeling excited and energetic, eager to tell Abram all he had learned. But first he rode to one of the many blacksmiths in the city and bought a full set of armor for Abram. Since he had won his own beautiful armor on account of Abram, he felt it only fair that the man have his own. He paid the blacksmith and, with the armor in a large bag, headed for Ocean Mist. As he rode down the main street to their lodgings, he suddenly felt *the eyes* again. Trying to ignore it, he rode on looking straight ahead. He wasn't as perceptive as Abram, but he could not shake the intense feeling of being watched. He abruptly stopped his horse and jerked his head to look behind him—but no one was there. Nor did he see anyone on the rooftops of the large, surrounding buildings. This part of the street was fairly empty but for the occasional horseman or guard. Indeed, no one looked at all threatening or took any apparent interest in him.

Whill urged his horse into a quick trot and was happy to see Tarren waiting by the Ocean Mist door. He dismounted and handed the reins to the boy.

"Hello, Master Whill!"

“Good day, Tarren.” He surveyed the surrounding street. Still he found nothing to justify his paranoia.

“I heard that you defeated Knight Rhunis at the tournament. I wish I could have seen it,” Tarren said with great jubilation as he acted out a mock swordfight. “Do you think you could teach me some moves?”

Whill looked at him with amusement. “Do you hope to be a knight yourself one day?”

Tarren nodded vigorously. “Oh, yes. I can’t wait until I’m of age for the tryouts.”

“Well, if your father says it’s alright, then I would be happy to.”

Whill didn’t think that the boy could exhibit more joy than he already had, but at this response, he managed to. “That will be great! Do I get my own sword?”

“Slow down, my young friend. Let’s start with your father’s permission and then we’ll work out the details.” He gave Tarren a gold coin. “Take good care of that horse for me. We’ve been through a lot together. And see to it that this bag of goods finds its way to my room.” Tarren looked at the coin with wide eyes and thanked him.

Once inside, Whill spotted Abram sitting at their usual table near the bar, facing the door—he had a thing for facing the door. Whill took the opposite seat.

“How did the day treat you, Whill?”

He eagerly told him about the ship and what they had accomplished. Soon the serving girl from the other morning came to the table.

“Ready to order?” She aimed a particular smile at Whill.

“Beef stew for me—with fresh bread—and another bottle of mead, please,” said Abram.

“I’ll have the same, Miss—”

The girl stared at Whill as if transfixed. “Oh, sorry, my name is Brillia.”

“Brillia. That’s a beautiful name. Mine’s Whill.”

“I know.” She blushed. “I mean, everyone has heard of your fight with Rhunis. My father told me all about it. He’s been bragging that the best fighter in Eldalon is staying at Ocean Mist. Well, I’ll be back shortly with your food.” Abram gave him a withering look. Whill waited until she had disappeared through the kitchen door before he spoke. “Do you think it’s bad that so many know of our whereabouts? Because of the gold, I mean?”

“Yes, I do.” Abram seemed tense. Whill could tell something was on his mind.

“Freston brought it to my attention that we should be careful of thieves.”

Abram looked annoyed. “Of course we should be careful. I’m surprised no one has yet tried to rob us. You go about throwing your gold around like it’s candy and you wonder if we might get a little attention from the no-good scoundrels that walk these very streets. I haven’t raised you to be naive.”

Whill looked at Abram with burning eyes. “Don’t treat me like a child.”

“I’m not treating you like—”

“Yes, you are! And what of you, Abram? If anything, I was taking your lead in my generosity. Of course it’s crossed my mind that we are in danger of thieves, but if they have half a brain they know the gold is locked up. And if they do try to take it from us I wish them luck, for they will bleed before they get their greedy hands on a single coin. It is I who beat Rhunis in that tournament—I, a man, not a child—and it was I who saved your hide from those wolves. But that means nothing to you. You eagerly sign me up to fight one of the best knights in Eldalon, but you think me too weak to handle my own past.”

Whill had not been this angry in a long time, and never at Abram. He knew he was overreacting but he couldn’t stop. It was as if a dam had broken, releasing years of animosity towards Abram about the secrets he would not reveal.

“What if you had been killed by those wolves, or that damned black bear last year?” he went on. “Or any of the many battles you fought when I was just a child? Where would I be then? If you were dead, there would be no one to tell me what only you know.” He breathed heavily but felt relieved to have his feelings out in the open.

Abram was solemn. “I’m sorry. You are a man to me by every measure, and I am thankful to you for saving my life. Shortly you will know all you wish, as I have told you. You’re right, my death would have robbed you of all of your answers. But if I had not been able to finish your training, you would not be prepared to know them. I have not spent these long years teaching you in order to prepare you for a life of normality or peace. You could be a Knight of Eldalon—or of any kingdom, for that matter—with your knowledge and skill. But that is not your path. Your destiny lies elsewhere.”

Whill felt terrible for what he had said. Abram had saved his life countless times. He had dedicated nineteen years to Whill’s well-being and had treated him as a son. He began to apologize but could not find his voice. Tears welled in his eyes as he looked away, ashamed.

“I know, Whill. And I’m sorry for having to put you through all this. But soon we will sail, and soon you will know.”

Brillia returned with the steaming food. It smelled delicious but Whill had lost his appetite. He ate little of the stew and bread, and left the table saying that

he was tired from the day's work. As he lay on his soft bed and watched the moon flirt with the passing clouds, he realized that he indeed was very tired. Sleep soon found him—as did dreams of his long-dead parents. They stood upon a tall hill, waving happily. But he could not reach them; no matter how he tried, he could not find the top of the hill. The faster he climbed, the taller it got... until a mountain stood before him.

Chapter 7

Farewell to the City of Light

The sun shone in upon Whill's face. The sky was clear blue and the morning air, sweet. A small bird sat at the windowsill peering curiously at Whill, quickly jerking its head to get different angles of him. He sat up as the bird flew away and noticed Abram sitting at the small table, looking at what appeared to be a map.

"Good morning," he said as Whill climbed out of bed and hurriedly got dressed.

"Damn! I'm supposed to meet the brothers at first light."

"Relax, I sent word with that boy Tarren that you would be late. I want to show you something." He gestured to the opposite seat and rotated the map for Whill to see.

"I told you I had small business yesterday. Well, I met with King Mathus and Lord Rogus. The king is very eager to meet with us when we are finished in the mountains."

"Why?"

Abram took a deep breath as if troubled. "It seems that King Addakon of Uthen-Arden has declared war against Isladon. As we speak, war wages upon its borders. No word has come from King Fenious of Isladon. The Arden navy has blocked off the entire coast, and Mathus fears that Drindale will soon fall."

Whill sat back in his chair in disbelief. "So Mathus wants to know if we intend to fight?"

"That he does."

"And you told him yes, I assume."

"No, I told him our answer will come after we visit Dy'Kore."

Whill thought for a moment about the severity of a war within Agora. There had not been strife among the kingdoms for more than five hundred years.

"What of the Draggard within the Ebony Mountains?" Whill asked.

“It is as I have warned the kings for years; King Addakon has made them his allies. It was obvious when Addakon did nothing to help Isladon in vanquishing that retched scourge from the mountains. But the kings would not listen. They did not want to believe the ugly truth. Now it is apparent.”

Whill was stupefied. “But how can Addakon persuade his soldiers to fight their own kind—and alongside those demonic beasts?”

“Addakon is of strong mind and he can make his will that of others. His army is nothing but a group of mindless pawns.”

“And what of the people of Uthen-Arden? They must object to this outrage.”

“The people know not of his alliance with the Draggard. He has told them that Fenious is the one who has befriended the fell beasts, and he has turned them against the elves as well. He tells his people that the elves are indeed the masters of the Draggard, and that they are plotting to take all of Agora for their own. I fear that Elladrindellia will be Addakon’s next target.”

Whill sat shocked. “This is ridiculous! King Addakon has treated his people terribly since he has been in power. Never in the history of Arden has there been a more brutal king. How can they believe his lies and follow so blindly?”

“Do not forget, Whill, Addakon would have been carefully planning all this for many years. And though he has treated his people badly, they will follow his lead if presented with a common enemy—especially one as terrible as the Draggard.”

Whill’s mind raced as he tried to comprehend what he had heard. He stood up and slammed his fist down on the table. “We must do something! There is no time to wait for the ship to be finished. Let us go now to the mountains and be done with it! We must tell Mathus that we will fight.”

Abram smiled. “I’d hoped you would say as much.”

With that, Whill and Abram grabbed their things and hurriedly packed their bags. They left Ocean Mist and made their way to the bank on Whill’s horse. Once inside, they converted all but one bag of gold to diamonds. Upon finishing the transaction, they quickly rode to the docks and found Freston.

“We must leave Fendale at once, my friend,” Abram told him.

“What’s wrong? Is there trouble?”

“Yes, of the worst kind.” He quickly explained what he knew of the Isladon siege.

Freston did not seem shocked. “I knew Addakon was no good. Ever since his brother died, things haven’t been right in Arden.”

“We wish to leave today—as soon as possible,” Abram said. “Do you know of anyone who will sell us a vessel?”

“Of course. I will.” He pointed to a small ship docked forty feet away. “I have three of them, as you know, but there is no need to buy it. If you must go, go now and take *Old Charlotte*. She’s not much to look at but she’s sturdy, and fast.”

Whill stepped forward. “Will you take care of my horse until we return?”

“Like she were my own. And your ship as well, lad. It’s a shame you won’t see her come to life.”

Whill nodded. “I was looking forward to sailing her soon, but that will have to wait.”

Freston led them to a large wooden building built into the back of the cave. It was a store for sailors to get last-minute supplies. Whill ordered dried meats, cheese, bread, and a barrel of water. Next to the water he noticed barrels of wine, mead, and... “Dragon’s Brew”. He read the bold red letters, laughing to himself, and said, “I’ll take a small barrel of old Barlemew’s as well.”

He overpaid and carried the meat while a young boy wheeled the rest of the things to the boat. Together, Whill and Abram loaded the vessel and said their farewells to Freston and his sons.

“Are you ready to sail, my boy?”

“That I am, sir. That I am.”

Together they opened the sail and quickly caught wind. Whill took in the familiar smell of the ocean water. With the wind in his hair and the wheel in hand, he steered them westward. Their path would bring them completely around the western coast of Eldalon, roughly a thousand miles, to the port town of Sherna.

Whill regretted having to leave Fendale; he loved its people and the city itself. But at least now he would find out his past, the secret of which was locked away somewhere in the dark recesses of the Ky’Dren Mountains.

They sailed steady the entire day until the sun began to set behind the vast blue ocean. It appeared to be bigger than usual, soft orange behind the clouds.

“Ah, sunset upon the ocean,” Abram mused as the sun’s rays shot up from behind the clouds in brilliant hues. “Never will man mimic such beauty.”

With the stars came a chill that rode on the wind as the night air pushed the ship steadily along. Whill shivered with the drop in temperature. Abram went below and retrieved his long, hooded brown robe.

“I was going to give you this in Fendale on your birthday next week, but I figure you’ll be needing it now. Besides, I can’t hide it forever.” He held up a large black fur coat. “I saved some of the wolf hides and gave a tailor your measurements.”

Whill inspected the fine coat. It was black as a moonless night and so long it would fall to his knees. Around the waist was a long strip of leather to hold it tight, and there were large silver buttons down the front.

“Thank you, Abram! It is a fine gift.” He put the coat on and buttoned it up. It was very warm and a welcome barrier against the wind.

As the night passed Whill kept true to their course; with the silhouette of the coast to his far left, it was hard to veer off. Abram put a hand on his shoulder. “You can handle her for a while, eh? I’m going to catch some sleep.”

“Go ahead, I’ll be fine.”

As he stood at the wheel, hypnotized by the steady crashing of small waves and the endless bobbing of the boat, Whill thought of the journey ahead. They had ventured the Ky’Dren Mountains before, but that had been years ago, when Whill was just a boy. Still, he knew much of the history of the mountains—and indeed of every land. He and Abram had lived for a time in many towns, and he had learned many of the traditions and ways of the various peoples. They had stayed in Brindon, Orenden, Bearadon, and even Belldon of the Shierdon kingdom.

Most major towns of Shierdon were built on the edges of Lake Eardon. It was more than 150 miles across, with a large island, Belldon, taking up the middle. Belldon was more of a fortress than a town. In the early days, during the war between the kingdoms, the people of Shierdon could retreat to Belldon and find safe refuge. No army in the history of Agora had ever overtaken the island fortress. As people settled and spread throughout Agora, there were often wars waged over land as each king fought to increase the size of his own kingdom or take over another. Many times Belldon had saved its people, being virtually inaccessible but by boat.

In those days there were many more than four kingdoms of men. What was now Uthen-Arden had at one time been made up of more than twelve small kingdoms, constantly battling for power. As the years passed and lands were taken by war, two kingdoms rose above the rest—Uthen and Arden. After a bloody war between the two, they finally ended the strife and outlined their borders in the Uthen-Arden Peace Treaty. The kingdom of Uthen spanned from what was now the Isladon border, and the existing mountain border of Ky’Dren, eastward to the center of the Thendor Plains. The kingdom of Arden extended from there to the easternmost coast of Agora, beyond the Elgar Mountains and including what was now called Elladrindellia.

The two kingdoms lived in peace for nearly four hundred years until war broke out between them once again. The great war of Uthen-Arden raged for more than thirty years, during which time children were born to both kings:

Aldolas, son of the king of Arden and heir to the throne; and Bryella, daughter of the king of Uthen—an old man who had yet failed to produce a son of his own. In the midst of the war, a secret love affair arose between Aldolas and Bryella. It happened that when both kings fell in battle on the Thendor Plains, Aldolas became king of Arden. Shortly after, he called an end to the war and took Bryella as his queen, combining the two great kingdoms into one called Uthen-Arden—though many referred to it simply as Arden.

Isladon had established itself long before the wars of Uthen-Arden. The borders that existed along the Ebony Mountains and down to the coast were made years before either great kingdom came to power. Though many attempts had been made to overtake Isladon, none had succeeded.

Eldalon was the oldest, and possibly strongest, of the four kingdoms of men. This was mostly due to the mountain borders and the Ky'Dren Pass, against which many armies had marched and been defeated. Unlike all other kingdoms, Eldalon maintained a strong alliance with the dwarves. According to legend, this amiable relationship dated back to the time when the king of Eldalon gave the great mountains back to the Dwarves; it had been taken by what was, at one time, the barbarian kingdom of Gothneck. The mines of the Ky'Dren were rich with gold and diamonds, and the dwarves thought a man who would give back such a treasure must be of the noblest kind. They never forgot Eldalon's kindness and fought alongside it every time the Ky'Dren Pass was challenged.

Whill looked forward to meeting the Ky'Dren dwarves, but more so, he looked forward to finding out what secrets of his their deep chambers and vaults possessed. As he went over the long history of Agora in his mind, he wondered if there was indeed a possibility that it would ever fall to the Draggard. After all, the beasts had conquered the elves of Drindellia. True, the armies of Agora were strong—and the navies stronger still—but the elves had powers that humans did not; if they could be defeated by the Draggard, then what chance did humans have?

Though the sky was clear and the night was calm, Whill was troubled. Suddenly he heard a loud banging noise that jolted him from his trance. Abram appeared from below the deck, swearing loudly and rubbing his head. Whill laughed. "You alright, old man?"

"The damned ceiling down there was made for a dwarf. I swear, if it were any lower I would have to crawl around like a fragging dog."

"Well, Mr. Brightside, at least you've still a head to hit things on—it's got to be the hardest head this side of the Thendor Plains," Whill said, mocking Abram's voice, which he happened to be very good at.

"Very funny." Abram checked his fingers for blood.

“If you like, I could try to find you an iceberg to bring down the swelling.”

Abram chuckled. “Alright, jester, why don’t you get some rest. I’ll take over for the rest of the night.”

Whill gave Abram a pat on the back as he took over the wheel. He went below deck to the sleeping quarters and crossed the dark room with his arms outstretched. Suddenly he banged his head on a low beam. A flash of light appeared before his eyes and he became dizzy. Sharp pain shot from his throbbing forehead as he heard Abram burst into a fit of laughter above.

“Look out for that beam! My father always said what comes around goes around. You all right, boy?”

“Never better,” Whill grumbled as he found the cot. “Good night.”

Chapter 8

Diamonds and Greed

“Wake up, Whill, we have trouble!”

Abram shook Whill out of his quiet and dreamless sleep. He sat straight up in the cot, alert and ready. “What is it?”

“Come above.” Abram started for the steps.

Whill followed Abram to the deck and looked at the sails and then the ocean with wonder as the older man untied rope holding the wheel steady. “What’s wrong?”

Abram pointed to the rear of the ship. “There.”

Whill followed Abram’s finger toward the horizon. With the morning sun just rising in the east, it was not hard to see the faint dot. “A ship, I presume?”

Abram nodded, troubled. “I noticed it not an hour ago. Whoever they are, they have been following our course steady, and they’re gaining.”

“Pirates!” Whill spat over the side of the boat.

“Yes. Followed us from Fendale, I imagine.” He slammed his hand down hard on the rail. “Damn, but I am a fool. We are not prepared for this.”

“Can we outrun them?” Whill asked.

Abram answered bluntly. “No. This ship is no match for theirs.” He paused. “We could sail toward shore and try to make land in time.” He pointed toward the coast, which was nothing more than a phantom beyond the fog.

“But broad cliffs line those shores for miles. Our only option is to fight.” Whill looked at the ship upon the horizon, already growing larger. “What if we just give them the diamonds? That’s what they want.”

“Pirates have a code, as you know: leave no man alive whom you have wronged. They will take what they want and kill us without hesitation.”

“Then what chance do we stand?”

Abram smiled at him. “None but hope, my friend—hope that our path is not destined to end here. That is all we have.”

Whill was not encouraged by Abram’s speech. “We should start tossing everything we don’t need!”

“That will give us a little more speed and a little more time, but not enough. Let us prepare for battle.” Abram loaded his quiver with arrows. Whill went below and donned his armor from the tournament. He also grabbed the armor he had bought for Abram and brought it up to the deck.

“I was going to give this to you yesterday, but we left in such a hurry I didn’t have a chance.” He held out the bag.

Abram emptied it and marveled at the silver armor. He gave Whill a one-armed hug and pat on the back. “Thank you, Whill. Not only is this a wonderful gift, but it could’ve come at no better time.”

The hours passed and the ship gained steadily on them. Soon it was not more than a half-mile away. Whill could now see that it was a black ship with all-black sails—but for a large dragon symbol outlined in white at the center of each.

“That can’t be,” Whill gasped.

“I’m afraid it is—The *Black Dragon*.”

Whill knew of the *Black Dragon*, as did most people living in Agora. The ship and its captain, the notorious pirate Cirrosa, had once been part of the Arden navy. Their last mission had been to escort a merchant ship sailing from the port city of Hentaro. Destined for Fendale, the cargo had been a wealth of diamonds and jewels—over twenty chests. After sailing from Hentaro, neither the *Black Dragon* nor the merchant vessel were seen again. It was rumored that the ships were lost to a great storm or destroyed by dragons, but when a vessel identical to the Black Dragon was reported to have been plundering ships, it became clear to the king and people of Arden that it was indeed Captain Cirrosa and his crew. Since then, Cirrosa had become the most feared and wanted pirate to sail the great oceans of Agora.

Abram scowled at the approaching ship. “We have but one advantage: the element of surprise.”

Whill knew exactly what Abram had in mind and he quickly went to work. From one of his bags he retrieved a length of bandage cloth. He tore it into long thin strips and wound them around the end of his arrows. Next he dismantled a lantern, opening it at the basin so that he could dip the arrows into the oil. He and Abram quickly converted ten arrows in this manner. Finally, Abram lit a torch and they were ready for their surprise attack, feeble though it might be. There was nothing to do now but wait.

When the *Dragon* seemed to Whill to be about two hundred yards away. He nodded to Abram, gesturing for him to light his arrow. With the tip of his arrow ablaze, Whill steadily pulled back on the bow as he aimed at a point high in the sky. Bringing the bowstring all the way back until the feather of the arrow

touched his cheek, he fired. The blazing arrow flew high into the sky in a large arch and began its descent upon the ship. Instead of hitting the sails, it missed and landed on the deck of the vessel. Whill and Abram could hear someone cursing and screaming obscenities, and assumed it was Captain Cirrosa ordering his men to put out the small blaze. As the first arrow hit, though, Whill was ready with another. Abram lit this one in the same fashion and Whill recalculated his shot. The second arrow took flight and found its target. It hit the closest sail in a small burst of flame, which quickly began to spread. Men swung from ropes, trying to douse the fire with buckets of water. The captain's barked orders became more urgent now, and Whill heard him yelling, "Drop sail, you useless fish turds, drop sail!"

Before the crew of the *Dragon* could comply, Whill shot another arrow at the same sail, this time hitting higher than before. He followed with two more aimed at the deck of the ship. Still, the *Dragon* had gained enough that Whill could see a small group of archers preparing to fire upon them. He let loose another arrow, aiming this time directly at them. The men saw it coming and ducked out of the way as the arrow stuck in the mainmast, spraying liquid fire on the surrounding ship. They quickly resurfaced, though, and shot a barrage of their own arrows. Whill yelled, "Get down!" and ducked in the stern as they struck the deck.

Not daring to peek over the side of the ship, Whill watched as Abram abandoned the torch and went for his own bow, which lay beside him. He readied an arrow and said, "Alright, when they get—" but his words were interrupted by a deafening crash as the *Black Dragon* rammed them at the starboard rear. Huddled close to stern, Whill and Abram were now smashed hard against it from the great force of the collision. As they recovered from the blow, they saw the bow of the *Dragon* come into view. It loomed high over *Old Charlotte* and seemed ten times as broad. Abram scrambled into a shooting position, as did Whill, and as the archers came into view, the pair took down two of them with simultaneous shots. Their fellow archers cursed them as they let their own arrows fly. Anticipating the return fire, and with no immediate cover, Abram grabbed Whill and ran for the sleeping quarters. Arrows fell right where they had been, and more followed close at their heels. Abram and Whill had instinctively notched another arrow each, and took the opportunity to fire before the archers could again. They stopped just long enough to get off a clear shot, and then quickly closed the distance to the stairs as two bodies fell to their deck from above.

Whill and Abram hurried down and took cover. Whill stood closest to the opening. "That's one hell of a large ship," he said as arrows hit the back wall.

Abram nodded as he readied another arrow.

Whill did the same. “There must be dozens of men aboard.”

“Aye. And here they come.”

Whill heard what could only be large ropes hitting the deck. Abram grabbed his arm and switched places with him.

“What are you doing?”

“There’s no time to bicker.” Abram abandoned his cover, dropped to his knees, and fired three arrows in rapid succession. Whill heard a loud thud as at least one body hit the deck. Abram retreated within the stairway once again and strung another arrow.

“There are seven ropes over the side of the *Dragon* and men are filing down one after another. We can’t hide here forever. Let’s do the unexpected and meet them head on, my boy. Are you up for a good fight?”

Before Whill could answer, Abram ran out into the opening, firing arrows as he went. Whill followed suit and ran screaming onto the deck. At least twenty men were now descending upon the ship down the long ropes. Whill shot at the men highest of them, hoping they would take some of their fellow seamen with them as they fell. He took up his position next to Abram and they took down two more men. Though they were excellent bowmen, the pirates were too many, and soon they covered the deck. Some had swords, while others brandished a long knife in each hand. Still others carried hatchets and maces. The men didn’t look anything like Whill thought pirates might. They wore rags for clothes and looked very thin, as if they hadn’t eaten for weeks. Two men charged forward and were quickly taken down, but as they fell, four more charged in their place. Outnumbered and out of arrows, Whill and Abram drew swords and made a charge of their own. The men came at them with wild screams and curses, fearless in their attack.

Whill blocked a blow meant for his head and quickly brought his sword down and across the chest of his attacker. Pushing the man back into the group of pirates, he ducked as an arrow zinged past his left ear. Abram had killed two men, and was now fighting a third, but Whill noticed an archer taking aim at his friend. He quickly dispatched another pirate, grabbed his knife, and threw it at the archer high overhead. The blade found its mark and hit the bowman in the throat as the arrow intended for Abram hit a pirate descending the ropes. Two men now came at Whill—one with a hatchet, the other, a sword. The hatchet-wielding pirate made a two-handed overhead attack as the other jabbed straight at Whill’s chest. Whill blocked the swordsman and spun away from the hatchet blow. Abram chopped into the neck of the hatchet-wielder and blocked a blow of yet another foe as Whill parried the swordsman’s attack. The pirate was no

match for Whill, who cut the man down with ease. Even as more men came onto the deck, Whill and Abram steadily drove them back.

“Come on, you pirate scum!” Whill screamed as he took down another. Abram was now fighting a large man who was using two swords. Whill again faced a man with a hatchet, who came at him with a wild cry. As the pirate swung at Whill’s head, he quickly blocked the blow. Swinging his sword down hard, he effectively caused the hatchet to lodge in the deck floor. Before the attacking pirate knew what had happened, Whill stabbed him through. Before the body could fall, he impaled another pirate who had just landed on deck. Turning, he grabbed the hatchet stuck in the deck and simultaneously blocked a sword attack. Abram killed Whill’s attacker and was quickly faced with yet another foe. Whill launched the hatchet toward the top of the rope that held the most men. It cut clean and sent six men falling towards the deck. Just then, there was a shout from the ship above.

“Enough!”

Captain Cirrosa leaned with his hands upon the rail, looking down at the battle below. His hair and clothes were black as night. His face was deeply tanned, and rough with age and years at sea. He wore a mustache and pointed chin beard which, along with his menacing eyes, gave him the look of a bird of prey ready to attack.

The attacking pirates stopped where they were, and Whill watched as the rage drained from their faces and was replaced by intense fear. There was a thud as Abram let the last of his attackers fall to the deck, having stabbed him through.

“You useless scum can’t do anything right,” The captain yelled to the men below.

Whill pointed it at Cirrosa. “If you want more of your men to die, then by all means, send them down the ropes. And if you want my diamonds, sir, then come down yourself and try to take them. But I promise you that you will bleed.”

Cirrosa gave a hearty laugh, as did his men from above. The men below did not.

“You have a fighting spirit, young Whill! Good for you. But in fact, you have killed none of my men. Those you have slain are slaves, nothing more.”

Whill looked at the men, who cowered as the captain spoke. They stood with their arms at their sides, heads down, shoulders hunched.

Again Cirrosa laughed. “I told them that if they could kill the two of you, I would set them and their women and children free. If not, they would die.” The crew began to cheer and whistle.

Abram stepped forward. “You always were a heartless killer, Cirrosa.”

The captain's face lit up. "Abram, my old friend. It's been a long time. I see you too have abandoned Arden. We have something in common after all."

Abram ignored Whill's puzzled look. "For one, Cirrosa, we are not friends. And second, if you do not leave now, you and your men will all die today. Twelve men remain on our ship—slaves, you would call them. But I call them free men who will fight alongside us to free the women and children you speak of."

Cirrosa laughed again, but cut it short and, instead of a smile, bared his teeth. "I fear that you and your friend have not counted on one thing." With one swift movement, he produced a long knife and pulled a child close to himself. He put the knife to the child's throat, and Whill recognized the boy immediately. It was Tarren.

"No!" Whill lurched forward but was halted by Abram. Cirrosa ran the blade teasingly along the terrified boy's throat.

"You have something I want, and it seems I have something you want. Give me the diamonds and the boy will go unharmed."

Whill began to curse the captain, but Abram spoke over him. "If we give you the diamonds, you will kill us anyway, along with the boy and these men's families. We find no comfort in the word of a pirate."

Cirrosa shook his head and grinned. "So be it. We will kill you all and take the diamonds anyway. Shame, really. I could have gotten good money for this boy." With that he slit Tarren's throat and let the boy fall to the deck below. Whill could hear nothing but his own screams as Tarren's body fell. He ran to his limp body as real pirates now made their way down the ropes.

Cirrosa spoke again, this time to his men. "Kill them all, and one hundred coins to the man who retrieves the diamonds!"

As Whill held the dying boy in his arms, he heard Abram yelling to the slave men, "Fight for me, bleed for me, and I swear your families will not perish!" The slave men answered with a primal scream that could only be produced by the truly oppressed, those who have given up hope for themselves and fight only for the lives of those they love.

As if through a long tunnel, Whill heard faintly the sounds of swords clanging and men fighting. He could not take his eyes off Tarren, who lay in his arms—bleeding from the neck, body broken from the fall. As he watched the boy die, he could distantly hear Abram calling his name and yelling something about getting up. Whill's head began to churn. His rage alone was enough to make him dizzy. Anger welled within him—anger for Tarren's death; anger for having killed slaves who were only fighting for freedom; anger that he might die today without learning his true heritage. The injustice of it all sent him into a

trance-like state. Before he knew what he was doing, his hand covered Tarren's throat.

As his flesh made contact with the young boy's blood, Whill felt a strange sensation run through him. It was as if his energy and life force were suddenly being sucked from his body. Tarren's chest heaved as a Whill's energy filled him. Whill became dizzy and disoriented as men fought around them. He became aware of nothing but Tarren and himself and the bond they now shared. A strange blue light was all Whill could see as tide after tide of energy pulsed through his body and into Tarren's. As the blue light faded into blackness, he was suddenly jolted out of his trance and slammed to the deck as the sounds of the world came rushing in. He saw blood and bodies and fire—and Abram looking down at him.

Over Abram's shoulder a red dragon flew past.

Abram shook him, but he would not respond. He was unconscious and would remain that way for some time, if he snapped out of it at all. The fighting had slowed as many slaves and pirates stood dumbfounded by what they had seen. Abram rose. There was nothing he could do for Whill now but win this battle. He turned to the slaves.

“Behold, men, your gods fight with you! Go forward without fear, and may their blessings lead your strikes!”

The slaves' cheers grew into a primal scream. The pirates upon the deck did not live more than ten heartbeats after that. The slaves were heading up the ropes when suddenly an explosion hit the pirate ship, deafening all nearby momentarily, and shaking many from their feet. From the ship Abram saw the source of the carnage: the massive red dragon. The distraction was enough to ensure that the climbing slaves made it up to the deck of the pirate ship—with Abram right behind them. He hit the deck and was engaged by a pirate wearing all black with only a thin slit revealing his eyes. He brandished two daggers and came in hard, slashing with one and stabbing forward with the other. Abram barely avoided the slash but was ready for the stab. When it came, he spun away from the strike and jumped up onto the rail. Knowing that the pirate would go for his ankles, he jumped backwards from his perch and brought his legs up high, tucking his knees, and came down with a powerful slice. As the pirate swiped at his legs with both blades and missed, he had a glimpse of his leaping enemy and a shining blade... and then he saw no more.

The slave men were tearing into the pirate force with reckless abandon. The ship was aflame, and the dragon repeatedly swooped down on the battle to scoop up a pirate in his huge claws or maw. Then down into the battle the dead and bloodied pirate would drop—usually on top of one of his comrades. This horrible image alone sent many pirates scrambling for the rails and into the ocean. Abram had his suspicions as to why the dragon seemed to fight for them, but he did not care; it was enough to sway the battle. The men had already begun opening the many iron doors upon the deck that led to the slave quarters and were setting their families free.

“Get them onto my ship and set sail!” Abram ordered. “Do not wait for me—look for me in the waters!” He spotted Cirrosa making a run for the lower decks and followed. Through a door and into a small stairwell went the most wanted pirate in two centuries—whose scrolled list of crimes against the peoples of every kingdom in Agora would have fallen to the floor. Murder, theft, kidnapping, rape, torture, and many, many more vile and heartless acts—Abram wanted this man dead out of sheer duty if nothing else.

He followed Cirrosa slowly into the mess hall. There was a door to the kitchen on the right, and three doors to the left. He knew the *Dragon’s* style of ship and took the door to the right. Upstairs and into the captain’s quarters he went cautiously, and there he found Cirrosa and a flying dagger. Abram rolled as he hit the landing, the blade whizzing by his head. Then he leapt to his feet and charged Cirrosa.

“Come on!” The pirate taunted as he brought up his short sword and a long curved dagger. Abram came in hard with a slash to the left that was deflected by the short sword. The dagger came in and Abram spun out, keeping his distance from the blade. Cirrosa went into a slash-and-stab dance that kept Abram on his toes in the close quarters. Cirrosa worked the two blades like a master, but Abram was prepared. He knew the pirate’s fighting style well, for they had been friends for a time in their academy days. He was keeping pace but needed to get one of the blades out of the fight. He deflected the short sword high to the left and came in close, knowing Cirrosa would go for the gut. A split second before Cirrosa thrust with the dagger, Abram was already pulling back from the strike. Down his blade came from the short sword parry; straight came the thrust of Cirrosa’s blade. In an instant Abram sliced deep into Cirrosa’s forearm, nearly severing it. It swung sickeningly from the pirate’s arm. Cirrosa let out a howl of pain and spun away from Abram. The *Dragon* was rocked again and lurched to the side. Abram and Cirrosa were thrown to the wall. Abram got his footing as quickly as possible and came at the injured captain. Cirrosa’s eyes went wild with pain and rage. He lunged with his blade, but Abram easily blocked it. The

pirate was too weak from his injury to win, but Abram knew he wouldn't stop until the bitter end. Cirrosa would never allow himself to become a prisoner, nor to see the inside of a courtroom. For Cirrosa, being caught meant a fate worse than death.

There was no time for speeches; the ship was falling apart around them. Abram deflected another feeble slash and stabbed Cirrosa through the heart.

Cirrosa jolted and his body froze. Then he found Abram's gaze and grabbed his shoulders. Blood poured from his mouth as he spoke. "I'm glad it was you," he said, and then his eyes went blank.

"So am I."

Abram watched Cirrosa fall before he fled to the empty and burning deck above, climbed the rail, and dove into the ocean.

Chapter 9

An Ocean of Mystery

Whill awoke to more pain than he had ever known. He was sure that he was dead or dying. Every fiber of his being ached to a point that was almost unbearable. He was not sure if he were actually awake or asleep. A fog blurred his vision as strange shapes loomed over him and spoke in a language he could not understand. He tried to move but could not; he tried to speak but found he could not remember how. He lay in fear—fear of the seemingly endless pain, fear of the shadows which spoke to him in such a strange tongue.

Once again he blacked out and slipped into the world of dreams. He could see a man and woman standing upon a small hill. Though he did not remember ever seeing them, he knew they were his parents. Joy flooded through him as he ran toward them, ready to finally embrace the mother and father who had been stolen from him. But as he ran the hill grew bigger, and his parents' smiles withered. The faster he ran, the higher the hill grew until it was a mountain before him, and his parents' faces smiled skeletons' grins—he realized the mountain was time itself

Whill screamed as he awoke and sat up. His vision was still blurry and the strange figures grabbed at him. He tried to fend them off but they soon subdued him. Vaguely he recognized the boy Tarren sitting next to him, smiling. He knew then that he was dreaming again, for Tarren was dead. He struggled to wake. As his vision grew clearer, he could now see that with Tarren sat many women and children he did not know. He tried to move and was almost rendered unconscious as pain jolted through his body. As his vision blurred again, he saw Abram walking towards him. Then blackness found him once more.

He lay in great pain while the voices spoke soothingly. Then the blue light returned, slowly at first, dancing along the edges of his vision. As it became stronger, his pain finally left him and he found he could sit up. Surrounded by the blue light, he now saw a figure, a person, standing before him. The figure drew close enough that he could tell it was a woman. She came and knelt before

him. Her hair was so long that when she knelt it touched the ground. It was brown and shone with a great radiance, as did her body. Her face was a picture of pure beauty; her skin smooth as silk. Her eyes were bright blue—the irises ringed in a darker shade—and within them Whill sensed great compassion and kindness, and wisdom beyond mortal understanding. He thought he must be dreaming of his mother again until he noticed her ears. They were pointed and protruded from under her hair. He knew at once that he was in the presence of an elf. As he stared in wonder, she simply smoothed his hair back and spoke, in an almost humming tone, the same words over and over: “*Endalla orn, Whill, elan orna menon, lelalda wea shen ora.*”

He was lulled into a deep and peaceful sleep, one without pain or fear. As the elf woman’s voice slowly faded, he felt more at peace than ever he had before.

The bed rocked slowly, and Whill could feel a wet cloth being applied to his forehead. His body ached and his throat burned, but he had enough strength to open his eyes. He was in the sleeping quarters of *Old Charlotte*, where more than a two dozen women and children sat staring at him with strange expressions. Instantly he surveyed the surrounding crowd for the elven beauty, but to no avail. The only women in the room were human, and none of them resembled the elf. Perhaps he had been dreaming after all...except that she had seemed more real than these women did now.

“Please, my good lady,” he said to the woman sponging his forehead. “Where has the elven woman gone?”

She gave him a queer look. “I’m sorry, lad, there is no elf here. You still have a fever. You should rest some more.”

Whill ignored her request and swung his legs over the side of the cot. Dressed only in his pants, he quickly grabbed a shirt and threw it on. Again he surveyed the surrounding people. They wore ragged clothes, and their hair was dirty and matted. They looked as though they had not bathed or eaten in weeks. He assumed that these were the families of the men who had first attacked—but how had they gotten onto his ship, and where were the pirates? He needed to find Abram.

With the woman’s help, he stood and made his way to the stairs. He stepped on deck and into the open air, and instantly began to feel better as the cool wind and saltwater mist bathed his face. The sun hung low in the east; it was just past dawn. Abram was at the wheel, talking with a young slave boy. Four of the slave men were on deck also, and they gave Whill friendly smiles. He simply nodded; even though he had no choice, he felt ashamed for killing their friends.

Abram turned, as if sensing Whill’s approach. The boy turned too. When Whill saw the child’s face, he froze. It was Tarren.

“Whill, you look like you’ve seen a ghost,” said Abram with a warm laugh.

Tarren stood smiling, seemingly oblivious to what had happened to him. Whill reached out to touch his head and peered at the boy’s neck. There was no sign that it had ever been cut.

“Are you feeling better, Whill?” Tarren asked.

“Uh, yes...yes, I feel better.”

“That’s good, you gave us a good scare. Thank you, Whill. Thank you for saving me.” There were tears in his eyes as he flung his arms around Whill’s waist, who returned the hug and patted his back. There were a million questions on his tongue, but he bit them back behind an awkward smile.

“You’re welcome, Tarren, you’re welcome.”

Tarren released Whill after a few moments and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

Abram broke the silence. “Tarren, lad, do you think you could steer the old girl for a while so I can speak with Whill?”

“Yes, sir, I sure could!”

Abram put his arm on Whill’s shoulder and led him to the front of the ship so they could talk privately.

“Abram, what’s going on? How can Tarren be alive? What happened to me back there? Where are the pirates?”

“Relax, Whill, relax. It can all be explained. First off, you have been in a feverish sleep for two days now.”

“Two days!”

“Yes. You would wake up screaming and flailing about. I assumed you were having nightmares. You have been running a high fever up until this morning. How do you feel now?”

“I’m hungry as all hell, but otherwise I feel alright. Why, what happened?”

Abram studied Whill for a moment as if trying to read something of his health. “You don’t know what you did?”

“No. After Tarren fell I took him in my arms, then everything went strange and I blacked out.”

“You healed him, Whill. You saved his life.”

Whill shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“When you went to Tarren, I was rallying the slave men to fight. Everything happened at once. The pirates attacked again; down the ropes they came and we began to fight. But you would not move. I screamed to you to get up, to fight, but you were not with us—not in mind, anyway. You just stared at Tarren, and then you put your hand upon his throat.” Abram stopped and looked at the slave men and at Tarren.

“When you touched Tarren’s throat, Whill, your hand began to glow with blue light. It was faint at first, but then it grew until it was hard to look directly at it. So bright it was that it took the attention of all who were near. Even the pirates who had just joined the fight stared in awe, transfixed by what they were witnessing. Having seen an energy healing before, I knew what was happening—and what danger you were in. As fast as I could, I ran and pushed you back to break your contact with the boy.”

Whill took in what he had just heard. “So I healed Tarren with my own energy?”

“Yes, but you didn’t know what you were doing. If I hadn’t stopped you, you would have poured all of your life force into Tarren and dropped dead on the spot.”

“But how could I have done that? Only elves have the power to heal with energy. Everyone knows that it is not a human gift.” Then he remembered the elf from his dreams, and how he had at first mistaken her for his mother. “Was my mother an elf? Is that why I was able to heal Tarren?”

Abram studied Whill for a moment, as if deciding upon something. “No, Whill, she was not.”

Whill let out a frustrated sigh. “Then why do I have such powers, and to what extent do I have them?”

Abram gave Whill a sympathetic smile. “You have a gift. I was surprised when you healed Tarren; I had no idea you would be able to tap into your abilities before you were properly trained—but you did. How you did it I do not know. It seems that your emotions were so strong, you instinctively did what was needed to save the boy, but since you have no control, it was very dangerous. It takes a great deal of energy to heal a person who is on the brink of death. Not only did you heal his wound, you mended his broken bones as well. That is why the feat took such a toll on you. It takes as much energy from the healer as it would take for the person to heal himself.”

“That doesn’t explain how I can do it.”

“That, my friend, I would rather explain to you, along with everything else, within the mountain.”

Whill had known that would be the answer, but he was too mentally drained to argue. “Fine, then. At least tell me what became of the pirates.”

Abram’s face relaxed, visually relieved to have the subject changed. He put his hands on the rail and began to recall the events after Whill’s blackout.

When he finished, Whill was wide-eyed. “And the dragon didn’t advance?”

Abram laughed. “No. It finished off the pirate ship, circled overhead twice, and flew away.”

“Why did it help us?”

Abram shook his head. “I really don’t know, Whill. It may be that when it saw what you were doing to Tarren, it thought you were indeed an elf. The dragons and elves have a strange friendship, as you are aware. It has been less strong of late, since the creation of the Draggard by the Dark elf Eadon. But some loyalty still lies between them.”

Whill was at a loss for words. He couldn’t believe how they had all escaped such peril. And he still had not fully absorbed the fact that he had healed Tarren with energy. His head began to ache as he pondered the implications of such powers.

Abram again put his hand upon his shoulder. “Come, Whill, let’s get you something to eat. You’ve lost at least ten pounds in the last two days, or hadn’t you noticed? The slaves, it turns out, are from Eldon Island. The Eldonians are great fisherman and have caught quite a feast.”

Whill regarded the men at the opposite side of the boat. “They hold no animosity towards us? After all, we killed many of their people.”

“No, they do not blame us. They know we had no choice; we did what we had to do. On the contrary, they are grateful that we helped free them. Now come, and do not feel ashamed.”

Whill followed Abram to the rear of the ship and together they joined the Eldonian men. The men had caught a bundle of tuna, which Whill was eager to accept. Though he still felt awkward around them, he could not deny his hunger. He ate four bowls of the tuna as he listened to the Eldonians speak of their homeland. Eldon was a large island off the southern coast of Eldalon. In times of war it had been used as a lookout point. In the event that an attacking fleet was spotted, the people of Eldon would light great beacons atop the mountain peaks, which thus became known as the Burning Mountains. In return for their constant watch over the waters, the Eldonians received protection from the king of Eldalon, and were allowed to live the way they had for centuries. Fishermen by trade, they lived peacefully on their island and were thought by many to be a primitive people. They shunned many of the ways and practices of the mainland peoples and were content to live by their own customs.

Whill listened with admiration as an Eldonian man spoke of the ways of his people. “We want only blue skies and long lives; we are happy having what we need. The want for unnecessary material things leads only to envy and greed; wars are spawned from such ways of thought. We help the king of Eldalon because, in this day, it is a necessity for us to have his protection. We will defend our shores, if need be, but we would rather live in peace, as we were intended to.”

He paused and looked at Whill, who glanced away, uneasy. “When the pirates took us we were far out at sea, which is why Eldalon was not alerted to our dilemma,” the man went on. “We had been prisoners of those beasts for almost a full year. They attacked our ship and made us their slaves. Many of us they killed—not because we tried to revolt, but for their own enjoyment. The old, the weak, and the sick were disposed of quickly. They used our women...”

The man stopped, so filled with rage was he at the memory of their imprisonment. He took a deep breath and looked to the sky with tears in his eyes. “And then the captain told us about the two of you; he said that if we could kill you, he would let us go. So you see, we had to attack; though we knew you not, we saw you as our enemy—the only thing standing between us and freedom. In my heart I knew that Cirrosa would not hold true to his word, but we had no choice. We would have all surely died if it had not been for you, and for that we are grateful. Those who died attacking you did so with honor, and we begrudge you not for it.”

Whill did not know what to say. He knew the man was sincere and harbored no ill will for the slaves who died at their hands, but still he felt a deep guilt that seemed would never really be washed clean. He himself had never known his father... and now he had killed the fathers of many children. They had been good men, forced to fight. The thought of it all made Whill sick to his stomach. Hoping not to be thought rude, he excused himself from the eating circle and joined Tarren at the wheel.

“Hello, Master Whill, did dinner do you some good?” He wore the same wide smile with which he always regarded Whill.

“I’m no longer hungry, but I couldn’t feel worse.” He looked solemnly out over the waters. “Tarren, what do you remember of what happened on that ship? I mean, when I...when I helped you?”

Tarren’s face scrunched up in thought. “I remember pain, and falling. Then I saw nothing but blackness. Then your voice—you were angry—and a blue light.” His eyes were wide, and a new excitement entered his voice and demeanor. “And then I felt the strangest thing I’ve ever felt in my life, or call me a liar. It was like when you know it’s your birthday soon and you can’t wait, or when you’ve eaten way too much candy. Inside you feel like you might explode. It was like being in the center of a screaming crowd, but all of their excitement is inside your body. I felt no pain, and before I knew what had happened, your friend picked me up and told me to hide below.” He looked upon Whill with puzzlement and wonder. “How did you do it, Whill?”

He put a hand atop the boy’s head. “I don’t know, Tarren. I don’t know.”

Chapter 10

Survivors

The night was cool, the ocean calm. The stars shone brightly in the heavens, untouchable diamonds of the night. To Whill it seemed that the ocean mocked the night sky, reflecting the stars with the same brilliance, but also making them dance and shimmer in a way that the sky never could. He stood at the bow, entranced, hands on the rail, mind drifting with the midnight sea. He was tired but not hungry. He needed rest but could not sleep among those he felt he had wronged. His legs, back, arms, and even his mind ached. He knew he had not fully recovered, and was not sure how soon he would. Yet, contemplating the length of time it would have taken Tarren to heal from his broken bones, Whill wondered how he himself had recovered so soon. Had the elf woman been real? Had she helped him along with some kind of magic—an energy healing of her own? Surely that was absurd, for they were hundreds of miles from Elladrindellia. She had been a dream figure and nothing more. But the more Whill thought of her, the more real she seemed. The way her hair hung low, her beautiful smile, her eyes....

Startled, as Abram put a hand upon his shoulder, Whill jumped back to reality and the cool night air.

“Sorry, Whill, I didn’t mean to disturb you. Are you alright?”

Whill let out a deep breath and gave Abram a weak smile. “I’m fine. I was just thinking.”

Abram gave him a pitying look. “Thinking of the Eldonian men? Whill, don’t beat yourself up; we had no choice in the—”

“No. Not about that. I was thinking of the elf woman I dreamed about last night.”

Abram looked puzzled. “What elf woman?”

Whill told him all about the dream in detail as Abram listened keenly. At the end of the story, Abram gave him a slight frown of puzzlement. “What was it she said to you?”

Whill thought for a moment. “*Endalla orn, Whill, elan orna menon, lelalda wea shen ora.* ‘Worry not, Whill, feel no pain, nothing can harm you.’ It was more like a chant, and when she said it, all pain left my body and I was at peace—more at peace than I have ever felt. I could not only see and hear her, I could feel her inside. I could feel her energy within me, pulsing, soothing. It felt so real.”

Abram regarded him, straight-faced. “It very well could have been real, Whill.”

Whill’s face lit up. To hear it from Abram gave the idea substance, made it seem like a real possibility.

“Elves have many powers that people do not, and will never understand,” Abram said. “It is quite possible that what you experienced was indeed real. She may have helped you to heal in much the way you helped Tarren. If nothing else, your fast recovery may be proof of it.”

Whill was baffled. “But I know her not. I have never even met an elf. Who was she, and why would she help me?”

Abram looked at him the same way he always did when asked this kind of question; Whill knew he held the answers, and also knew that he would not tell him. He looked at Abram with disappointment. “Let me guess: in the mountain.”

Abram sighed. “I am as tired of these secrets as you are. From your description I can only guess that she was one of Queen Araveal’s daughters. Which one I do not know, for they are all similar in appearance.”

Whill was not shocked to hear this; more so, he was relieved to hear an explanation at all. “So this woman—princess—she knows me?”

“She does, as does the queen. Why she does is part of a tale that must wait. It will be less than a week before we reach Dy’Kore. Be patient, my friend.”

Whill laughed a tired laugh. “I’ve waited nineteen years what’s another few days?”

Tarren sounded a small bell mounted above the wheel. “The island, I see it!”

Abram took over the wheel as the Eldonians hurried onto the deck. Whill watched as the island drew closer. Even now, at night, he could see the vast beach and forest beyond. Abram steered them into the Eldon Channel between the island and Eldalon. They sailed with Eldon to starboard for more than an hour, well into dawn. As the sun began to rise, the city of Do’Adore became visible. As they approached a large dock, where there was a fleet of small fishing boats, a great horn sounded from the trees; it was answered by another from

within the city. Abram gently and masterfully steered the ship to the dock, and an Eldonian man secured a line.

The city was amazing. It had no great buildings, and no barrier separating it from the surrounding land. It consisted of thousands of large huts, each with smoke coming from a small chimney. The huts were identical, though some were larger than others. This, Whill had learned while listening to the Eldonian men speak of their village, was only due to the size of each family living within. Social status was not reflected in the size of one's home, or in the things one might own. Each person had a purpose, and each purpose was vital to the survival of the people. Whill wondered why more people didn't live in this manner. While others fought viciously over things they did not need—and in the end, brought them no lasting joy—the Eldonians lived in harmony with their surroundings, celebrating and sharing in good fortune, and mourning each other's losses.

As the former slaves went down the ramp to the beach, they were greeted by their kin. Sobbing and laughing jubilantly, they hugged and kissed the family and friends who had thought them lost at sea.

Whill was reluctant to leave the ship, his guilt still weighing heavily on his heart. Abram came over to him. "Look, Whill, at the joy we have brought to so many people. If not for our actions, these people would never have returned. They would have died along with those other men. Don't you see the good that has come from something so terrible? Those men would have died anyway, or been worked to death by Cirrosa and his men. If you had not won the tournament, Cirrosa would never have pursued us, and these people would not have a second chance at the life they love so. Everything happens for a reason, Whill. Take comfort in the joy you see before you."

Whill knew Abram was right, and he told him so. Together with Tarren, they made their way onto the beach and were introduced by the Eldonians as great saviors of the sea. Blushing and feeling very uncomfortable, Whill nevertheless accepted hugs from the Eldonian women. Most were dressed in long hooded robes, due to the morning chill, but some wore only cloth covering their genitals. The men carried long thin spears, and some brandished swords.

The Eldonians insisted that they join them in a celebration meal. What Whill expected to be a small breakfast turned out to be a grand feast and celebration that lasted late into the day. By the time they were ready to leave, the sun was beginning to set. The surviving men and the chief walked them back to *Old Charlotte*, followed by what seemed to be the entire island population. As they approached the ship, the chief spoke.

“Once again, thank you for returning our people. We are forever in your debt and at your service. If ever you are in need, please, think of Eldon as an ally. You are welcome here eternally.” With that he bowed, as did the rest of the people of Eldon. Whill, Abram and Tarren bowed in return and made their way onto the ship. As they set sail once again, with Abram at the wheel, Whill and Tarren watched the people of Eldon wave happily after them. Night fell as the three companions sailed toward Sherna.

The deep blue sky had made way for a blackened one, and the stars awoke. They shone brightly in their heavenly realm, untouchable diamonds of the night. With the stars came a chill that rode on the whispering winds and clung to Whill’s bones like a long-lost love. Carrying an oil lantern, he went below to fetch his wolf-hide coat. It hung above his cot, which was now occupied by Tarren. The boy slept peacefully, a slight smile at the corner of his mouth. But to Whill he appeared too peaceful, too still, as though death had come back to reclaim him—to fulfill a fate which had been altered. He nudged Tarren on the shoulder, and to his relief the boy rolled over, mumbling something inaudible.

Satisfied, he pulled a blanket up to the boy’s chin and retrieved his coat before silently returning to the deck. Abram was still at the wheel, sailing steadily east. Whill joined his friend, and for a while they stood in comfortable silence, sailing by moonlight. They were lucky to have the benefit of a full moon. Abram seemed mesmerized by its reflection upon the water, and more at peace than he had in a great while.

Noticing Whill staring at him, Abram simply smiled. “Is Tarren sleeping soundly?”

Whill turned his gaze to the water once more. “Out cold. He did have a long day.”

Abram laughed. “Didn’t we all. You should get some rest too. You must be tired, having not slept last night.”

Whill shook his head. “No, I’m not; I’m wide awake. I guess two days rest is enough for a while. I’ll take over for a bit, Abram; you haven’t slept either. I’ll wake you at dawn. If this wind keeps steady; we’ll be in Sherna well before noon. I’ll rest then.”

“Alright, Whill.” Abram gave him a pat on the back and stretched with a great yawn before heading to the sleeping quarters.

“Wait,” Whill said. “What do we do with Tarren? We can’t see him safely back to Fendale personally.”

Abram turned at the stair. “Do not forget we have a wealth of diamonds. Once in Sherna we will find a good woman to look after him until we return from the mountains. Then we will go to Kell-Torey to meet with the king. He will see to it that Tarren finds safe passage back to Fendale. Worry not, Whill.” With that, he disappeared below and left him alone with the moon and stars.

Whill took the wheel and once again let his mind drift with the waters. He thought of Tarren, and how amazing it still seemed that he had healed him. Only the elves had the power to heal with energy; if Whill was not of elven blood, then what could the explanation be? Also, if he could heal, what other powers did he possess? Could he also use his abilities to fight as they did? The ocean held no answers. Only within the mountains would Whill find any revelation.

As he sailed steadily east, the sun began to rise. The blackness of the night sky was replaced slowly by a dark blue. As the stars disappeared, the horizon glowed orange with hints of radiant pinks, reds, and purples. When the sun finally showed its face, it gleamed down upon the world with the magnificence and splendor of a god.

Whill secured the wheel and quickly went below to wake Abram. Though he meant not to, he woke Tarren as well. Soon the three friends were enjoying a simple breakfast of fish, gifts from the Eldonians. They passed the remaining time of their journey mostly answering Tarren’s candid questions.

As high noon approached and the mist parted, they could see the harbor of Sherna come into view. As it drew closer, Whill saw the distant snow-capped mountains beyond. The sight made his chest swell with excitement. Soon all his questions would be answered; all the secrets, revealed.

With Tarren’s help, Whill lowered the sail as Abram steered the ship into the small harbor. There were only seven vessels docked: six fishing boats and a small royal ship. Off the coast, the mother ship could be seen rocking lazily with the waves. It was a battleship of the Eldalon navy. Whill could now see over a dozen Eldalon soldiers waiting on the dock. As *Old Charlotte* eased next to them, Whill threw a line to one of the soldiers, who quickly secured it to a worn post.

Abram lowered the small ramp and greeted the soldiers. “Beautiful day, no?”

The guards showed no expression. One stepped forward. “What business do you have in Sherna? Are you merchants?”

Abram’s usual patience seemed to desert him. “We are not merchants—we have no cargo but ourselves and our personal items. I am Abram, and that lad there is Tarren. The man next to him is Whill—of whom I’m sure you’ve heard, or vultures don’t eat red meat. We have had a long and tiresome journey from Fendale, and seek only a good day’s rest.”

The guards looked at one another, and the first man spoke again. “That man there—you say *he* is Whill? The one who beat Rhunis? But he is barely a man!” The guards all began to chuckle.

Whill went down the ramp, wearing a slight smile. Facing the guard, he looked him in the eye and let his smile fade. “It is true I beat Rhunis, and I have the diamonds to show for it—not to mention the king’s leave to travel all of Eldalon freely. And the man you see next to me, Abram, has not three days ago slain the menacing Captain Cirrosa—a feat that the great navies of Eldalon have failed to accomplish for a decade.”

The guard stared in wonder as Abram passed the other guard a scroll bearing the royal seal. Whill let his smile return. “Now would it be so much to ask for us to go on our way without more pestering? We have much to do and little time. Don’t be mistaken, I respect and admire the fact that you soldiers are far from your homes, serving your king and protecting these lands; but we are not enemies of Eldalon—we are forever its allies.”

The guard was left speechless. He simply looked Whill in the eye as if trying to sense whether he were lying. The other guard nodded that the seal was genuine. At last he said, “You say that Cirrosa is dead?”

Whill nodded. “No longer will the *Black Dragon* be a menace to the great seas of Eldalon.”

The guard eyed Whill, who stared at him straight-faced. Finally the guard smiled. “It seems as if you bring good news in bad times. The king will be very pleased to hear of this. As you must know, there is a large bounty on Cirrosa’s head.”

Abram spoke up. “I will tell the king personally soon enough. But I wonder, good sir, could you tell us what has happened within Isladon as of late? Has war started there?”

The guard’s face became solemn. “No one has been able to enter Isladon yet. The Arden navy has claimed the waters surrounding the coast. This may be something better discussed when you see the king. I am not at liberty to speak of such things to—excuse the label—strangers.”

Abram nodded. “I understand. Thank you.”

With that the guards returned to their posts; the three travelers unloaded their things from the ship and went in search of lodging.

Beyond the harbor, the town spread out upon a slight hill. It was a relatively small town, with a butcher, a blacksmith, a town hall, and stables. The buildings, including homes, were made mostly of logs. Beyond the main street, rolling hills spread out as far as the eye could see.

There were few people about the street, most of which gave no notice whatsoever to the new arrivals. The town smelled like most port towns did; the sweet scent of the ocean was everywhere. It reminded Whill of Sidnell. He hadn't seen Teera and her daughters in over two years—since he and Abram had last visited—and had a feeling he wouldn't see them again for a long while still.

As they ventured into the heart of the town, Tarren pointed out a small Inn. Much like the other buildings, a log structure, it was two stories high with many small chimneys perched on its roof. The sign above the door read HAGUS'S INN. Tarren led the way and opened the main door for Whill and Abram. Inside, the room was filled with smoke. More than a dozen fishermen and other locals sat at the bar and surrounding tables, drinking and talking loudly. At one table sat six Eldalonian soldiers talking in hushed whispers and eyeing them suspiciously. There was also a group of women dancing in the middle of the room and, in the far left corner, a small band consisting of a fiddler and two guitarists; in harmony they sang:

*By the ocean's water or dragon's fire
The end shall come at long last;
So light up your smoke so fast you choke
And drink your beer down fast!*

Whill was familiar with the old drinking song, for he had heard it in countless other taverns and pubs. He hummed along as he looked around the room. It had a high cathedral ceiling; stairs on the right led to the second-floor balcony, which boasted many doors but no windows. Abram led them to the bar, and many eyes followed. The bartender was a stout, rugged-looking fellow with a white beard down to his belt. He wore a fisherman's cap and brown overalls with a white shirt. He smiled at their approach, and his leathery skin seemed to stretch uncomfortably as he presented a toothless grin. He didn't seem like the kind of man who did a lot of smiling, and Whill could see that this one was rehearsed.

"Good day, good day, friends! Name's Hagus. What can I do for ya?"

Before Abram or Whill could respond, Tarren spoke up. "We'll be needing a room for the night, three cots if you have 'em, and hot baths if you could." He grinned at Whill and went on. "We been at sea for a long and dangerous haul, and need bath and good food. I can still feel the pirate scum on my skin."

Abram laughed, and Hagus frowned. "The boy's name is Tarren," Whill said. "I'm Whill, and this is Abram. Tarren is right, we could use all he requested. The

room we'll need only for the night—if you have one available.” He mussed Tarren’s hair.

Hagus maintained a steady frown as he pondered on something, and in the absence of teeth, his bottom lip touched his nose. “Pirates, says you. Is the boy one with a wild and fibbin’ imagination, or does he speak true?”

Abram gave Tarren’s shoulder a slight squeeze. “The boy has a good imagination, yes, but a liar he is not. I’m afraid it is a long one, but if you could get us what we need, we will tell you the tale of Cirrosa’s demise—over some Dragon’s Brew, of course.”

“Cirrosa!” Hagus yelled, catching the attention of half the room. He bent low and whispered, “That scum hasn’t been spotted in these waters in over a year.”

Whill bent low to match the bartender’s stance and, after an animated look, said, “Seen him we have—and his blood dries upon my friend’s sword as we speak.”

Hagus’s bushy eyebrows seemed in danger of leaping from his face. “No!”

“Yes. Would you like to be the first on land to hear the story, or can you not accommodate us at this time?”

Hagus fumbled for some glasses. “No, no! No—um, Dragon’s Brew you said? Comin’ right up, and—oh—Sheria! Sheria!” he called towards the door at the back of the bar.

A woman of about fifty emerged carrying two bowls of stew. She wore a long brown dress with orange trim, and a brown handkerchief upon her head held back her long grey hair. She was pretty, with a more natural smile than Hagus’s.

“Sheria,” Hagus said hastily, “after you’ve served those, get our guests a room ready. Make it the north room.” He poured the Dragon’s Brew from a large barrel mounted on the back wall. Sheria nodded and began on her way as Hagus burst out again, “Wait, woman, I’m not done! Have three baths prepared, and see to their luggage—and horses, if they have any.” He turned to Whill as he set the beer in front of them. “Do you have horses?” Whill shook his head in amusement. “No horses? Never mind—em, ah—and have Jenna cook up the special—three orders, right? And not today’s special, the *special* special.”

Sheria didn’t move. She merely stood and deadpanned her husband. Though Whill thought it impossible, Hagus blushed and gave a weak smile, “Please, my love?”

Sheria nodded, satisfied. “Of course, dear.”

She gave them a small bow and went on her way. Hagus let out a long breath. “My wife, she’s a doll. Jenna, our daughter, she’s the cook in the family.

My other daughter—Oreona—she works with us also. Now, uh, where was I—oh, yes—young lad, could I interest you in some cider?”

“Please, sir!”

Hagus got Tarren a tall glass of cider and excused himself, retreating to the back.

Whill chuckled. “Have you ever seen anyone so excitable?”

Abram took a long swallow, then turned to Tarren, who had just taken a seat on a large stool. “Listen, my boy, when we tell our version of the story, keep quiet about getting your throat cut and Whill healing you.”

“Aww, but that’s the best part!”

“That may be,” Whill said, “but I don’t want the trouble of having to explain powers I don’t understand. And that kind of stuff makes people nervous. Just don’t mention it, alright? For all our sakes.”

“I guess,” Tarren huffed.

“Promise?” Abram asked.

“I Promise,” he said reluctantly.

Tarren looked very disappointed, so Abram smiled and patted him on the back. “I tell you what. If you can keep quiet about it now, I’ll let you tell the whole story to the king when we get to Kell-Torey.”

Tarren lit up, and Whill thought the boy’s eyes might pop out of his head. “The king, really? You really mean it, Abram? You have my word!”

Hagus returned and set two more beers on the bar. His expression was a little easier now. “Your rooms will be ready shortly. You can leave your luggage with me and it will be seen to. Your baths are ready as well, and food will follow. So whenever you’re ready, go ahead. The bathing room is up the stairs, first room on the right.”

“Thank you,” Whill said. “I think I’ll do just that.” He retrieved two gold coins from his pocket and set them on the bar.

Hagus looked at the gold in amazement. “Good sir, the room, meal, bath—well, the cost for all is no more than twenty in silver.”

Whill leaned in and said, “Yes, but we will need more of your services before we leave. Consider this advance payment. A man’s silence is a costly thing at times. I trust we will not gain any unwanted attention by entrusting you with our story. Not, that is, until we are far from here.”

Hagus was adamant. “Yes, sir, mum’s the word! You can count on me!”

“Good.”

Whill made his way upstairs, and Abram and Tarren soon followed. The bathing room consisted of four large tubs, three steaming with hot water. Next to

each tub there was a small table with towels, soaps, and scrub brushes. A large fireplace roared with four large kettles of boiling water above it.

Whill soaked in the hot water long after Abram and Tarren had finished. His muscles still ached from the incident with Tarren. The hot water and fire had almost lulled him to sleep when a girl, who must have been Oreona, entered the room. She instantly looked at the floor.

“Begging your pardon, Whill, sir, but your food is ready and your friends await you downstairs.”

“Thank you. Tell them I will join them shortly.”

She nodded and left as Whill got out and dressed in clean clothes.

Downstairs the band had taken a break, and there were about half as many people as before. Abram and Tarren sat at a large table; they had waited for Whill to begin. The table was set with a blue velvet cloth and fine dishes. A large pot of steaming stew sat at the middle with two loaves of marbled bread, a small plate of butter, white cheese, and an assortment of fruits. There was also a pitcher of beer with two Tankards, and a smaller pitcher of cider with a mug for Tarren. Whill grabbed a Tankard and toasted with his friends.

“Lelemendela.”

Tarren asked what it meant and Whill explained, “To life.” Tarren insisted that they do it again so he could join in.

They ate and made little conversation. Whill was surprised by his own appetite; he had three helpings of stew and finished off a loaf of bread by himself—along with half the brick of cheese.

When they were done, Abram lit his pipe and sat back, content. “While you were bathing, Hagus told me of an excellent blacksmith where we can purchase some fine arrows,” he said.

Tarren lit up. “Do you think I could get my own sword? I might need it if we run into villains on the way to the mountains.”

Abram and Whill eyed one another.

“Tarren, Abram and I must venture to the mountains alone.”

“But, Whill—”

“Let me finish. In your father’s absence we must do as he would wish. I do not think your father would permit you to go into the mountains. You will stay here in town until we return.”

Tarren’s eyes watered. “But who will I stay with? Wouldn’t I be much safer with the two of you? What if the pirates come back for me? Please let me go, please!”

Will knew exactly how the boy felt; he had felt the same when Abram left those many times in his youth. Now he saw himself in Tarren—a scared child

trying desperately to act tough; not understanding why he must stay; wondering if he was unwanted.

“I know you want to come, Tarren, and I would love to have you with us, but this is not a decision we can make on your parents’ behalf. When we return, you will journey with us to Kell-Torey. Let there be comfort in that at least.”

Tarren’s shoulders sank. “How long will you be?”

“It will take us two days each, there and back again,” Abram said. “How long we will be in the dwarf city, I cannot say, but it should be no longer than a few days.”

Tarren looked no happier with this information. He slumped back in his chair and stared at his empty plate. Whill stood. “Would you like to come with me to get some supplies for our trip?”

Tarren could not help but smile as he got up from his chair. “Aye.”

Abram said he would stay behind to speak with Hagus and reminded them of some of the items they would need. Together, Whill and Tarren left the inn.

They spent most of the afternoon gathering supplies for the following day’s journey. At the blacksmith’s they purchased four dozen arrows and, to Tarren’s delight, a small knife that could be hung from the boy’s belt. From the town store they bought bread and cheeses; meat, Whill explained, would be acquired in the wild.

As they ventured up the main street, Whill took in the pleasant sea air once again. It was a beautiful late afternoon. Faint white clouds hung in the sky, seemingly unmoving, as the sun bathed the world with warmth. They passed many log homes, a few with stone walls. People were busy with the day’s chores but still had time to offer a “good day” or a “heya” as they passed. A butcher was busy preparing a hog for sale, while a young lad sat on the porch of the butcher shop, plucking a headless chicken. On the opposite side of the street a woman swept dirt from a doorway. She gave Tarren a wink as she hummed a jubilant tune.

They headed towards the healer’s house on the outskirts of town. As the buildings thinned and the forest trail came into view, a woman ran past with two soldiers following. They went straight to the healer’s house and were greeted by urgent voices which Whill could not decipher. He began to jog toward the home and Tarren followed suit. As they neared the building, Whill began to make out the urgent words emanating from the open windows and doors. A woman was screaming in a way that made him cringe.

“No! No! My baby, my baby! Do something, please! Can’t you? Why won’t she breathe, why won’t she breathe? Let me see her, damn you, she won’t—” Her voice trailed off into a deep, breathless sob.

Whill and Tarren reached the door, the room was bright, but the scene was a dark one. A woman lay on a blood-soiled bed, being comforted and held down by three older women. One, who Whill sensed was her mother, held her tight and cried hard into the young woman’s shoulder. A man of about twenty stood with a dead stare—and watering eyes—aimed at a bundle on the foot of the bed. An elderly man and woman, whom Whill suspected to be the town healers, huddled over the dying infant, trying urgently to revive it. Whill could hear nothing but his own heart. It pounded in his ears steadily, faint hues of red flashing before his eyes with every beat.

There is no injury, he thought. I can do this. She only needs enough to start her heart.

Whill faintly realized that all were now watching him as he advanced into the room toward the infant. He wondered why they did not try to hold him back. Then he saw what they saw; from the palm to each fingertip of his outstretched hand, blue tendrils of light convulsed and danced. The mother had stopped sobbing and stared in wonder. The healers made way for Whill and stepped to the sides, never taking their eyes off him. The infant laid upon the blanket—small, weak, unmoving—a blue hue to its skin. The look on her face was that of great discomfort, not peace. *She wants to come back, he thought.*

As Whill bent and put his hand upon the baby’s head, he instantly felt her presence. Her faint spirit stumbled into his as a blind man might do, lost in an unknown place. The tendrils from Whill’s hand spread across the limp infant’s body, becoming ever brighter. Her spirit clung strongly to Whill as he tried desperately to monitor the transfer of energy. Then suddenly he felt a great urgency, a desperate struggle to hold on to life as it slipped away. He felt the baby’s simple emotions—the need for what he gave her. Before he could break contact, a sudden jolt surged through his body, dropping him to his knees. He stiffened as her desperate spirit drained from him all the energy it could. Whill was no longer in control. Unable to stop, and fighting hard to break contact, he saw now that the baby had lost her blue color. Through the energy bond, he felt the baby’s heart begin to beat. It pounded faster and faster, stronger with every beat. Her spirit devoured the energy pulsing from him. He mustered his strength and told her spirit kindly to let go.

Suddenly he felt a sense of recognition and understanding, and then great knowledge and a vast intellect, within the spirit’s consciousness. A wisdom of countless years resided within; memories, like waves, crashed into him. He saw

strange lands and strange people; oceans, forests, and streams where he had never ventured. Mountain ranges, foreign to him, loomed before his mind's eye and disappeared. He watched as an entire life played out before him. There was a flash of light, and another set of memories, faces, and feelings began. It ran its course and ended in another flash. Again and again—faster and faster—the cycle repeated until the lives of this ancient spirit poured into him like an avalanche. Then, suddenly, it stopped. Now a landscape he recognized spread out before him. The Ky'Dren Mountains, Lake Eardon, and Drakkar Island flashed before him. He saw the Castle of Del' Oradon, and felt great love. Now oblivious of his physical surroundings, he had no conscious link to the world around him. There was only this spirit, and its memories. He was not afraid; rather, he felt great comfort and trust. As he watched the life memories of the spirit unfold, something caught his eye. It had only been for an instant, but he asked to see it again. The spirit obliged and he saw in greater detail the form he sought. It was Abram, and he was a young man in his mid-twenties.

Another vision flashed before him—a long corridor hung with great banners. Through the spirit's memories, Whill watched as the view turned to face a grand mirror. In the reflection he saw a stunningly beautiful woman. She seemed to be in her late twenties, with long black hair and a flawless face. Whill knew then, for the first and last time in his life, he was looking upon his mother. She gazed at herself and then at her large belly. She gave it a few loving strokes before continuing down the hall. Whill urgently tried to make her turn, but the vision faded. Now all was black—but he was not alone. The spirit, that had at one time been his mother, cuddled him as if he were the infant. Without words, she told him that she loved him and was very proud, as was his father. She made him understand that the baby he had saved was a new life and would have no memory of him. She told him not to be sad, but thankful that they had shared this rare experience.

Whill knew it was time to go, but protested. She reassured him once again, with great love and pride, and was gone. He knelt at the foot of the bed, his eyes burning with hot tears. He could hear the infant wailing loudly and smiled to himself as he passed out.

Chapter 11

The Road to the Mountain

Whill was again in the state he had been after healing Tarren. His body ached, his head pounded, and he floated in and out of strange, feverish dreams of his parents, the mountain, and of places and people he had never known. He awoke briefly to find an old woman wiping his brow with a cool cloth. He attempted to ask of the infant, but his head swooned with pain and he fell once again into a deep sleep.

Again the elf woman came to Whill and, with her soothing touch and warm smile, took away all pain. Her beauty surpassed that of any mortal he had ever seen, and he was sure he would be content to stare into her eyes forever. Her face radiated with great compassion, but Whill could sense an urgency born of fear. As she soothed his many pains with her own healing energy, she spoke.

“Whill, he can sense you. You must not use your powers again until you are among us. He knows where you are. You must go now.”

Whill awoke abruptly and sat up. Abram jumped, his eyes heavy. Whill surveyed his surroundings. He knew where he was—the house of healing. The old man and woman now tended to him, and they seemed as shocked as Abram. Even Tarren stared in wide wonder as Whill attempted to get out of the bed.

“Abram, we must go, we have to leave now!”

Abram gave Whill a look of concern. “Whoa, whoa there, friend, relax. Give yourself a minute. Are you alright?”

Whill found his clothes and hurriedly put them on. Tarren retrieved his boots. “Thank you,” he said. “Abram, the elf woman from before told me we should leave—just now, before I awoke.”

Abram’s face turned to a hard scowl. “What else did she say?”

Whill tied his boots quickly. “She said something like ‘he can sense you,’ though I don’t know who she was talking about.”

Abram paced the room for a moment as if in deep thought. “You’re right, we must go, and we must go now. Tarren, go and tell Hagus we are leaving.”

The boy ran from the room without a word, and the old man peered out the window with a scowl. “I don’t know how easily you will escape the crowd, good sir.”

“What crowd?”

“That crowd, there.” The old man pointed.

Whill went to the window. “They have been outside for four days now, awaiting a glimpse of the great healer; he being you of course, sir.”

He was not surprised at being unconscious for days, but he was by the crowd. More than fifty people were camped outside of the small home. A man noticed Whill and cried, “There he is, there he is!”

Whill quickly ducked away from the window as the people began to cheer. The old man smiled at him. “That was a wonderful thing you did for the child; though, I know not how you did it. You have a great gift, son—an elven gift, if I may. Tell me, are you part elf?”

“Uh, no, I am not. I do not understand my...abilities, either. How is the child, anyway?”

The old woman smiled as she poured Whill some tea. “She is doing excellently, thanks to you. You know, upon learning your name, the mother named the baby Whilliana in your honor. She is most grateful and has come every day to see how you are. The town has been in an uproar; the sick have even begun coming from surrounding towns to ask to be healed by you.”

She handed Whill the tea and he thanked her. Abram peered out the window, wearing the same scowl. “Not all of them are admirers, mind you,” he warned. “Just last night a band of fools arrived carrying torches, demanding to have the sorcerer handed over. The soldiers would not let them pass, of course, but they came nonetheless. Word of this will soon spread throughout Agora, Whill. Our troubles have only just begun.”

Whill could sense that he had much more to say on the issue but was holding his tongue for now. Outside, the crowd was still cheering and demanding for Whill to come out. He peered through the side of the window. Twenty armed Eldalon soldiers had formed a barrier in front of the house, and he suspected that there were more guarding the rest of the building. He could hear women and men alike pleading for him to work another miracle.

“Please, my son is blind, if you could just help him,” one woman pleaded.

“My father is sick, good sir, would you take just a moment—” said another.

“My mother, she cannot walk, surely you can help us?” asked a young man.

And there were countless others.

Whill looked at Abram, who gave him a look that said clearly, “No!” The pleas were making Whill sick to his stomach, and he wanted to be far from this

place as fast as possible.

“How do we get out of here without being noticed?” he asked.

“I have had four days to plan our escape, Whill. Do not worry. As you know, many of the herbs and roots and such needed by a healer must be kept cool.”

Whill nodded. “An underground storage room.”

The old man pointed to a trapdoor near the northern wall. “There is a tunnel that leads to our cold room; it can be exited through a small hatch that looks like a tree stump.”

“I told Tarren to have Hagus bring a wagon around back,” Abram said. “From there we should have no problem escaping to the woods.”

Whill was satisfied. “Sounds like you have thought of everything. But what shall we do with Tarren?”

Abram gestured to the old man and woman. “Iam and Laurna have agreed to be so kind and watch over him until we return.”

“We would be happy to,” said Iam.

“It is our honor,” Laurna added with a smile.

“Thank you, both, so very much,” Whill said. “And please accept payment for this deed. I insist. If not for yourselves, then take it for your patients. I know that gold can buy medicines that are scarce in these parts. And though I cannot help these people right now, as I would wish, perhaps my money can.”

From the window, Abram spoke. “Tarren has returned. We must go.”

Abram had readied their things so they could leave as soon as Whill awoke; their weapons, packs, and supplies sat in a heap at the foot of the bed. As they prepared for travel, Tarren entered the room and quickly closed the door on the screaming crowd. The sound of the mob was unsettling; Whill tried to block out the sounds of the pleading people, but found it difficult. He wished he had control over his powers; he wished he could help every one of them. But knew he could not.

Once ready, he turned to Tarren. The boy smiled bravely with a slight shimmer in his eyes, and Whill could tell he was scared. Bending to one knee, he said, “You be good for Iam and Laurna, alright, lad? Help them out and stay out of trouble.”

Tarren tried to be tough, as always. “When will you be back?”

Whill knew how Tarren felt; he saw himself in the boy now more than ever. “We will return before the tenday. I promise, Tarren, we will come back for you. You have my word.” He gave the boy a hug and turned away with watery eyes of his own, and joined Abram at the trapdoor.

Abram regarded Tarren with a reassuring smile. “You be a good lad. We’ll be back before you know it.”

It was the same thing he always told Whill before leaving on one of his adventures. To hear it now made him even more somber. Together with Abram, he descended the steps to the tunnel. Iam closed the hatch behind them, whispering, "Farewell, and good luck."

The tunnel was dark, but for the candle that Abram held, and smelled of earth. Low and not more than ten feet long, it was cool and dank. The emerging roots left just enough space to walk in a crouch, but soon the two came to the cold room. It was fairly small, and spanning its entirety were shelves of various roots and herbs, tinctures, and animal extracts; it was a well-stocked supply room. At the opposite end of the small room was a ladder leading to the hatch. Abram ascended it a few feet and lifted the hatch just enough to peer outside.

"Good, Hagus is here. Ready, Whill?"

Whill nodded and Abram extinguished the candle. As he lifted the hatch, Whill was blinded by the daylight, but quickly followed Abram outside. Directly in front of them was Hagus's wagon. They scampered to the rear of it and jumped inside as Hagus urged his horses into motion.

The wagon was not covered, but the innkeeper had furnished a large blanket to conceal them until they were out of town. They rode quietly as the wagon made its way to the forest trail. After about fifteen minutes Whill peered out from under the blanket and saw the surrounding treetops. The sky was clear and the sun shone brightly overhead; it looked as though it would be a good day to travel.

After another half hour of riding, the wagon stopped and Hagus said, "You're clear." The two emerged from under the blanket and got out of the wagon. "I loaded all the things you asked for, Master Abram. Also a few treats made by m' dear wife. If there is anything else I could do fer ya, let me know. I would be honored."

Abram grabbed a few of the supply bags and his bow. "You have done us a great service, Hagus, and we are grateful. We need not remind you to keep silent about where we are headed."

Hagus raised his eyebrows and shook his head vigorously. "No, no, I will not say a word, not to no one. You have me word."

Abram eyed Hagus for a moment, more to intimidate him than out of suspicion. "Good. And thank you once again."

Whill finished unloading his things and stood next to Abram. He too thanked Hagus for his services, and they watched as the wagon traveled out of sight back down the forest trail.

Whill surveyed the surroundings. To the south and north the forest trail could be seen winding slightly through the forest. The trees were in bloom now, and

sprouts could be seen on almost all of them. Some early-blooming flowers also stood proudly, scattered here and there along the forest floor. At a hurried pace, they left the trail and headed eastward through the forest, toward the mountains.

Whill thought of the infant and his mother. Now it all seemed like a dream. He knew Abram had much to say on the topic, but decided to wait until he brought it up. At the moment his friend was silent, thinking deeply on something. They walked for an hour until Whill could no longer bear the silence.

“Abram, I’m sorry for the other day.”

Abram did not look at him. “Whill, I don’t think you understand what you have done.”

He let out a deep breath. “I know, I shouldn’t have healed the infant, but I couldn’t stop myself. It was like—”

“You could have died! Again! Not only that, but you have alerted the enemy to your existence and whereabouts. We will be hunted now, you can be sure of that.”

Whill took the offensive. “Hunted by whom? Men who think I’m a sorcerer? Let them come.”

Abram stopped and looked Whill in the eye. “The Draggard will be after us now, son— many of them. Surely he knows where we are, and they will be sent.” He began to move again.

Whill, shocked, hurried to catch up. “The Draggard! *They* come for us now? Why? And who is this man you speak of?”

“He is a very powerful foe. If the elf woman warned you of him, then we are in great peril for sure. Do not ask more on the subject. We will be in the mountains soon.”

Whill was left once again to wonder. He feared the Draggard; though he had only seen paintings of the fell beasts, he feared them like he feared no man. They were bred for one purpose: killing. Rumors had begun in Agora that winged Draggard—named Draqwon by the elves—had been seen near the Ebony Mountains. This thought greatly unsettled him.

Abram’s voice pulled him from his violent imagination. “Other than the elf woman’s visit, what else occurred during your healing?”

Whill thought for a moment. It sounded mad, but he told Abram anyway. “I saw my mother.”

Abram turned to Whill, dumbstruck. “Your mother?”

For the next hour of their journey, Whill told Abram what had happened. When he was done, Abram went silent for a moment. “Then I suppose it was good that you healed the infant, or you never would have had this...encounter,” he said at last. “You are fortunate for such a thing.”

Whill was surprised. “You believe me?”

“Of course I do. For one, your description of your mother was perfect. For another, I believe that we move on to live other lives. It is true that your tale is a fantastic one, but fantastic things do occur. Take comfort in your mother’s words and be grateful. We shall soon see how great the price will be.”

Whill was not comforted by Abram’s statement, though he was still grateful for the chance to meet his mother, if only in spirit. He felt bad for bringing more peril upon them. He was, however, comforted by the mountains that could now be seen in the distance. The forest had become considerably less dense, and the terrain steeper. From his vantage point he could see the many rolling hills ahead, and the mountains beyond. The sun was high and shone brightly among thick white clouds. There was little wind, and a strong scent of pine floated in the air. The forest floor was alive with rich greens and flowers. Ferns were in abundance, as were redclove plants.

They walked steadily for the rest of the day, talking little— which was of no concern to either; they had traveled together for many years and were comfortable in their silence. Also, Whill could sense that Abram was wary of danger.

With each step, he was closer to the mountain that held so many answers for him. Who his parents had been, what their names were, and most importantly, why Abram had withheld such information? His excitement grew, as did the mountains before him.

With the sun getting low and only a few hours of daylight left, Abram picked up the pace. They had not taken a break since they started out, and Whill knew that he did not intend to.

“At this pace, we will reach the foot of the mountains before dark,” Whill said. “Do you intend to camp?”

Abram reached for his leather water bag and took a long drink. “If we do indeed have pursuers, it would not be safe camp here in the forest. We would be better off on the mountains at night.” He wiped the dripping water from his mouth.

The terrain was very steep as they climbed one of the final hills that stood between them and the mountains. Whill’s legs and shoulders ached from the exertion. He was used to carrying many packs when hiking, but they usually did not go this long without a break, or keep up this hurried pace. Before them the mountains loomed like great gods with bodies of stone and white crowns. The peaks of some could not be seen as they pierced the clouds above. Scattered upon the mountains were pines and birches, which thinned out considerably with elevation.

Finally they reached the base of the mountains. Directly ahead of them was an impassable rock wall, rising more than one hundred feet. Abram surveyed the area and pointed to the southeast. "The passageway to the city is about two miles that way," he said. "We will barely make it before dark, lad, so keep up."

Whill laughed. "Alright old man, I'll try."

They made their way along the base of the cliff until they were able to ascend the mountain. They grasped trees and roots when possible, to aid in the climb, and even when they found a fairly flat portion of rock, the advance was slow. They had been hiking since before noon with no break, eating on the go, and were both exhausted. Finally Abram stopped, hands on his knees, and said, "Let's take a little break."

"If you insist." Whill panted.

Abram laughed weakly, but his laughter was short-lived as a small hatchet flew through the air and stuck in a tree, right next to his head. Together he and Whill drew swords and turned in the direction it had come from. They saw no one. They were in a perfect position to be ambushed; the only refuge was a large boulder, and they quickly took cover behind it. They readied their bows and listened keenly, but heard nothing. Peering out over the rock, Whill saw many other boulders, any of which could harbor a foe.

Abram cupped his hands around his mouth. "Who goes there?" There was no response. "We mean no harm to the dwarves and are willing to come out unarmed!"

Whill grabbed Abram's arm. "What are you doing, they could be Draggard!"

Abram nodded toward the buried hatchet. "That is dwarf-made. If it were the Draggard, they would have attacked already. He is most likely a sentry." He put down his bow and sword and walked out in the open.

"Now the other!" a gruff voice ordered.

Abram nodded to Whill, who reluctantly joined him.

"We come in search of Dy'Kore," Abram said. "We come as friends and allies. I am Abram of Arden, and this is my companion, Whill."

"Those names mean nothing to me. And if ye be allies, why d'ye have a band o' Draggard following ye? Maybe ye'r scouts, and should die where ye stand."

Whill started for the ledge to see for himself, but the dwarf's words stopped him. "Move an' ye'll die. Think you'll signal to em, eh? No, stay where ye are."

"Master dwarf, we are not scouts," Abram insisted. "I am a personal friend of your King Ky'ell, and have proof of it."

"Ha! Show the proof, if ye have it. But be doin it slow."

Abram slowly reached for the chain around his neck and took it off. Upon it was a large golden seal, embedded in jewels. He lifted it into the air.

“Throw it here,” said the dwarf, extending a hand from behind the closest boulder and exposing his position. Abram did so. The dwarf quickly retrieved the necklace and disappeared again behind the rock.

“That was given to me by the king to ensure passage into the city. As you know, it bears the royal crest and cannot be obtained falsely.”

The dwarf came forward slowly. He stood not five feet tall, and was shod in large boots. His clothes were a strange shade of grey that made him blend in well with the surrounding rock. At either side, he carried hatchets— two on the right, one on the left. In his hands was a great axe, four feet long with two large half-moon blades. The edge of the blades sparkled even in the faint light. The shaft was well polished and smooth. The handle was wrapped tightly with leather, and at the base there was a sapphire the size of a child’s fist.

The dwarf came within five feet and spoke, but did not ease his grip on the axe. “What’s yer business in the city?”

“We seek counsel with the king and have business of a personal nature.”

The dwarf eyed Abram and Whill in turn. His long brown hair was clumped in thick locks, and his brown beard reached his belt. Behind his large flat nose were watchful green eyes.

“Ye do indeed be friends o’ the king if ye carry such a pendant, but ye must be great fools to bring a horde of Draggard at yer heels to the mountain pass. Quick, now— get yer weapons an’ follow me.”

The dwarf waited as they retrieved their weapons, and then walked to the ledge. “There.” He pointed. “They’ve been following ye nigh an hour.”

Whill could faintly make out movement far below. Abram saw them too, “There are at least twenty, damn! Do you think we will make it to the pass in time?”

“Doesn’t matter whether we will or no. We’ll kill ’em before we get there,” he said with a proud voice.

“What!” Whill exclaimed. “You intend to fight them? I am sure you can wield that axe with great skill, but they are too many; we are outnumbered almost six to one. It would be suicide!”

“I’ll not run from those beasts! This is a dwarf mountain, this is, and I’ll defend her as such. Those foul ones will learn the ferocity o’ the dwarves. We don’t back down, and we don’t run. They be the trespassers, and they will pay for their crimes.”

The dwarf’s face was red and his eyes watered as he spoke. Whill could sense that something very intense fueled this dwarf’s hatred for the Draggard.

Abram spoke up. “You may be proud enough to die taking on that many Draggard, but do not be foolish. We can get reinforcements and return to fight.”

“No!” The dwarf insisted in a deep voice. “If they find the door to the city, they’ll send messengers to report it. As ye know, they’ve a keen sense o’ smell—that’s how they track ye still. If they learn o’ the passageway, I’ll have failed in me duty, and that will not happen. I will fight! Ye can run like cowards if ye wish, but ye will never see the city!”

Whill stepped forward. “We are no cowards! But we should not run to fight these beasts hastily. We need to have a plan for attack.”

Abram agreed. “He’s right. I have seen one Draggard rip through ten men before falling to the blade. We will not defeat them if we simply stand and fight.”

The dwarf squinted at them, frowning. “I been watching ye and yer pursuers fer an hour now. I have thought o’ a plan for ambush already.” He pointed at a ledge directly above them. “There be many boulders up there— large enough to kill those beasts, but small enough to push. I’ll wait there; the two o’ ye should wait o’er there.” He pointed in the direction from which he had come. “Ye can attack with those bows o’ yers once I’ve let loose the boulders.”

Abram looked at the ledge above, and at the boulders he and Whill would use as cover. “It is a good plan, master dwarf, but they will not all be killed by your falling rocks, nor our bows.”

The dwarf smiled mischievously. “I know. The rest will die by our blades.”

Whill laughed nervously. “You’re mad, did you know that?”

The dwarf’s smile faded. “Ye know, boy, men have died fer saying less to a dwarf. That can be settled later, laddie, but I advise ye to watch yer tongue.”

Abram watched the exchange and eyed Whill with a raised brow. Whill let out a frustrated sigh. “I apologize, master dwarf. Perhaps I have mistaken your bravery and cunning for—pardon the expression— insanity.” The dwarf eyed him suspiciously. “Could I know the name of such a fearless dwarf?”

The dwarf eyed him still. Whill assumed he was pondering whether to chop off his head or introduce himself. At last the dwarf, being accustomed to the ways of men, extended his hand. “I am Roakore, son o’ Ro’Din.” Whill shook his hand. It was like a rock. His skin was rough and his grip was crushing. Whill tried not to grimace and instead he manifested his discomfort into an animated look of surprise.

“You are the son of Ro’Din? Fallen king of the Ebony Mountains?”

Roakore released Whill’s throbbing hand. “Aye, but this ain’t no time fer conversation. Let us ready ourselves quickly.” He looked over the ledge once again. “They’ll be here soon.”

Just then Whill had an idea. “What if we bait the Draggard— try to get more of them in range of the boulders?”

“What do you mean?” Abram asked.

Roakore laughed. “If ye would like to be the bait, boy, go ahead.”

Whill ignored him and produced the bag of diamonds from his pocket. He looked up at the ledge, determined the best spot, and dumped the diamonds onto the ground. They gleamed brightly, even in the dim light. Roakore gasped at the sight of the large pile of gems. “How did ye obtain such a wealth o’ diamonds?”

“He defeated Rhunis of Eldalon in competition,” Abram said.

Roakore’s expression of shock did not fade. He looked at the diamonds and to Whill again. Finally he composed himself. “Indeed, if ye can beat the Dragonslayer, ye will be an able ally... though it makes me uncomfortable to leave these diamonds fer those beasts.”

Whill mocked the dwarf’s earlier conviction. “I as well, but they will all die as sure as the sun will set.”

Roakore simply nodded and let out a growling laugh. Abram urged them as he peered over the ledge, “They are coming.”

Of the boulders they could use for cover, Abram chose a large one about sixty feet from the diamonds. It was about nine feet tall and as wide as four men, with a large crevice on the side opposite the ambush. He climbed atop the boulder and squatted within the crevice. It was perfect for his intentions; it was a good vantage point and he could quickly bring his bow up over the top.

Roakore nodded his approval. “I think that Whill here should come with me. ’Twill be a more effective attack if a bowman was directly above ’em as well. It’ll confuse ’em.”

Though Whill did not like the idea, Abram agreed. From the boulder he said, “Aim for the neck and eyes.”

Whill nodded and began to follow Roakore. As the dwarf began to climb the rock face, he spoke over his shoulder, “Quickly, boy, so we are not seen!”

Whill scrambled to keep up. The dwarf, with his short legs and arms, surprised Whill by how well he scaled the steep rock face. Once on the ledge, Whill peered over the side and could now see the Draggard much better. There were two scouts ahead of the main pack, stopping often with their snouts in the air.

“Come,” said Roakore.

Whill followed him along the ledge to the boulders he had spoken of. Once again Whill peered over the edge cautiously. They were directly above the diamonds. Roakore smacked his back. “Help me, laddie. Gather as many large

rocks as ye can.” He walked over to one directly behind them. “This size is perfect.”

Whill regarded the rock in disbelief. It was three feet tall and just as wide. “I cannot lift that!”

Roakore had found another of the same size. He regarded Whill with frustration. “Then roll the damned thing.” He squatted, took a deep breath, lifted the giant rock onto his shoulder, and carried it over to the ledge. Whill was astonished. He had heard of the dwarves’ strength but was amazed nonetheless.

He got behind his rock and, with great effort, began to roll it to the ledge. By the time he finished, Roakore had gathered five more. The dwarf peered over the ledge, “Hurry, boy! Get another, they be almost upon us!”

Darkness was advancing quickly now. The sun would set completely in twenty minutes, to their disadvantage. The Draggard could see excellently in the dark, a fact that unsettled Whill as he looked to the horizon. He retrieved another—smaller—rock as Roakore gathered four more. Satisfied, the dwarf took position behind the largest boulder.

“Will you need help with those?” Whill asked.

The dwarf laughed. “No, you just have that bow of yours ready and I’ll worry about the rocks.”

Peering over the ledge again, Whill could see Abram perched upon his boulder, his bow ready. He looked back, and Whill thought he saw him wink. Below and to the right he could see the Draggard scouts nearing the diamonds, the rest of the band now close behind. At this distance he could see that they wore no armor or clothes. They had no shields, either, only long metal staffs with large curved blades at each end.

The sun now met the horizon as it began to set. It was a brilliant array of red, orange, and purple that spread out like ghostly fingers among the thin clouds. Whether or not it was because it might be the last sunset he would ever see, Whill thought it was the most beautiful. He did not get to enjoy it long, however; the Draggard scouts had reached the diamonds. He watched as they peered at the gems, growling low and hissing violently. In the dying light their skin was dark green with black markings. They had ears like an elf’s, though much longer, and stood about seven feet when fully erect, which was rarely. The two scouts seemed to favor a slightly bent posture. Their bodies were well defined and muscular, with thick scales covering all but the chest and belly. They had short horns protruding from their backbones and at the end of their long tails—which, being one half of their total body length, were formidable weapons in and of themselves.

Suddenly the two scouts let out a horrible cry that made Whill's blood curdle. He watched as the Draggard pack stopped, fell to all fours, and ascended the mountain with alarming speed. The scouts surveyed the land, but seemed half-hearted in their search as they snarled and pushed each other, fighting for dominance of the diamond pile. Whill backed away from the ledge slowly, silently stringing an arrow, as Roakore got ready to push. He could tell from the many snarls and growls below that the rest of the Draggard had reached the scouts. Roakore waited as the noise grew.

Sensing that it was time, the dwarf made a silent grimace as he pushed the boulder with all his might. At first it did not move, but then slowly began to roll. To Whill's dismay, the movement sent small stones and pebbles tumbling over the ledge. The noises below stopped. Roakore pushed the boulder with all his might and sent it tumbling violently over the ledge. Whill took the opportunity to bring his bow around and take aim.

He saw a horrific sight; twenty Draggard stood in a circle below, looking up at them. As the boulder descended, many of them let out ear-piercing cries. Whill let loose an arrow; it flew into the open maw of one of the beasts and stuck in the back of its throat. As it flailed violently, the rest of the beasts scrambled to get out of the way of the falling boulder— five were not so lucky. The giant rock came down with bone-shattering force upon the Draggard, and was quickly followed by a smaller one, though still quite large, hurled through the air by Roakore. This too found its mark, slamming hard into the face of a howling Draggard. Simultaneously, Abram shot an arrow that hit another of the beasts in the eye.

The Draggard were bewildered and scampered from the fallen boulder as the three rained death upon them. As Abram shot repeatedly, killing two Draggard that advanced in his direction, many of the other beasts began to ascend the rock face, heading straight for Whill and Roakore. Whill shot the closest one in the forehead, but to his amazement, the arrow was deflected by its thick scales. The beast screamed insanely, baring hideous teeth. As Roakore dropped a large rock, the creature tried to avoid it, but was hit square in the chest. Whill strung another arrow and this time aimed for the eyes. He hit his mark and the beast fell hard, landing on the boulder below in a dead heap.

Seven Draggard remained; five ascended toward Whill and Roakore, while two more advanced on Abram. Whill shot another through the eye, and it fell with a loud thud on the ground below. Roakore had now abandoned the stones and grabbed his great axe. Whill followed suit and unsheathed his sword.

As the last audible note of Whill's unsheathed sword reverberated in the air, the sun finally set and the Draggard topped the ledge. Whill was scared, more

scared than when facing the wolves or the pirates. The Draggard were a nightmarish sight up close. They did not attack at once, but simply waited.

The dwarf let out a scream. "Come on, ye foul beasts!"

They did not move. Instead, they let out cries of their own. The sound hurt Whill's ears and his body shook. The beasts growled and hissed, spittle falling from their pointed teeth. They had stood side by side but now began to spread out in pairs. He could not take the anticipation. He searched himself for the strength needed to face these fell creatures. They were the only thing standing in the way of all his answers. They were the scourge of the earth, a plague. *They should not be feared*, thought Whill. *They should fear me!*

From below Abram cried in pain and Whill jolted into action. He lunged forward at the closest Draggard but was met with greater force. The beast attacked with its double ended weapon, which Whill blocked with difficulty. Roakore swung at the one closest to himself, but his great axe only sounded a heavy *whoosh* as it missed its target and cut through the air. Whill blocked as both of his opponents swung and stabbed at him with their blades. They were relentless, hissing violently as they advanced. Whill knew if they got him against the rock wall he would be doomed.

Roakore, meanwhile, was not being driven back. He screamed and growled as he swung his heavy axe.

Whill parried yet another blow and, finding an opening, sliced the leg of the beast to his right. It howled in pain and let up long enough for Whill to be one-on-one with the other. The beast brought down its blade, meaning to hew Whill's head. He moved out of the way in time and, with one powerful stroke, cut off the beast's right arm. Roakore, who was now ten feet away and closer to the ledge, blocked a series of blows and quickly dropped to his knees, avoiding one meant for his head. With lightning speed he swung his axe at the closest Draggard, and chopped its leg off above the knee. He followed with a heavy blow that cut the beast's head clean off, and quickly rolled sideways as the other one lunged at him.

Whill was inspired by what he had seen of Roakore's masterful counterattack. He blocked again as the uninjured of his two attacking opponents struck. The beast that Whill had cut screamed again in rage and barreled straight at him. As they exchanged blows, the other dove at him, arm extended, legs spread. He blocked an overhead attack and spun away from the diving beast. Reversing his sword grip, he thrust backward and impaled the one-armed Draggard through the chest. The other one, undeterred, continued its attack. Whill had no time to parry. Instead he abandoned his sword and jumped high into the air as the blade barely missed him. He back-flipped over the impaled

Draggard and landed behind it. His foe spun blindly with an attack, but its blade struck his dead kin rather than Whill. The beast wailed in anger as it pulled its weapon free. Now unarmed but for his knife, he ran toward the ledge. In the darkness, he could just barely see his abandoned bow. He dove with an outstretched hand, and pulled an arrow from his quiver with the other. In fluid motion, he landed and rolled on his back, bow in hand. He frantically strung it, pulled back, and shot at the Draggard, which was now only a few feet away. The arrow found its mark and hit the beast in the belly, but had little effect. As the Draggard's blade came down and he feebly raised his knife in defense, Roakore suddenly barreled into the creature and they disappeared over the ledge.

Whill was about look over the ledge but quickly wondered what had become of the other Draggard Roakore was fighting. He whipped his head around and saw its demonic silhouette not fifteen feet away. He got to his knees and took a shooting stance as the monster ran at him with a menacing howl. He shot the Draggard in the chest, but the arrow barely penetrated. He shot again, this time hitting it in the belly. The beast slowed but did not stop; it came at him with an impaling attack. He shot again, pulling back hard on the bow. The arrow sliced through the air and hit the Draggard again in the belly, sinking deep this time. The beast stumbled before dropping its weapon and falling to its knees. Whill had another arrow ready and aimed for the monster's face, but the dying Draggard quickly swung its tail around and broke the bow in two. Suddenly it lunged forward again and grabbed him by the neck. The Draggard's strength was incredible. Whill could not breathe and knew his neck would soon be crushed. As the beast's sharp claws sunk into his flesh, he unsheathed his knife and thrust it upward. It came to rest behind the creature's ribs and the grip on his neck loosened. Whill stared into the Draggard's hideous black eyes, and they stared back— burning with anger. The grip on his neck tightened once again, and the Draggard whipped its tail deep into Whill's left thigh, baring its pointed teeth in triumph. Whill could not scream in pain—he could not breathe—and his vision had begun to go black. With what strength he had left, he shoved the knife as far as he could and gave it a sharp twist. The beast's eyes widened and its growl turned to a gurgle. The claw around his neck loosened and finally fell as the beast dropped on its side, dead.

At first, Whill still couldn't breathe; he was on the verge of passing out. He struggled as his damaged windpipe finally opened enough to let in a shallow breath. He sucked greedily at the air and his breathing slowly became deeper. His throat burned and he went into a coughing fit that made his head spin. He fell forward, exhausted, and groaned in pain as he reached for the tail still stuck in his leg. With great effort and immense pain he pulled it from his flesh.

He crawled towards the ledge, wondering what had become of Roakore and Abram. He peered into the darkness below and saw Roakore hacking away at a lifeless Draggard that lay next to the fallen boulder—the beast was already in pieces. Roakore swore profusely and kicked a decapitated head, sending it rolling. He looked up at Whill with a hard scowl still on his face. “Ye still alive, boy?”

Whill could not answer. He simply nodded and pointed in the direction Abram had last been. The dwarf ran and began to look. Whill’s heart sank as Roakore raised both arms in the air as if to say “I don’t know,” and continued searching.

Whill feared the worst. Crawling back from the ledge, he attempted to stand. His head spun and his leg gave out as he fell to his knees, wheezing. He heard heavy footsteps coming toward him suddenly and moved to retrieve his knife. With an effort, he pulled it from the fallen Draggard body and struggled to see what approached. When it was almost upon him, Whill began to make out a large figure and prepared himself for another fight. Then he heard a familiar voice:

“Whill, are you alright?”

He dropped his knife as Abram knelt beside him.

Chapter 12

The Mountain Passage

The thick cloud cover made the moonless night pitch black. The wind upon the mountain had picked up, and a chill rode on the air. Roakore had joined Whill and Abram, and was busy trying to light a torch Abram had retrieved from his bag.

“If this damned wind would let up fer a minute, we’d have some light,” Roakore grumbled as he struggled with the flint. Finally a spark caught, and the oil-soaked torch lit, quickly illuminating the night. Roakore grinned. “Ah, that was easy. Now let’s hurry and dress them wounds.”

Whill’s leg was bleeding profusely and his throat felt as though he had swallowed a handful of small blades. When he attempted to speak, he found that his voice was rough and grainy, and his throat burned terribly. Roakore patted his back.

“Save yerself the agony lad, by the looks o’ yer throat yer lucky to be breathin’.”

Abram tried in vain to conceal his worried look. “Well done, Whill.”

“Indeed,” Roakore agreed, surveying the slain bodies with a hearty laugh. “Them hell-born scum didn’t know what they were getting into messin’ with us three, now did they?”

Abram retrieved a bottle of clear liquor he had attained from Iam and showed it to Whill, who nodded and clenched his teeth. Abram poured the antiseptic onto his wound gingerly. Whill let out a low growl as hot pain surged through his leg. Roakore watched keenly.

“Good wound. That’ll take some time to heal that will. Dress it as well as ye can, Abram.” Roakore turned his attention to the surrounding darkness. “We must get to the passage as soon as possible.”

Abram retrieved some bandages from his pack and took a look around for himself. Beyond the torchlight was pure blackness. “Yes, we must go. Can you walk, Whill?”

“Too slow,” Roakore said. “Besides, the boy would bleed to death afore we got there. No, I will carry him the distance.” Whill tried to argue, but the dwarf cut him off. “I insist.”

Abram tied the bandage tightly. “He’s right. He’s much stronger than I, and you cannot walk the distance with an open wound.” He offered Whill a drink of water, which he accepted. It went down like thorns and made his eyes water. Abram loaded Whill’s weapons and packs onto his back as Roakore offered the injured young man a hand.

“Put yer weight on yer good leg when I pull ye up.”

Whill nodded and Roakore pulled him up and over his shoulder with ease. He turned to Abram and said, “Follow me,” as he started off at a jog.

Whill was amazed yet again at the dwarf’s strength. Roakore ran with ease even with Whill over his shoulder and his great axe in his left hand; he was also careful not to put pressure on his injured thigh. They ran for what seemed like hours, and Whill became dizzy with pain from his aching leg and throat. Blood had rushed to his head and pounded dully in his ears. With every step the pain increased, and he could see little in the torchlight.

Finally Roakore stopped and slowly let Whill down onto his good leg. Abram was quickly at his side, offering him a shoulder to lean on.

Before them was a great wall of stone, smooth as ice. Its edges escaped the torchlight, giving it a mammoth appearance in the black night. As they watched Roakore keenly, he slowly ran his right hand along the stone, as if looking for something, and then turned to them and said, “All assume that elves alone have the power to do magic—or so ’tis called by ye humans—but we dwarves have powers also. ’Tis a gift from our gods, bestowed upon us to aid in our purpose.” His expression hardened and he took a step forward. “What yer about to witness is to never leave yer lips, nor be set to paper, as long as ye draw breath, Understood?”

“I swear with my life, it shall fall upon no ear,” Abram said solemnly.

Whill struggled to find his voice. “I swear the same.”

Roakore eyed them for a moment, then turned and raised his arms. Head bowed, he stood like a statue for a moment. Nothing happened. Then words burst from him so loud it startled Whill. “*Ohn zrak kytho sjendi zwickor heninty!*” The dwarf reached out into the air as if grabbing something, and the stone wall rumbled. Roakore slowly pulled the phantom object with both hands. Whill stood in awe while a circular section of the rock wall began to move as if hinged. Roakore took a step back and, as if pulling an invisible rope, heaved the door open. Before them was the tunnel to the city.

The dwarf stood breathing heavily; Whill had not yet seen him tire, but now beads of sweat ran down his brow as he walked into the passage. Whill and Abram followed.

Within, the tunnel was perfectly round. Having been made for dwarves, the ceiling was low; Whill and Abram had to crouch. Roakore turned and once again spoke the command, this time for the door to close. The heavy stone door moved inward with a great rumble, and gave a loud thud as it came to its resting place. Roakore breathed heavily and sat down to rest on the stone floor.

Whill wondered about the dwarf's power to move stone but decided against asking him. He and Abram sat as well, and Whill rolled up his pant leg to look at the blood-soaked bandages over his wound. Abram found a needle and thread and positioned himself to stitch it up. "Why?" he asked in a raspy voice. "Can't I just—?"

"No." Abram shook his head. His eyes darted to Roakore and then back to Whill. The dwarf did not notice.

Whill understood. If he used his powers to heal himself, the dwarf would become suspicious; only elves had powers to heal, and dwarves did not like elves. Reluctantly he let Abram begin, who went to work quickly but carefully. Masterfully stitching the wound, he soon finished and Whill inspected the work. "It looks good, Abram. Thank you." He tried to keep the pain from his voice.

Roakore nodded with a low "hmm," and helped Whill up as they prepared to keep moving. "So, lad, ready fer another ride?"

Whill tried to clear his hurt throat. "No, we are in no danger now. I can walk. Slow though I may be."

"Aye, then let's be off. Not far ahead the tunnel widens; it should be a wee bit more comfortable fer ye tall ones."

Whill again put his arm around Abram and together they followed Roakore. Shortly they came to the wider part of the tunnel. It was about ten feet high and just as wide, but unlike the last section, had a flat floor.

"This tunnel runs for fifteen miles southwest under the mountain," Roakore explained, his voice echoing. "Along the way it is met by other tunnels as well."

The going was slow, even now that they could walk fully erect. Whill slowed them down considerably. Roakore looked back at them. "At this pace we'll not reach the city until after noon—that is, if we stop to rest."

Whill limped along as quickly as he could with Abram's help. "Do you intend to rest, Roakore?" he asked hoarsely.

The dwarf laughed. "Aye, Whill, that I do. I been on patrol for many a day and night with no sleep. Even we dwarves grow weary—though not easily."

They walked on for another hour, torchlight leading the way in the dark passage. Little was said, as they were all very tired. It was surprisingly warm in the tunnels. Either that, Whill thought, or he was beginning to run a fever. Finally, to his relief, Roakore stopped. "We should get some rest. This be as good a place as any."

Whill sat on the stone floor, his leg throbbing madly. From one of the packs Abram retrieved food and water. He offered Whill some cheese and dried meat. "I imagine your throat still hurts, but you should eat what you can. We've had quite a day, and you will need your strength."

Whill accepted the food and ate what he could. Every swallow was torture, though the cool water from his canteen helped a little. He ate only enough to quiet his growling belly and then lay back, propping his head on his pack. His eyes were grainy and heavy, his body sore. Even on the stone floor, with no pillow but a lumpy bag, he soon fell asleep to the sounds of Roakore and Abram's voices echoing softly throughout the tunnel.

His dreams were dark, filled with broken bodies and blood. He imagined he was in a great battle. All around him lay the slain bodies of elves, men, and dwarves. Thousands of Draggard warriors surrounded him and Abram. Overhead dragons flew, their fire raining down. Whill fought hard against the hordes of Draggard, but as he slew one, more took its place.

Whill was awakened by the nagging pain in his leg. He lifted his head from his bag to find Abram and Roakore awake. "Good morning, laddie," said Roakore as he gnawed on a piece of dried meat.

Abram smiled at Whill, "Sleep well?"

Whill sat up. "Not really, but I feel a little better." He rolled up his pant leg. The bandages around his wound were slightly soiled, but not enough to constitute changing them. He rolled the pant leg back down with a groan. His throat felt a little better, though it was very dry. He took a long drink from his canteen, finishing it off with a satisfied sigh.

"Here." Abram offered Whill his own canteen. "Roakore says we can replenish our water supply up ahead. Help yourself."

Whill accepted the canteen and drank greedily. He was surprised by his own thirst.

Roakore stood and brushed off his legs. "A little farther down the passage there is a spring that trickles down from the ceiling. The best darn water ye'll ever drink, or I'm a midget." He burst into hearty laughter at his own joke. His voice boomed in the small space, echoing throughout the tunnel. Whill had a slight headache, and the sound was like a hammer to his temples. Nevertheless,

he found the dwarf funny and laughed also. With a hand from Abram, he got to his feet. His leg still hurt, but he was able to put a little more weight on it now.

They began once again down the tunnel. It had run fairly straight for most of the journey, but now it began to wind in some places. It became slightly steeper in some spots, and then ran down again. With no sunlight penetrating the space, Whill had no idea what time of day it was. He guessed it was early morning. Roakore spoke as they walked, giving them a short history of the mountain and the Ky'Dren dwarves. Whill remembered that Roakore had said he was from the Ebony Mountains, and hoped it would not be rude to inquire.

“Roakore, may I ask...what has become of your people?” he said in a raspy voice.

The dwarf slowed and turned to look at him. He cleared his throat and walked on, now to Whill's right rather than in front. “Like me, they be livin' here within the mountain. Our numbers were greatly diminished after the Draggard attack, but we've survived.” Whill thought that to be the end of the awkward conversation, but then the dwarf went on, looking past the torchlight to the darkness beyond.

“It were twenty years ago when it happened, but I remember it like it be yesterday, 'twas a black day for us dwarves. A black day indeed. Somehow the Draggard learned of our southern harbor passage. Shortly after dark they came. There were thousands. Our guards were quickly overrun, an' word came from the survivors that the beasts had penetrated the tunnels. The great horn of Illia blew, soundin' the alarm, an' that is when we heard 'em coming.

“We dwarves can fight better'n men, make no mistake, especially when guarding our treasures an' family. But they were too many. We wasn't prepared for such an attack and were greatly outnumbered. I alone killed more'n a hundred, but still they came, hordes and hordes of 'em, bloodthirsty an' wild. I watched as me kin fell dead all 'round me. An'—me father.” Roakore stopped. He still stared straight ahead, his eyes now watery. Whill tried to act as if he did not notice, and Roakore went on with his tale of horror.

“Me father died in me arms. With his last breath he told me the mountain had fallen and I had to leave. I begged him to let me fight—I told him I would kill every last one. But he forbade it. He said I would not lose my honor if I fled. He asked me to save as many as I could and flee here to our kin, the Ky'Dren, and return one day with a great army to claim the mountain once again. His last words were, ‘Ye be king now, me son. Ye alone must lead our people to victory. Do this and ye shall join me in the Mountain o' the Gods.’ I did as he wished, and we retreated through the northern tunnel. For weeks we traveled north through the Uthen forest, all along hunted by the Draggard.” He stopped. His last

word echoed eerily throughout the passage. Whill had a newfound sense of dread. The dwarves had been defeated by thousands of Draggard that inhabited the mountain still. No one believed such a number were living within Agora, or if they did believe, they refused to admit it. But having seen Roakore fight, he knew it would indeed take thousands to defeat so many dwarves.

Whill saw Roakore wipe his eyes surreptitiously. He felt sorry for the dwarf, surviving king of a mountain lost. "Have you yet tried to take it back?" He inquired, hoping not to anger Roakore. Abram gave him a warning look.

"No, that we have not. King Ky'Ell o' Ky'Dren believes that this be a test. He has said that it be the duty o' the survivors, women an' children alike, to take back the mountain. He will help, o' course, as will the Elgar dwarves, but not until the older children and men have mastered the arts o' war.

"These many years we've done naught but train vigorously, preparing fer the day the mountain is taken back. And it will be soon. Many o' the young'uns are now grown. They be handy with the blade and eager to take back what is rightfully theirs."

They came to the spring Roakore had mentioned. It trickled from the ceiling and into a large basin that had been built to catch it. The basin was made of white marble and had no stand, but was attached to the wall. From its curved lip, water poured steadily into a small hole in the floor. Each of them took a turn filling his canteen and drinking the fresh mountain spring water right from the basin. Whill drank his fill and let out a satisfied sigh as the water ran down his chin. The water made his sore and parched throat feel much better.

"Indeed, master dwarf, that is the best water I have ever had, or call me a liar," he said.

Abram wiped his mouth and capped his canteen. "Aye, the best water this side of the great blue ocean."

Again they journeyed down the long tunnel. For hours they walked, stopping rarely to eat and rest, but talking all the way. Whill listened mostly, due to his still-irritated throat. Abram told Roakore their story, leaving out how he had come to have Whill in his care. He spoke also of their many travels, the tournament, and the battle with the pirates. He left out any mention of Whill's healing ability, however, knowing it would not settle well with the dwarf.

The going was slow, but finally they came to the entrance to the city. The tunnel ended as they ventured into a large room with high ceilings. It was well lit with torches, and a great pit lay at its center. Whill could see more torches lit on the other side, along with many armored dwarves. Looking over the edge of the great pit, he could see no bottom. A large wooden drawbridge stood closed on the other side. "Who goes there?" called a gruff voice.

Abram nudged Whill and pointed up. “It looks as though security has risen since last I was here.” Whill looked up and saw that a large rack hanging from the ceiling bristled with long sharp spikes. He assumed that if they did not answer correctly, the rack would quickly be dropped. “’Tis I, Roakore o’ the Ro’Sar Mountain,” the dwarf announced. “I come from guard duty, and with me be two humans—one a good friend o’ the king an’ carryin’ the family crest. Just last night they helped me destroy a horde o’ twenty Draggard intent on finding the city. We wish to enter.”

Soon the drawbridge began to lower with a rumble. The thick wood came down with a loud thud that reverberated throughout the large chamber. Roakore guided them across the bridge and stopped when he reached the other side. Ten armored dwarves stood guard, blocking the passage beyond. Two came forward, greeting Roakore in turn with a slam to the chest. They eyed Whill and Abram suspiciously. Their great axes were like Roakore’s, and upon their heads were thick helmets that covered all but their faces. Their armor was thick and appeared very heavy. It consisted of broad shoulder and chest plates with thick mail underneath. Their arms and legs were protected by what appeared to be dragonhide; the thick scales overlapped one another and shimmered in the torchlight. The guard with the red beard spoke up, pointing at Whill and Abram.

“What binness d’ye ‘ave ‘ere?”

Abram answered in the dwarf tongue, telling him that they sought counsel with the great king. When questioned, Whill spoke Dwarvish as well. The guards were visibly impressed by their fluency, and by the royal crest that Abram presented.

“Welcome, dwarf friends,” said the red-bearded dwarf. “It be good to see men who’ve taken time an’ learnt our talk, an’ speak it so good. I’ve heard of ye, Abram. Ye fought aside our great king. ’Tis an honor.” He did not bow, and he did not shake hands. Instead, he slammed his fist to his own chest and nodded, casting his gaze to the ground in the greeting of respect. The second guard did the same, but did not speak.

Abram did not return the gestures, he simply nodded to each. This was not meant as an insult, Whill knew; it simply was not required of him to greet them in such a manner, as he did not know their names or reputations. The dwarves simply regarded Whill with a nod, which he returned. Roakore, however, received the same greeting as Abram had, for his stature among his kin was great. If they had not greeted him in such a way, it would have been a sign of lack of respect.

The red-bearded dwarf regarded Roakore. “’Tis good to see ye return Roakore, can ye tell me aught o’ this battle with the Draggard?”

Roakore answered plainly, “Ye’ll hear o’ it soon enough, I’m sure, but not from me. We seek the comfort o’ Dy’Kore and be eager to arrive. Go well, friend.”

The dwarf was visibly disappointed but stood tall and, in a firm voice, responded, “Go well.”

Roakore nodded to Whill and Abram and started off once again down the tunnel. It had widened considerably and was now lit by wall hung torches every ten feet. The walls themselves were decorated with carvings from top to bottom. Whill got a keen sense of the age of their culture, along with nostalgia for a vast and deep history. There were many carvings concerning the battles of old, such as dwarf kings sitting on great thrones, dragons spewing fire by the mountain, and dwarf armies marching against men; and many others which were less war-like in nature, like diamond-mining, great feasts, and celebrations. But above all else the walls depicted the revered dwarf gods. Great murals loomed above, spanning the arched tunnel. Whill had only ever heard stories of the dwarf religion from Abram. There were no books on the subject, as they were a very secretive people and did not usually bother to explain their beliefs to outsiders. Whill could only guess who the gods in the carvings were, and though he was eager to find out, he thought better than to ask Roakore.

Soon they came upon two guards, one at either side of the tunnel. As Roakore approached, they gave him the same gesture of respect the drawbridge guards had. Without a word, the three walked past. Whill soon realized that a pair of guards was stationed every two hundred feet or so, and as they passed each, Roakore received the same gesture.

Whill was relieved when they finally reached the entrance to the city. Before them was another large pit of darkness and, across it, another large drawbridge. As before, Roakore answered a guard’s inquiry and the bridge was lowered. Whill gasped as he viewed the giant double doors that lay beyond. Each stood more than fifty feet high and twenty feet across, and appeared to be made of iron with huge steel braces. Across their front were ancient dwarf runes written entirely in silver. Whill marveled as he read “Azrokea’s Passage.” Azrokea, he knew, was a high god of the dwarves, and this was one of the many ways they paid homage. As they ventured across and the doors began to open, their hinges emitting a dull moan, Whill could see that each side was at least five feet thick. Beyond, the great city of Dy’Kore awaited.

Chapter 13

A Tale of Betrayal

Whill had read countless books about the dwarves. He had learned their language, customs, and history. As a child in Sidnell he had dreamed of exploring the immense caves and caverns of the Dwarf Mountains. Now he was in the ancient dwarf city of Dy’Kore, a place few men had ever ventured. Within these stone walls slept remnants of his past, and with them his future awaited. A chill ran down his spine and a tear welled in his eye, though he did not know why.

The city was more than he could have imagined, and the few drawings he had seen of it did not begin to capture its beauty. Before him was a great hall with high ceilings, easily over a hundred feet. Eight great pillars, ten feet across and beautifully carved, extended from floor to ceiling. Dozens of tunnels opened into the hall, and dwarves filled the great room, busy in their duties and daily travels. The floor, he noticed, was of highly polished white marble, and the walls, though not marble, were exquisitely carved and decorated with beautiful banners.

Roakore stopped a passing dwarf and whispered something that made him eye Whill and Abram with wonder. He nodded to Roakore and quickly ran off down a tunnel to the left. Roakore looked up at them with a smile. “I told him who ye be, an’ that ye wish to speak to the king immediately. If ye wait here, a guide will come to take ye to him. I got me own things needin’ tendin’.” His face turned serious. “’Twas an honor fightin’ with human warriors such as yerselves, go well, friends.”

“Go well, King Roakore,” said Whill.

Roakore eyed Whill with a look of sorrow. “That title be mine when them words echo throughout me reclaimed mountain. Until then I be just a dwarf waiting to fulfill his destiny.”

Whill felt foolish. “Go well, friend,” Abram said, and Roakore turned and walked away.

“Will we see him again?”

“I imagine we will, lad. I imagine we will.”

Soon the messenger returned with a well-dressed dwarf in tow. They approached Whill and Abram and stopped. The dwarf who followed wore a blue hooded robe with a silver chain over his portly stomach. He was elderly, with a grey beard and hair. In his right hand he held a silver staff as tall as himself, set with a large sapphire at its crown.

“Abram, me friend, ’tis good to see ye again.” He slammed his fist to his chest and looked to the ground. He had a deep, gruff voice like Roakore’s, yet it was melodic and fluid. Whill assumed that this was a dwarf of high stature who could turn a crowd with his words alone.

Abram returned the gesture. “It is good to see you as well, friend.”

The dwarf turned to Whill and, to his surprise, gave the same greeting he had given Abram and said, “I am Fior, high priest o’ the Dy’kore clan. ‘Tis good to meet you Whill.”

Whill instinctively returned the gesture of respect, hoping he was not making a mistake; he assumed a bow would be expected, given Fior’s title. To Whill’s relief, Fior smiled and turned to Abram. “Ye have a good one here, ye do. Now, I hear tell o’ a Draggard attack this day’s eve, outside these very walls. I shall want to hear o’ that in detail, indeed, But not afore the king. I understand ye have things to attend to.”

“That we do,” answered Abram

“If ye will follow me then.” Fior turned and began crossing the great hall. “I know yer able to find yer way around Dy’Kore, Abram, but the state o’ things being what they are, ’tis best ye have an escort with ye at all times—as not to alarm anyone, or stir up rumor.”

“I understand.”

They followed Fior across the hall and into another large tunnel. They walked for a minute in silence before turning left onto a large marble stair, which spiraled downward for about fifty feet before opening into a large room. This one was larger than the hall had been, considerably larger. It had a floor of black marble, and walls of polished stone that shimmered in the firelight—torches hung every ten feet along the mineral-rich walls. The reflection off the stone cast a beautiful spectrum of color on the room, which Whill would have marveled at had he not known what they were here for; this was a vault, and behind one of the many doors set between the torches, his secrets waited to be revealed.

Fior turned to them, looking like a dwarf sorcerer in the torchlight. “It is door number twenty-seven, on the left. I will wait here.”

He handed Whill a large key. Momentarily, he only gazed at it—the key to his past. He looked to Fior, then to Abram, then to the distant door. He walked toward door twenty-seven. The light swirled throughout the room as the torches flickered, and Whill worried for a moment that maybe this was all a dream—that maybe he was still in Iam’s house of healing, fighting a high fever. He feared he would open the door and find nothing but another ever-growing mountain with his parents atop, waving happily as they aged before his eyes and turned to dust.

Thirteen, read the door to his left; he was halfway there. He heard nothing but his heart in his chest, and it seemed to echo throughout the vast room. His leg no longer hurt, or if it did, he was not aware of it. He had already determined where the door stood, and focused on it for fear that it would vanish. It had haunted his dreams since Fendale, and now it was here in front of him. Seconds seemed like hours as he made the short walk, but at last he stood before it.

He jerked as Abram put a hand upon his shoulder. How long had they been standing there? A few seconds, minutes? Abram handed him one of the wall torches, and he looked again at the key in his hand. Finally, he inserted it into the lock and turned the large brass handle. He heard the sound of many locks and bolts disengaging, and then the door opened in silence.

The vault was dark. Whill entered slowly and raised the torch high so that he could see. The light shone on walls bare but for an unlit torch on each. At first he saw nothing, but as his eyes adjusted and he walked to the center, he could make out a large iron chest, two wooden chairs, and a small circular table. He turned to Abram, baffled.

Abram took the torch and lit two others upon the walls. He replaced the last torch with the one in his hand and said, “Have a seat, Whill.”

Taking the chair to the left, he eyed the chest curiously. Abram took the other, retrieved his tobacco bag, and lit his pipe. He puffed softly, eyeing the chest as well.

“Long have I pondered how best to present you with this story,” he said finally. “How to begin, where to begin—and I have determined I cannot tell any part of the story without first telling you who your parents were.” He took another long drag from his pipe, seemingly relaxed with one leg crossed over the other, while Whill sat literally on the edge of his seat.

“I don’t know any other way to say it, Whill, so I’ll just come out with it. Your father was King Aramonis of Uthen-Arden, and your mother was Queen Celestra.”

Of all the things Whill had anticipated, this was not one. He sat in utter shock. “King Aramonis? How can that be? I thought all perished in the ambush that killed the king and queen of Arden. She was with child at the time, but—”

He stopped as he comprehended what he had just said.

“Yes,” said Abram. “She was pregnant, with you.”

Whill’s mind raced. The gravity of reality bore down on him as he realized what this meant. “Then that means that I...I am...a prince?”

Abram shook his head and blew smoke into the air as he sat up in his chair and looked Whill straight in the eye. “No, Whill. It means that you are the rightful king of Uthen-Arden.”

Whill stood in disbelief and began pacing. “King? I’m no king. If I am King Aramonis’s son, why was I not brought back to Arden? Why wasn’t I raised there? Why would the surviving heir to the throne of Uthen-Arden be kept a secret from the world? Why—”

“Because your uncle wants you dead. That’s why.”

Whill stopped cold in his pacing as Abram answered his many questions with one answer. He began to understand. “King Addakon of Arden, my father’s brother—are you saying he had them killed? That he planned the Draggard attack that killed his own brother?”

“Yes, but there is much more to it. Please sit, my friend, you’re making me nervous.”

Whill sat back down in his chair, tense as a bowstring and shaking. His mouth had become parched and his head ached. He could hardly take in all that Abram had revealed so far.

“This story goes back hundreds of years, to the coming of the elves to Agora.” Abram sat back once again and puffed on his pipe between sentences. “The elves, as you know, were driven from Drindellia by the dark elves and the Draggard. Hoping to ensure his people’s survival, the elf king Verelas sent the queen and their children, along with hundreds of others, over the ocean. When they reached the shores of Agora, over five hundred years ago, they were met by the people of Opalmist. Upon hearing of the refugees, King Theorolus of Arden quickly rode to meet them. Soon a great friendship arose between Theorolus and Queen Araveal. By then the king had learned of the elves’ ability to manipulate energy, which, as you know, they call Orna Catorna. He made a deal with Queen Araveal: in exchange for the land now called Elladrindellia, he asked that the elves teach him and his decedents Orna Catorna. The queen agreed and the deal was made, and with every new birth in the royal family, the elves have kept their word. At the age of twenty, the royal children are brought to the elves to be taught for a year. This is a well-guarded secret, of course. Your father and your uncle were taught by the elves, as you shall be.”

“Me? I am to be taught by the elves?” Abram nodded and Whill thought for a moment. “But how is it that I have the power to heal already?”

Abram tapped his pipe on the chair arm, emptying the bowl. “You are a descendant of King Theorolus. You have, in your blood, hidden powers given by the elves. Though they usually do not emerge before being taught, the ability lives within you. You completely surprised me, of course, when you healed Tarren.”

“So that is how I did it,” Whill said as he stared off into the distance. “What of my parents, Abram. Were you there when they died?”

“I was. I’m getting to that. Now as you are aware, your father and uncle were identical twins born only minutes apart; your father Aramonis first, and Addakon second. You must understand that your father treated Addakon as an equal. He loved his brother deeply. Addakon, on the other hand, harbored a deep and dark hatred for your father which he did not show openly. The fact that Aramonis would be king angered Addakon deeply; he was insanely jealous and felt that he had been cheated by mere chance. When they were sent to learn the ways of Orna Catorna, it only got worse. Addakon had a thirst for power that, once he got a taste of it, could not be quenched. He wanted to be king at any cost, and eventually he proved that no cost was too great.”

Abram stood and began to pace slowly, his hands behind his back. “Your father was my best friend, Whill. I loved him, and your mother, deeply. They were the kindest and most righteous people I have ever known.”

He stared into the torchlight a moment before continuing, “I was a knight of Arden, and I met your father when he was sixteen. I was twenty-two at the time, and trying to make a name for myself within the ranks of Arden. I fought in many battles against the Draggard, on both land and sea, and soon caught the attention of your grandfather, King Armond. I was made a personal guard to the royal family at age twenty-five, and shortly thereafter King Armond died in the Battle of Fendorf. As you know, it is the greatest Draggard attack on Agora to date. They came with hundreds of ships, and their army numbered over ten thousand. It took the combined strength of all four kingdoms of men, and the elves, to defeat the enemy. Afterward, your father became king, and I his personal guard—and friend. He took as his wife the beautiful Princess Celestra of Eldalon. Years passed and the kingdom of Arden prospered, as did its people. Your father was known as the greatest and most generous king to take the throne of Uthen-Arden, and his death was deeply mourned throughout Agora. As you know, the kings of Arden have been legendary warriors since the time of King Theorolus. Now you know that this is largely due to the fact that they possessed elven powers. Each king in your line has striven to become a greater legend than all before him. It has helped the kingdom to thrive, but it has also led to many untimely deaths. This thirst for power and fame, along with a boldness that

comes with great power, has made you and Addakon the last in the line of Theorolus.”

Whill waited intently as his friend paused; he had many questions but held his tongue. After a moment Abram tapped his pipe on the table and sat down again.

“The day your parents died, I was there; I was with them. Your mother was eight months pregnant with you at the time, and they were on their way to Eldalon to visit your mother’s family; the King and Queen of Eldalon were very eager for a grandchild and the unity it would bring to the two kingdoms.

“We traveled north from Del’Oradon towards the Ky’Dren Pass, but two days into our journey we were ambushed by a great host of Draggard. They came in the morning and our small camp was overrun. Traveling with us were eleven of the greatest knights of the time, along with forty other soldiers, but the Draggard numbered over three hundred. The fight lasted less than an hour as our men fell. They protected their king and queen valiantly until the end, but we were too hopelessly outnumbered. And though they had managed to kill a great many Draggard, over a hundred still remained. Your mother was killed in the fight by a Draggard spear.”

Abram looked at him, his eyes shimmering in the torchlight. “It was quick, Whill. She did not suffer. The Draggard had circled us and stood waiting, as they do when they are sure of victory. Your father held your mother in his arms and wept, unable to heal her.

“I was hit also.” He pointed to his upper right chest. “Though I knew I would die, I was ready to give my life defending my king—my friend. Your father stopped me, however, from attacking the beasts, for as the Draggard waited, a man came to us from their ranks. It was Addakon.

“Your father was crushed. Holding his dead wife, he asked, ‘Why, brother, why would you do such a thing? Have I not been good to you, have I not loved you all these years?’ Then he stood and cried, ‘Is your thirst for power so great that you would see your own brother die at the hands of these beasts?’ Addakon told your father he was a fool and would die a fool’s death. Then Aramonis spoke to me for the last time. He told me to take his child, and see to it that one day he took back the throne.

“Turning to Addakon, he said, ‘If I am to die today, brother, then you will die with me.’ He raised his sword high and spoke, in the words of the elves: ‘*Ortho min brensa las enna, engrona de lementho brydon.*’

“Addakon knew what the king was doing and ordered the Draggard to shoot him. Spears took flight but were stopped in midair, inches from us, as your father

bellowed the elven chant of death. Addakon knew he was beaten and started to run.

“I will never forget what happened next. Your father drove his sword deep into the ground, and a great boom and flash of light exploded through the air. Every last surrounding Draggard fell to the ground dead, as did your father.”

Abram reached over the table and put his hand on Whill’s shoulder. Tears slid down his cheeks. “He died to save you, Whill.”

Whill could not meet Abram’s gaze. He stared at the floor, a lump swelling in his throat. Abram stood and stared into the torchlight. “Your father performed the Orrona Dekarra, the sacrifice of life, the most powerful elven attack. He used all of his energy, and all the energy left in his sword, to kill over a hundred Draggard. When they fell, I watched in horror as he died too.

“There was no sign of Addakon, though I know now that he survived. I did what I knew I had to do, Whill; I took your father’s sword and cut you from your mother. You were alive, due to your father’s attempt to heal your mother, but I knew you would die soon if I did not find help. I mounted the closest horse and rode as fast as I could to Elladrindellia, seeking the aid of the elves. For days I rode, knowing that hell itself was at my heels. When I finally reached the elves, you were barely holding on and I feared the worst. But Queen Araveal healed you that day. And now here you are, a man by every measure—one whom your father would surely be proud of.”

Abram went to the large iron chest. He produced a key from his pocket and disengaged the lock. Whill watched intently as he opened it and retrieved a small object from within. He held it in his fist and turned to Whill. “This, I’m afraid, is all I have to give you of your mother’s.” He laid a silver ring in his friend’s hand, and Whill took it between thumb and finger. As he gazed at it, a pang of sorrow rose from his very core. Abram spoke again, “That ring has been in the Eldalon royal family for hundreds of years. It was made by the dwarves for the queen of Eldalon. It has been passed down from mother to daughter ever since. Celestra received it on her sixteenth birthday and cherished it dearly; she wore it always.”

The ring was made of pure silver, and at the center sat a large pearl encircled by sapphires. Whill tried the ring and found that it fit his smallest finger. Abram returned to the chest once more and produced a sheathed sword. He presented it to Whill with open palms. “This was your father’s sword. It is called Sinomara.”

Whill took it by the hilt, and his eyes filled with hot tears; he could find no words—this was the sword his father had wielded to save his son’s life. Slowly he pulled off the sheath and set it on the chair, and eyed the great sword with reverence. It was an elven sword. Its long hilt was bound in black leather and bright blue silk, and the single-edged blade was three feet long and slightly

curved. The hand guard was a thick steel ring encrusted with small diamonds. Along the length of the blade, on both sides, were elven runes. They read, "This is the blade Sinomara, made for a king of men. May it protect its master in times of peril, and vanquish all that dare to stand before it."

Whill inspected the sword in the firelight. It was the most beautiful and well-crafted piece of weaponry he had ever seen. Simply holding it in his hand gave him a sense of great power and strength.

"I will leave you now for a while," Abram said solemnly, and went to the door. Whill barely heard him close it, so transfixed was he by the sword in his hands. He looked at the ring and the sword in turn. Tears welled in his eyes again and a dam of emotion broke within him. He was flooded by sorrow and fell to his knees weeping. Staring at the sword through blurred vision, he spoke to his long-dead parents:

"I will avenge you, mother. I will avenge you, father. With all the power I possess, I will hunt down Addakon and make him pay for what he has done. I will make him pay."

Overcome with grief, his voice cut out. He wailed and gasped, shuddering as he held the sword. Then his sorrow was replaced by a great rage, and holding the sword high with both hands he bellowed, "I will not rest until he is dead!"

Chapter 14

The Dwarf King

Whill stayed within the vault for a time unknown, chanting to himself over and over his promise of vengeance. His rage and sorrow did not ebb; he focused on it intently, replaying in his mind the final minutes of his parents' lives. His father's words echoed through his head in a maddening chorus. *Why, brother? Why would you do such a thing?* He heard his mother's final screams, and the sounds of battle. Abram's voice joined in the chorus. *He died to save you, Whill.*

His head spun and his mind raced. He thought of the life he might have known, the life that had been taken from him—his mother's laughter, his father's smile. These too joined in the deafening chorus of pain that was Whill's world. When he was finally exhausted he fell into deep sleep, his father's sword still in hand.

His dreams were filled with blood, screams, and pain. He stood next to Abram as his father cradled his dead mother in his arms. Draggard soldiers were all around, hissing and laughing at them. Then Whill saw Addakon. He came from among the crowd of Draggard with a malevolent smile on his face. Whill drew his father's sword and charged. At first, Addakon simply stood and laughed, but as Whill neared, the evil king unsheathed his own sword and ran to meet the attack. Whill came down with a powerful first strike, and then proceeded to slice and jab with all his might, but his uncle just laughed and blocked every blow with ease.

Suddenly Addakon raised a hand and Whill was paralyzed; but as he turned and walked toward Aramonis and Abram, he realized Addakon controlled his every movement. He fought to stop himself, but to no avail. When he finally reached his father, he raised his sword high for a killing blow. As the blade came down, Whill awoke with a scream.

"No!"

He sprang to his feet. At first he did not know where he was. He looked around the room bewildered, and then saw the sword in his trembling hands. He

breathed a sigh of relief. He remembered he was in Dy’Kore. For a moment he stood unmoving, trying to shake the vision of his nightmare. He walked to the chair, retrieved the sword’s sheath, and attached it to his belt. After one last glance, he put the sword away and opened to the door. As he did so, he turned to look back at the chamber—he had come to this room a boy seeking answers; now he left it the rightful king of Uthen-Arden.

The door closed behind him with a soft thud as he made for the vault entrance. Abram and Fior awaited him at the stair. He approached them in silence. Abram looked solemnly at him and asked, “Are you alright, Whill?”

He simply nodded and tried, in vain, to fake a smile. Fior broke the silence with his deep and majestic voice. “I will lead ye to yer quarters.”

Whill and Abram followed Fior down the stairs and through a series of halls and tunnels in silence. Many dwarves stopped in their tracks as they saw the three, but Whill paid them no mind. His thoughts were elsewhere.

They reached their quarters shortly. Fior told them to rest well and the king would see them first thing in the morning, and then left with a bow. Whill silently went to his room and closed the door.

Abram respected his privacy, though he was worried about him. He knew that it would be hard for Whill to accept his heritage even though he had prepared him for this day as best he could. Whill was wise beyond his years, a brilliant scholar, and his prowess as a fighter was masterful; *But*, Abram reminded himself, *he was also still young*—and the mind of a young man could be more tumultuous than the great sea. He understood how hard it would be for Whill. He walked to the large mirror on the wall, and stared into his own eyes for a long while. How quickly the time had passed.

“He is ready,” he said aloud, more to convince himself than as a statement. On that dreadful day almost twenty years earlier, he had made a decision: to forsake his own life for that of Whill’s. He had vowed on the blood of the king to care for Whill, and in his heart he knew he had done well. He had been utterly shocked by the recent display of Whill’s power, but ultimately pleased by the revelation. But still, troublesome thoughts lingered in the dark recesses of his mind. Would Whill exhibit the same lust for power that had darkened his uncle’s heart? Or would he grow to be a great man like his father?

He felt guilty for even thinking such a thing, but he could not deny that Whill was indeed powerful—more powerful than even his father and uncle had been at that age—and had used his powers instinctively without any training, a feat

never accomplished by his forefathers. Would such power corrupt the student Abram had dedicated his life to? If it did, what then would be Abram's responsibility?

These questions and many others kept him awake for hours, until finally he drifted off into the much-needed realm of sleep.

Whill awoke to find that he no longer had a single trace of the wound upon his leg. As he lifted the bloody bandages from his thigh he found only smooth flesh, with not so much as a scar. Amazed, he leapt from his soft feathered bed and quickly went to Abram's room, where he found him sleeping soundly.

"Abram, look at this!"

Abram jumped from his bed, instantly alert and brandishing his dagger. He looked around, puzzled, and then at Whill. With a sigh he plopped back down onto his bed and rubbed his tired eyes. "What is it Whill?"

Whill sat next to him on the bed and rolled up his pant leg enough for Abram to see. "It was like this when I awoke. I swear I didn't try to heal it."

Abram eyed the healed skin with a worried glare. It was many moments before his eyes found Whill's.

"You healed yourself, Whill, whether you meant to or not. There's no other explanation."

Whill shook his head and was about to speak, but there was nothing he could really say. Instead, he just sat there confused. Abram rose and paced the room, looking down at the floor and obviously distraught. He continued to do so even after he started speaking again. "This is why you must go soon to the elves. I have taught you much, but I cannot teach that which you now need to know. You have great abilities, Whill, but without knowledge and control, they could prove disastrous." He stopped and looked suddenly to Whill. "Your father's sword! Did you hold it long?"

Whill did not understand Abram's urgency. He was the one who had given him the sword in the first place. "Yes, after you left I held it for a long while... but I did nothing...I...I fell asleep."

Abram sat again and tried to explain. "The sword of your father has life once again. Elven swords are very powerful; when you held it in your state of...despair, and anger, powerful dark energy—your energy—poured into it. This, as you will learn, is a practice forbidden by Elves of the Sun—only the Dark Elves use such techniques, Whill."

There was much gravity in Abram's words. Whill began to understand how little control he had over his power to heal, and the thought scared him.

"It is not this use of the mind itself that they shun," Abram continued. "It is the use of negative thoughts and emotions that they do not allow. If one fills their sword with anger, hatred, and other negative energy, they too will become consumed with these emotions. The elves know this, and that is why it is not practiced; though it can bring great power quickly, it can destroy one's soul and blacken their heart just the same."

He was interrupted by a soft knock at the door. "Yes?" said Abram.

"It is I, Fior. The king requests breakfast with you an' Whill in a half-hour's time."

"We will be ready, my good friend."

"I will return for ye then, Abram," he replied, and with that he was gone.

Abram turned to Whill once again. "We will talk of this more later. Now we should bathe and dress. The king awaits us."

A half-hour later Fior returned and led them to the king's quarters. Having been given rooms in the king's guest wing, it was a short walk. The floors in this wide corridor were black marble, and the walls were adorned with many carvings. There were also great stone arches, each one a work of art, every twenty feet or so. Years beyond reckoning had gone into the designs of this ancient lair, and Whill took in all its great beauty.

Fior led them to a large, open door and stepped to the side, gesturing for them to enter. The room beyond was massive, easily a few hundred feet wide and twice as long. There were high cathedral ceilings supported by gold and silver arches, and the floors were of white marble. The walls, platinum, were highly polished and added to its grand appearance. Dozens of large dwarf statues lined both sides of the room, standing over twenty feet tall. These were the past kings of Dy'Kore, their exact likenesses carved into the stone with great precision.

"This is the Chamber of the Kings." Fior's voice echoed from behind them. "Within each statue lies the king depicted." He led them down the great chamber, past dozens of similar statues, to where King Ky'Ell sat waiting.

"The most magnificent sight I have ever seen," Whill said as he looked at the largest statue of them all. It was directly ahead, behind Ky'Ell's throne. The image that stared down at them was that of a bald, sturdy-looking dwarf with a long braided beard. In his left hand was a massive axe, and in his right, the curving horn of a dragon. Below the statue sat a large black marble plaque. Its Dwarvish words, written in diamond dust, read

Here lies Ky' Dren, the Dragons Bane
First king and founder of Ky'Dren
Warrior of the Gods
Slayer of Five Dragons
Savior of the Dwarves
0–350

Finally, they came to the king's court. Two dwarves stood on either side, dressed as Fior was, and four steps led to the marvelous gold throne. Ky'Ell himself was big by dwarf standards. His hair was grey, as was his long beard, which in his seated position, fell below his feet. His eyes were blue and alert, watching keenly behind a wide nose. At first glance he seemed a stern and serious dwarf, even mean, but as Whill and Abram stopped before him, his eyebrows shot upward and a wide smile spread from under his thick beard.

Abram slammed his right fist to his chest and bowed slightly. "Ky'Ell, my friend, it is good to see you once again."

The king returned the gesture and, in a deep and powerful voice, responded, "An' you, Abram. I am glad to see that the many rumors o' yer death be false, fer such a loss to the world o' men would be a grievous loss indeed."

Abram laughed. "If I had a gold coin for every rumor of my demise, I would be the envy of kings."

The king laughed, his great booming voice echoing throughout the chamber. As the laughter died away, Whill took the opportunity to greet him. He slammed his right fist to his chest in the sign of respect and bowed slightly. "It is an honor to meet the great king of Dy'Kore."

To Whill's utter amazement, the king returned the gesture. "'Tis I who am honored to finally meet the rightful king o' Uthen-Arden. I've heard much of ye from Abram, Whill. He's indeed done a good job of training ye. I hear tell from Roakore that ye slew many Draggard single-handed. Ye indeed be a great warrior o' men, an' ye'll be a great king in yer time."

Whill was barely used to the idea of being a king, and hearing himself spoken of in such a way made him uncomfortable. "Thank you, good king."

After a moment of silence, Ky'Ell rose from his throne and descended the four steps. "Let us eat, then. Ye must be starved from yer journey."

With that, he led Abram and Whill to a passage at the right of the throne. It went down into a wide tunnel. They soon stepped into a huge dining room. This one was smaller than the Chamber of Kings but, like that room, boasted highly

polished marble floors. Its walls were adorned with great banners and paintings of kings of old. Five massive chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and at the center of the right-hand wall, sat a giant fire place, more than twenty feet wide. In the middle of the long room, a beautiful stone dining table had been exquisitely crafted, and adorned with various gems and precious stones. Its wooden chairs were no less beautiful, intricately carved as they were, with silver trim and blue satin cushions. The stone table could seat over one hundred, and Whill found that four places had been set for breakfast at the end closest them.

Whill assumed that the fourth chair meant that Fior would be joining them, but when Roakore entered the room, the king sat and bade the three to do the same. Fior gave a small bow and exited the room as four dwarf maidens entered. Whill looked in wonder at the sight of the dwarf women. To his knowledge, no man had ever laid eyes upon a female dwarf, and rarely were they even mentioned in any of the accounts he had read concerning the dwarves. Whill suddenly felt embarrassed by his gawking. The king noticed his reaction but only grinned; the women were not bearded, as many of the stories told, nor were they in any way ugly. They were shorter than the male dwarves—a foot shorter on average—and had thick flowing hair that was so long, it had to be held up with ribbons to keep it from dragging on the floor. They wore full length dresses and aprons over their plump figures, and merry cheeks accompanied warm smiles as they set the many dishes before them. Whill thought to himself that at any moment one of them would fall over under the weight of their huge bosoms, and he fought off a chuckle.

When they finished, the maidens bowed slightly and, with wide smiles, exited the room.

“Our women are built as sturdy as the mountains themselves,” noted the king. “You should know, Whill, that you are one of the very few outsiders who has ever laid eyes upon them. We love and guard our women as fiercely as we do our treasure, for they are the givers of life, the greatest gift bestowed upon us by the gods.”

Whill regretted his earlier thoughts and wondered for a foolish moment if the king had read his mind. “I am honored once again, good king. They are indeed a treasure.”

The king eyed Whill for a moment. “Fret not, young Whill, fer years I too have pondered the mystery o’ how they stay on their feet.”

Whill flushed as he realized that his eyes had given him away. He began to stutter a response but the king interrupted. “But how I do love to investigate the many aspects o’ that mystery!” His chuckle grew into all-out laughter. Abram and Roakore joined in and, after a moment, Whill was laughing too.

When they had all finally stopped, the king took a piece of roasted duck from one of the platters and bit into it fiercely. “Eat up, friends, and tell me the tale o’ your meeting and the battle with the Draggard.”

Before them sat a feast of roasted duck, boiled goose eggs, strips of fried wild boar, ham, cakes, pastries, coffee, juices, goat’s and cow’s milk, and various fruits and bread. Whill found that he had a monstrous appetite, and knew that it was due to the healing of his leg. The food was good and the wine sweet, and the king listened intently to the story, He complimented Whill’s genius in using the diamonds as bait, and grunted approvingly at the ways the Draggard had been dispatched.

When they had finished eating, Abram took out his pipe, as was his habit after a good meal, and so did Roakore and Ky’Ell. The king gestured to Whill with his pipe. “Do ye smoke, lad?”

Hoping not to offend him, Whill answered truthfully, “No, thank you. I never acquired a taste for it myself, but I do enjoy the smell of another’s.”

“Very well.” The king puffed and blew a large smoke-ring into the air, and quickly sent another smaller one through the middle.

“Now for business.” He sat up in his chair. “What of the invitation I have received from Kell-Torrey?” He asked Abram.

“King Mathus of Eldalon has summoned all the other kings of Agora—as well as the Queen of Elladrindellia—to a secret meeting in his castle at Kell-Torey. He has not, however, invited King Addakon.” He paused and glanced at Whill. “Instead, he has requested that Whill attend, being that he is the rightful heir to the throne, and true king of Uthen-Arden.”

King Ky’Ell scowled. “The elf queen? I’ll be damned if I enter the company of an elf.”

Abram, who had foreseen that the mention of Queen Araveal might hamper the meeting, continued cautiously. “Please, Ky’Ell, hear me out.” Ky’Ell nodded and puffed on his pipe. “Addakon has invaded Isladon. There has been no word from King Fenious for weeks, and King Mathus has decided to hold this meeting under my council. He believes, as do I, that King Addakon intends to take over all of Agora, including the mountains of the dwarves.”

Ky’Ell choked on his smoke. “Bah! The snake can try, but he’ll not find it an easy task. He is flanked on both sides by Dwarf Mountains.”

Abram continued. “There is more, good king. I’ve told you I was there when Whill’s parents were killed—that it was Addakon who saw to it.”

Ky’Ell nodded impatiently. “Yes, yes, ye told me the tale.”

“What I failed to tell you was that the ambush was performed by a host of Draggard.”

The king was suddenly concerned. “Twenty years ago?”

Abram nodded. “Yes. It is my strong belief that Addakon has made allies with the beasts—to what extent, I can only guess—but if he has waited this long to act, I can only assume he has been amassing a Draggard army. Worse yet, he may be in alliance with Eadon himself.”

Ky’Ell spat on the floor at the mention of Eadon, the Dark elf who had crossed dragon with elf and created the Draggard. “Then the elves o’ Elladrindellia be in on it also, the scum! Brought the dragon half-breeds here to take our treasures, eh?”

“No!” Abram interrupted. “If you value me as a friend, and know me to be a man of truth, listen to my words! The elves of Elladrindellia have more disdain for the Draggard than even the dwarves do. They are not in league with the Dark elves. Their people were slaughtered and driven from Drindellia those hundreds of years ago by the Draggard.”

“Bah! A lie built to hide their true intent! I’d wager they aim to take over Agora themselves, an’ enslave us all with the help o’ the Draggard scum. Yer deluded, Abram. Ye believe a lie!”

Whill shifted uncomfortably in his chair. The tension in the air had become suffocating since the mention of the elves. He feared that Ky’Ell would erupt with rage. Roakore watched the exchange too, but his face showed that he was on the side of the king.

“If you will not listen to me, then listen to logic,” Abram continued, “If the elves of Elladrindellia are what you say, then why have they waited over five hundred years to strike? Wouldn’t they rather have amassed their army and crushed Agora long ago? Would they show up claiming to be refugees, only to wait hundreds of years before attacking?”

Calmer now, the king pondered for a moment. “I know that ye believe in what ye say, an’ if yer correct, Agora will have a valuable ally in the elves. But think for a moment, What if yer wrong, an’ the king has invited the enemy to the meeting? Then all is folly, an’ they will know our every move.”

“Well met, Ky’Ell. But I would wager my life that the queen and her people are good, and do indeed despise the Draggard as fiercely as yourself.”

The king leaned forward and puffed his pipe. “On what grounds would ye make such a wager?”

Abram looked at Whill. “On the grounds that, if the elves were indeed in league with Addakon, they never would have let Whill live, let alone save his life!”

The king scowled as he eyed Abram, then Whill, but did not speak. Abram went on. “When I took Whill from that bloody field, he was barely alive. I

brought him to Elladrindellia and the queen herself healed our wounds. She knew who he was, yet she helped. So I ask you, good king of Dy’Kore, why would an ally of Addakon save the true king from certain death?”

Ky’Ell leaned back in his chair. Even Roakore seemed stumped. Whill watched with anticipation as the silence thickened. Abram, however, crossed his arms and sat back in his chair, his pipe hanging from his mouth. He seemed to know he had won. Finally the king spoke.

“Ye present a good argument, Abram, one which I cannot dispute. But know that I remain wary.” He puffed on his pipe, but found it spent and began packing another load. “Enough o’ this bickering. Let us assume fer now that what ye say be true. What does King Mathus propose?”

“That is the purpose of the meeting. He would like to present the facts of Addakon and the Draggard to all, and hear what each has to say. But one thing I do know: he believes that unity alone will ensure our victory in the coming war.”

Ky’Ell did not look convinced. “I understand that Uthen-Arden be the largest kingdom o’ men, an’ boasts the largest army, but they be no match for the combined armies o’ the other kingdoms, which flank them on all sides. Surely it will be an easy defeat. I doubt also that the soldiers o’ Uthen-Arden will have much heart fer battle under a ruler such as Addakon. It is well known that he is hated by most of his people.”

“You are correct in that assessment, but the presence of the Draggard implies that something much graver awaits us all.” He looked at Roakore. “I believe that when the Draggard took over your mountain twenty years ago, it was under the command of Addakon.” Roakore tensed as Abram let the statement set in. “I also believe that the purpose of the attack was to set up a base for the Draggard army. It is my theory that within the great halls of your fathers lies a Draggard queen. For these twenty long years, I suspect, the Draggard army has been steadily growing, hidden within the mountain, waiting to be unleashed.”

Roakore was speechless, but his rage was apparent. The King looked at Abram, wide-eyed. “How many, do ye guess?”

Abram sighed and leaned forward. “It is said that a queen can lay more than twenty eggs a day, and those eggs can lay dormant for years. I would guess we are looking at an army of well over a hundred thousand.”

Whill could hardly comprehend such an estimation. He tried to envision an army so vast, and his body involuntarily shuddered at the prospect.

Roakore stood, red-faced. “I said it long ago, we should’ve taken back the mountain immediately!” He pointed at Ky’Ell with a shaking hand. “Ye have damned me father to the hells! Why have ye made us wait? Just so the children

o' the fallen mountain could partake in the reclaiming o' it! Are ye not now shamed in yer folly, in yer cowardice?"

King Ky'Ell sprang to his feet, his own rage twisting his face into a snarl. His voice boomed throughout the room. "Do not forget who ye speak to, Roakore o' the Ebony Mountains! I'll not be called a coward in me own halls. If ye were any other dwarf, I would kill ye where ye stand! But the gods have another plan for ye, son of the fallen mountain. Do not anger me again!"

From Roakore's twisted face came tears of frustration. He bent his head low and weakly hit his fist to his chest. Through clenched teeth, he said, "I am sorry, great king o' Dy'Kore, me tongue was led by me rage. Ye have been nothing but good to me people."

He slumped back into his chair and peered at the king. His face was no longer filled with anger; rather, he looked like a dwarf without hope. His despair was so great that it eased the king's rage as well. Ky'Ell spoke again, more softly this time.

"Ye will have yer chance, son o' Ro'Din. Sooner than ye think. But know this: I've waited to help ye take back the mountain fer many reasons. Yer correct, I do feel it's the right o' the eldest sons o' the fallen mountain to fight fer it, but I intended on fightin' alongside ye in them halls; and since I be old an' at the end o' me days, I had to leave me mountain in order, an' know that the son o' me choosin' be ready to lead if I don't be returnin'. Call it a selfish ol' dwarf's vision o' glory in the eyes o' the gods, an' ye'd be correct. Now it seems I be needed here in me own mountain after all." He turned to Abram and added. "If indeed what ye say be true."

He paused to consider his next statement, and turned back to Roakore. "I'm thinkin' ye should go with 'em to Kell-Torey an' represent the dwarves. Ye'll speak fer meself an' fer King Du'Krell o' the Elgar Mountains. When ye return, we begin plans to reclaim the Ebony Mountains. What say ye, son o' Ro'Din?"

Roakore rose once again and slammed his fist to his chest. "I would be honored to represent our people."

The king looked to Abram and Whill. "'Tis settled. These two sons o' fallen kings shall journey together to Kell-Torey, and the fate of Agora will be decided. Let many a song be written to tell the tale o' this great war. An' may the Draggard be destroyed once an' fer all!"

Chapter 15

The Dwarves of Dy’Kore

After the meal Whill and Abram returned to their rooms without the guidance of Fior—Ky’Ell had made it known that a visiting king of men was a guest within the city, and free to roam as he pleased. He had also offered them a tour later that day, and they had graciously accepted

As they entered their quarters, Whill turned and asked, “How do you think the meeting went?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing, Whill. What is your opinion?”

Whill sat down upon a heavily cushioned chair and thought for a moment. “I like Ky’Ell. He is gruff, opinionated, and stubborn—everything you would expect from a dwarf king—but he is kind and wise as well. I must say, though, I do not presume to be qualified to judge such a character.”

Abram laughed. “But, Whill, you *are* qualified. You are the rightful king of the most powerful throne in all of Agora! I see the title makes you cringe, but you may as well get used to it if you intend on claiming the throne.”

Whill sighed and slowly put a hand through his hair. “All of my life I have wondered of my parents. I have dreamed of them in many ways, but never have I considered such a possibility as the story you have told me Abram. I can still hardly believe it to be true”

Abram spoke gently. “I do not mean to press.”

Whill sat up in his seat, his elbows upon his knees, and a smile spread across his face. “I know, and you are right. I do intend to claim the title, and I intend to see Addakon pay for his treachery, but I am afraid. If my uncle has been taught by the elves—worse yet, if he has teamed with Eadon, as you said—then what chance do I have?”

Abram sat down across from Whill and lit the pipe he had been preparing. “You mean what chance do we have, Whill. When I made my vow to your father, I swore with all of my heart to see to your survival; but I also swore that one day you would take back the throne. I still live by that vow, and I shall die

by it. I have told you before that I will follow you down whatever road you choose—because of the vow, yes, but more so because I love you as a son and a cherished friend.

“And do not forget,” Abram went on, “You have powers far beyond your contemplation—powers that, when fully understood and mastered, will make you a very real threat to Addakon.”

Whill furrowed his brow. “But the trouble has already begun. I know I must be trained by the elves, but I assume that training will take years. How can I be of any use in the coming war?”

“I also have pondered that point. It is unfortunate that Addakon has begun his crusade against Agora so soon, and it would seem that time is indeed against us. But do not forget your history: wars are not won and lost overnight, and the other kingdoms of Agora are strong indeed. You must prepare to face Addakon, and let that be your goal.

“We have trained every day for the last ten years. Your prowess as a fighter is great indeed, and will only become greater. The elves will teach you things I cannot, and I do not doubt, given the abilities you have already demonstrated, that you will master their ways quickly.”

“And when do you suggest I go to Elladrindellia?”

“After the meeting in Kell-Torey—the elf queen is invited, do not forget. I suggest that we depart with her.” Whill was happy with the idea. He was eager to learn the ways of the elves like his father had.

Roakore walked the distance to his clan’s housing. It was not a great distance from the king’s quarters, but he took his time. His thoughts drifted to that dire day twenty years before when his mountain had fallen to the Draggard. News that a queen was most likely within the Ebony Mountains, laying her thousands of filthy eggs, did not settle well with the dwarf. His anger towards King Ky’Ell had died quickly; he himself had been shocked by his own words.

Roakore thought of the coming journey he was to take with Abram and Whill. In his few dealings with man, he had never acquired much of a liking for them—but these two had proven themselves great warriors in his eyes.

As he turned the last bend in the tunnel to his clan’s caverns, he could hear the telltale sounds of dwarves training with weapons. Every dwarf within the mountain lived for one thing, and one thing only: to aid in the will of the gods. If a dwarf dedicated his life fully, it was believed they would find a place among their kin within the Mountain of the Gods. Their cause was to mine the great mountains of the world and retrieve the many precious metals and gems their gods had created, and which the god of the dragons had hidden deep long ago.

To kill a dragon was the greatest feat of all, one that would ensure not only a place within the Mountain of the Gods, but even a seat among them.

This belief was set firmly in the minds of the dwarves from childhood. It was their religion. They spent their lives mining and crafting their treasures, which were then—by means of trade—returned to the world above.

Shortly after Roakore's clan arrived in Dy'Kore, however, it was deemed that they should not participate in the mining; rather, their salvation would come in the reclaiming of the Ebony Mountains. Since that day they had trained for battle. More than five thousand women and children had escaped, along with about a hundred adult males. Over a thousand of the children were now considered men, and trained hard with their elders for the coming battle. The women were not expected to fight; their duty was to increase the numbers of the diminished clan, which had once numbered more than fifty thousand. Because each elder male had many wives, Roakore's clan had seen over ten thousand births in twenty years. Roakore himself boasted the highest number with twenty-seven wives. In those long two decades, they had borne him over two hundred children, one hundred and nine of them males. At the age of 120, he was young by the reckoning of the dwarves, who could live to see hundreds of years. He had not previously given much thought to women, however, and had not sired a child before the attack. His love had been the mines and, though he was a prince of the Ebony Mountains, he worked side by side with the other dwarves. He was renown throughout all the dwarven clans as a craftsman, indeed one of the greatest. His forte was weapons, and his masterful works were some of the most sought-after pieces every trading season.

Roakore came out of the tunnel and into the main chamber of his people; at the opposite end stood two more tunnels—one to the living quarters, and the other to the training chambers. He headed toward the main training room, passing many smaller ones and armories. As he stepped into the main room, pride welled in his heart at the sight of his loyal people.

The room was vast with a domed ceiling. Three of the walls boasted a number of huge fireplaces, and an enormous chandelier held hundreds of torches. The highly polished surfaces of the chamber reflected the many torches and shed a great amount of light throughout the room.

Roakore watched from the shadows as his fighters, mostly young dwarves with only small beards, practiced as hard as ever. These grueling sessions had gone on the last twenty years for fourteen hours a day, and he knew that those before him were the greatest warriors that dwarf history would ever know. Each had a horrible story to tell of the evil day their mountain was taken, and each

harbored within him the rage that drove them to train so intensely each and every day thereafter.

Roakore did not want to disturb their practice but, having been gone at his own request on sentry duty, he knew that his appearance would inevitably bring the training to an abrupt halt. Preparing himself, he walked slowly into the room. Before he had gone more than five steps into the well-lit chamber, a young dwarf stopped sparring and slammed his fist to his chest. He began to announce the arrival of their great leader, but the proclamation was cut short as his opponent's wooden axe caught him in the side of the head and sent him crashing to the floor. Roakore laughed, and as he walked over to the dazed dwarf, the other one took up the cheer instead: "Roakore has returned!"

His words were taken up and echoed throughout the chamber until every dwarf had slammed his chest and bowed low, silently waiting for Roakore to speak. The dazed dwarf made an utterly miserable sound as he tried to focus on his leader. Roakore took him by the arm and helped him to stand. The young dwarf shook his head and slammed his chest, almost knocking himself to the ground.

Knowing that he now had the attention of more than a thousand young fighters, Roakore spoke loudly so all could hear. "What is yer name, boy?"

The young dwarf eyed him through heavy blinks and slightly crossed eyes. "Haldegoz," he answered groggily.

"Well, young Haldegoz, can ye tell me why it be ye lost this fight?"

Haldegoz scrunched up his thick eyebrows and scratched his short beard. "I saw ye, good king—that is—ye, Roakore." He cowered at his near mistake. Every dwarf knew that Roakore had prohibited anyone from calling him king until he stood before his people within the chambers of the Ebony Mountains—upon the throne of his forefathers.

Roakore ignored the slip and instead scowled at the surrounding crowd. "In warfare there ain't no time fer pleasantries, there ain't no time fer formality! In warfare there ain't no rules but one: if ye don't kill yer opponent, he'll kill ye! Haldegoz was defeated because he let his concentration slip, he let down his guard. In the midst o' battle, to lose yer concentration be to lose yer life. Never let down yer guard, never relent, and never take yer eyes from yer enemy!"

He patted the young dwarf on the back and raised his arms. "Now let us see what Haldegoz's opponent has learned!" He took up Haldegoz's wooden axe and eyed the dwarf he had been fighting. "What is yer name, lad?"

The slightly older boy puffed out his chest and proclaimed, "I be Ky'Drock, son o' Ky'Kronn."

Roakore slammed his chest and bowed slightly, purposefully, though he owed the young dwarf no such sign of respect. Ky'Drock beamed as he returned the gesture. It was just what Roakore had wanted. In a flash he was upon the bowing dwarf, striking hard with his wooden axe. Ky'Drock's expression turned from sheer delight to horror as the rightful king of the Ebony Mountains attacked. The lad barely blocked the massive blows as he tried to stay on his feet. Roakore did not relent; he swung low, then high, then straight down from above. To his delight, the young warrior met him blow for blow.

After a while, Ky'Drock found his rhythm and took the offensive. Roakore intentionally weakened his own defenses until it appeared as though he could barely fend off the attack. Ky'Drock gained confidence with every strike. When he finally became too cocky, his master stepped up the fight. As a heavy blow came down from overhead, Roakore stepped aside and let the wooden axe hit the floor. He then quickly brought his own axe over top, pinning it to the ground. With his left fist he gave the young lad—who was still bent over, clutching his axe handle with a look of surprise—a strong backhand to the face. After a few more, Ky'Drock fell to his knees, and Roakore swung his axe at the lad's face. Ky'Drock let go of his weapon and rolled out of the way, before the lad could get up, though, Roakore came out of his spin swinging, and sent him rolling away again. Ky'Drock rolled away three more times as Roakore continued to swing, and then quickly reversed his spin towards his opponent's legs. He kicked Roakore hard in the gut—but the skilled dwarf just spun away, absorbing the force.

No matter, Ky'Drock was on his feet in an instant. He retrieved his weapon, and charged in hard. He swung from overhead and then the side. Both attacks were parried. Next he went for the feet, but his master was too quick. Roakore leapt over the axe and came in hard as Ky'Drock's momentum spun the young dwarf to the side. The mighty dwarf struck him behind the knee, forcing him down onto it, and then spun in the opposite direction. The ensuing blow was so powerful that, even though Ky'Drock blocked it, he went flying onto his back.

Roakore chopped at Ky'Drock's legs, but the energetic dwarf proved agile, indeed, as he somersaulted backward into position—axe ready. Then Roakore came on full force, keeping the lad on his heels. Left, right, left, overhead, right: the onslaught came. Finally, Roakore feinted right and Ky'Drock twirled left. Before the young dwarf knew what happened, he had been struck in the side, and had his legs swept out from under him. Roakore spun again and stopped his wooden axe an inch from Ky'Drock's neck.

“Yer dead.”

The astonished dwarf only stared and gulped. Roakore lent the lad a hand, with a heavy pat on the back, and handed Haldegoz his axe. He addressed the on looking crowd.

“Me good dwarves o’ the Ro’Sar Mountains! Hard ye have all trained these long years. Before me now I see skilled warriors, dedicated fighters: a great tribute to our fallen kin. Let me say that each o’ yer fallen fathers smiles down upon ye this day from the great Mountain o’ the Gods! Long has been our road—and stained in blood it be—but we finally reach the end. A war is coming, one that’ll include all kingdoms o’ Agora! Our part will be one o’ great importance. Not only will we take back what be rightfully ours, but we will rid the world o’ a great evil.”

The chamber erupted in cheers. The deep, booming voices of the thousand dwarves was deafening.

“But be knowin’ this: we must not underestimate our enemy! Fer a trusted source tells me that a queen Draggard now inhabits our lost mountain.” Roakore spat at the mention of the beasts, as did hundreds of his followers. “We may be facing an army o’ over a hundred thousand!”

Roakore watched closely as many hushed conversations broke out. On the faces of his followers he saw surprise, anger, and confusion, but he did not see fear.

“But, me brave warriors, we be not alone! When the time comes, our kin’ll march with us—from Ky’Dren and the Elgar Mountains to the east.” He raised his voice so that his next statement echoed loudly throughout the chamber. “An’ let it be known now: the march o’ the three clans o’ the dwarves will be echoed in song fer all eternity! The great deeds we do in the name o’ our fathers will live on in our sons fer all time. We will reclaim our mountain, we will defeat the Draggard, and we will bleed with wide smiles in the faces o’ our enemy. Victory, glory, our home: will soon be ours!”

The chamber roared. The cheers and the stomping boots of the excited dwarves were so great, they could be felt by Whill and Abram far down the long corridors of Dy’Kore.

There came a knock at Abram’s door, and Ky’Ell entered. “Are ye ready for a tour o’ me great city, then?”

They followed the barrel-chested king through the many halls and chambers of Dy’Kore. After descending a number of stairs they came to the great under-city. Huge furnaces roared on all sides as they walked through. Thousands of

dwarves were hard at work shoveling coal into the large pyres, or wheeling barrels of it from adjoining tunnels. The heat was almost unbearable for Whill, and after only a few minutes his brow dripped with sweat. Steel, iron, gold and silver were melted down to be reshaped by the great smiths of the city. Next to each furnace was at least one work station; hundreds of smiths banged away tirelessly, crafting goblets, jewelry, weapons and armor.

It took almost five minutes to walk the length of the furnace room, and though Whill was amazed at what he had seen, he was relieved to be out of the grueling heat. The next stop was an entrance to the mines. The areas close to the main under-city had been milked dry centuries before, so they had to follow Ky'Ell for almost half an hour, taking many turns in the maze of tunnels, before finally coming to the current mines. He handed both men a lantern and Whill gasped aloud as they entered a rich tunnel. The walls on both sides gleamed and shimmered as the light shone on the many veins of gold within the rock.

“This tunnel were cut not a month ago,” the king boasted. “The gold veins go on into the stone fer thirty feet, as far as we can yet see. The devils tried to hide it away forever, they did, but we found it. We always do, fer the glory o’ our gods.”

Whill knew that, by “devils”, the king was referring to the dragons. It was said by dwarf religion that, in the beginning, there were two kinds of gods. The Dwarnevely—the good gods—had created the beauty of the world: gold, silver, diamonds, and jewels. The Dargandae—the dragons—were insanely jealous, for until then, they themselves had been the most magnificent beings in all the world. A great war ensued. The dragons, unable to destroy the beauty of the Dwarnevely works, hid the treasures instead. Deep in the earth and mountains they buried it, never again to be seen. And so the dwarves had been created—to retrieve and spread again the great beauty of the Dwarnevely’s creations throughout the world.

When Whill had first heard the many stories of the dwarves from Abram, he had been more than skeptical and thought their beliefs rather silly; but after what he had experienced in the last few weeks, he wasn’t sure what he believed anymore.

After returning from the mines and passing once again through the hot furnace chamber, the king led Whill and Abram above the under-city to the Chamber of Treasures. This chamber, aptly named, was the largest and most breathtaking Whill had yet seen. Here were some of the most beautiful artifacts the dwarves had ever crafted. The room was brightly lit with golden chandeliers and hundreds of torches, positioned in such a way that not a shadow could be seen in the vast room. The walls, floor, and ceiling aided in the effect, for they

were covered with diamond dust. Millions of sparkles caught Whill's eye from every direction as Ky'Ell led them deeper into the magnificent chamber. The crowns of each of the many kings were set upon marvelous pillars, in order from Ky'Dren down, along the right side of the room. Whill could hardly believe that he was looking upon the actual crowns worn by so many ancient dwarven kings, and he realized he was one of few humans to lay eyes on these priceless treasures.

To the left of the crowns were various other treasures, many crafted by a king or his sons, or by one of the many famous smiths of Ky'Dren. Great axes and hatchets, war hammers, and maces of old stood proudly on display, along with magnificent suits of armor adorned in jewels and plated in silver and gold. The three spent more than an hour within the Chamber of Treasures. The king told the many tales that went along with each item, and Whill looked on in amazement all the while.

Next the king brought them to one of the main living quarters of the dwarves, a twenty-story cylindrical shaft more than five hundred feet wide. Whill stood in awe as he looked over the rail from the top story down onto the many balconies. Each level was identical with hundreds of doors all spaced the same distance apart, and a torch burning at every one. The only difference between each door was the family name, which was set in stone and decorated to the inhabitant's liking. The living quarters boasted four equally distanced, large pulley machines, with four stout dwarves manning each. Up and down they went, carrying up to ten passengers within a circular cage. Though there were stairs as well, the machines made it much easier for the more than fifty thousand dwarves within these quarters to come and go.

The king showed Abram and Whill many more wondrous sights that day, and made a point of repeating that it would take years to see all of the dwellings and tunnels of the mountain; Dy'Kore, though large, was but a small piece of the Ky'Dren kingdom, which stretched more than seven hundred miles under the Ky'Dren Pass and north to the sea.

When they returned to the king's chambers, Ky'Ell rubbed his stout belly and informed them with a grin that it was dinnertime.

To Whill's dismay, Roakore did not join them this time, but he was both delighted and greatly impressed when he walked into the dining room once again and discovered more than a hundred dwarves—men, women, and children alike—seated at the massive table. This, Abram quietly told him as they sat down, was the tradition of the king's banquet. Every other night the king would dine with his people, regardless of rank or position. Invitations were sent out months

in advance, and dwarves would come eagerly from the farthest reaches of the mountain, some traveling for weeks, to dine with their king.

Whill was truly impressed. His respect for Ky'Ell had been great from the beginning, but now it was profound. Upon the face of every dwarf seated at the massive table was a bright smile, and each regarded their king with utter reverence.

Before the food, came ale in large mugs. White froth dripped down the sides of the overfilled and heavily adorned goblets. Barrels had been set along the table every five feet, each tapped and ready, to better accommodate the ale-loving lot. The king took his cup and stood, and every dwarf in attendance followed in his lead.

“Let me begin by commending each and every one o’ ye, me dear dwarves. May yer beards grow to the floor, and may yer families prosper. May each and every one o’ ye, through ye many great deeds—whether large or small—find yer way into the Mountain o’ the Gods.”

The dwarves responded with a hardy “who-waaahh” and chugged their beers. Whill and Abram followed suit, guzzling frantically to keep up with the veteran king. After the mugs were emptied, and at Ky'Ell's lead, they filled them once again.

“Also, to me left be two visitors from the outside, great warriors an’ great men indeed—Draggard slayers they be! Our friends an’ allies: Abram, an’ Whill o’ Agora!”

Again the dining hall erupted into many cheers, which were soon muffled as the dwarves chugged down their ale.

With introductions complete, the king refilled his mug again and sat down at the head of the great table. On cue, Fior nodded to the waiting servers, and the food came out by the wheel-barrels—literally. Whill had never seen so much food and, indeed, did not know what some of it was. It did not take him long to surmise that the dwarves favored meat—and lots of it—for the only vegetables he could see were potatoes. Nevertheless the food was excellent, nothing less than what one would expect from the table of the king.

Such feasts were commonplace among the dwarves, whose wealth had no rivals. Aside from the constant hard work—which they reveled in—every last dwarf of Ky'Dren lived a lavish and comfortable life. Ky'Dren was the greatest Kingdom of all the dwarf mountains. The precious metals, weapons, jewelry, gold, and other such wares that they produced, were traded throughout Agora; in return, the dwarves received all the food, supplies, and ale they would ever need.

The feast went on for more than two hours, and by that time Whill was feeling the effects of the dark dwarf ale; he was so full he thought he might

burst. The dwarves spoke openly with the king, telling stories and sharing jokes, and simply enjoyed their once a year dinner with the great dwarf. Whill looked around in wonderment at the joy around him—the hearty laughter of the king, the joyous smiles of the common folk. He made a mental note to host similar banquets when he himself became king.

When he became king... the thought brought a solemn expression to the young man's face. How could he be king? Uthen-Arden was the largest Kingdom in all of Agora, with hundreds of thousands of citizens. How could he rule such a powerful empire?

Whill was not the sort to think little of himself; on the contrary, he knew he was well educated, could speak every language of the peoples of Agora, and was indeed a great fighter. But a voice within said that this task was beyond him—that he would fail—and many would suffer his folly. Perhaps it was the pressure of sudden responsibility, or perhaps it was the ale, but Whill had a keen feeling that his legacy would be one of tragedy and failure. He indeed feared King Addakon; could he defeat such a foe? Pondering this, he realized when he finally did look upon Addakon, he would be in essence looking upon the image of his own father. Whill's first encounter with Addakon would give him a glimpse of his lost father. In those first moments of revelation—in the heat of the inevitable battle—would he lift his sword for the kill? Could he strike the image of his father down?

After four hours of hard training with his men, Roakore commanded all to stop. This had been one of the most grueling sessions to date, and every dwarf in the training room was winded and soaked with sweat. Each had obtained more than a few bruises, and all were utterly spent. They had sparred nonstop for ten hours straight, and how proud Roakore was. He looked upon his dwarves now with a great smile—the greatest warriors his race had ever known—and imagined their glory when the mountain was finally taken back.

“Ye have all done well, ye have all done me proud!” Roakore cried, and then fought back the swelling in his throat and the moisture in his eyes as he took in the sight before him. Here stood one thousand loyal dwarves. Most were barely considered adults, but all felt the loss of their prided mountain. Many of these lads before him would die in the reclaiming of it—perhaps all—but none cared. For the glory of their king, and the vengeance of their kin, each and every warrior before him would walk to the ends of the earth and fight an army of demons. Roakore knew then, as he looked into the eager eyes of his followers,

that no force in the world would stop them in their time of glory. Dragon or Draggard be damned, the mountain would be theirs once again!

“Our time o’ glory soon approaches! Soon we will march to our homeland; soon we’ll again see the great peak o’ Drenzedell; soon will be our hour o’ vengeance!”

The room once again erupted in cheers. *Soon, Father*, he said to himself. *Soon will be the hour.*

He left the training room and made his way to his family’s hall. He did, after all, have twenty-seven wives waiting for him, all hoping for a chance to aid the cause with another child.

After the fine ale and shared stories, everyone filed out of the dining room and down several winding corridors. It had come to Whill’s attention that it was a holy day among the dwarves—the day in which Dy’Kore himself had claimed the great mountain. The day of promise was celebrated every year.

Feeling very warm inside, and unable to hide his ale-induced grin, he ambled along with a group of very excited dwarves. All of them had welcomed Whill and Abram warmly, uncharacteristic of their gruff reputation. No doubt it was due to the spreading story of the fight with the Draggard two nights previous.

With every step Whill could hear the growing sound of many drums—hundreds it seemed—beating in unison in the chamber ahead. Soon the group entered a massive natural cavern much unlike the halls and tunnels of the rest of the city. Here no walls had been smoothly chiseled, no level ceiling had been smoothed out; indeed, the only alteration to the immense cavern was the carvings on the many walls, and the massive stalactites and stalagmites.

Abram and Whill stood side by side in mutual awe at the sight of the tens of thousands of dwarves already within the cavern. Before Whill could comment, the drumming abruptly stopped, and all attention fell upon the western wall of the cavern. Fior stood high upon a ledge where all in attendance had a clear view. He wore red flowing robes with gold trim, and in his left hand was a staff adorned with enough jewels to see ten men through fifty years of comfortable life. As the final echo of the drums was lost in the surrounding stone, and the murmurs died away, Fior spoke in Dwarvish.

“Long ago, on the vast green surface world, a great dwarf by the name o’ Ky’Dren was born.”

He paused for effect as his deep melodic voice echoed throughout the cavern. Near him stood four dwarf children, still as stone and looking wide-eyed up at

the storyteller. They had of course heard this tale a hundred times, but only rarely did they have the pleasure of hearing it from the mouth of the gifted Fior.

“Before the time o’ Ky’Dren, our people lived on the surface, on the never ending rolling fields o’ green we called home. We were aimless creatures, broken into many tribes; many o’ us fought amongst ourselves as the humans still do. Always were we at war, and ever were we threatened by the horrible dragons. But our gods sent us a prophet, a messiah—indeed, the greatest dwarf that ever lived!”

Fior paused as the crowd bellowed “Ky’Dren” in unison.

“The gods spoke to Ky’Dren, and bestowed upon him the ability to move stone with only a thought. ‘Go to the mountains,’ the gods told him, ‘for within them lies the most beautiful o’ our creations, buried by the jealous and evil gods. Defeat the dragons, find and free our riches, and forever shall ye live within the Mountain o’ the Gods.’”

He paused once again as a slow beat was taken up by the many drummers. “And so Ky’Dren and his many followers went to the great mountain range now named after him, and there carved out what would become the first halls of our ancient city.”

Fior went on for more than an hour, recounting the many battles those ancient dwarves had faced, and the grandest of all stories, how Ky’Dren had single-handedly killed five dragons—no small feat, even for a small army. Throughout the entire gathering Whill watched and listened keenly. All about him he saw a proud and noble people, listening intently to the stories of long-gone kings and heroes. History was the backbone of the dwarf culture, and their faith was stronger than that of any Whill had ever known. The peace within the eyes of those he looked upon—those who dedicated their lives to the greater good—gave Whill a feeling of great longing for a faith so strong, so resolute.

Whill followed no deity, but he was a spiritual man. Abram, those many years ago, had not presented Whill with any one religion, but had shown him many, and told him it was for him to decide what he believed. He came to see that all were relatively alike: promising salvation for blind faith, and damnation to nonbelievers. He could not follow blindly; he was a student of the world: always striving to learn more. With religion, one had to believe something to be true without proof, something Whill could not do—though he sometimes wished that he could. He had therefore come to the conclusion that whichever god or gods were real, they would judge him by his deeds and not his blind faith; they would see him as a good man with good intentions. He hoped that by following his heart and doing always what he saw to be right, he would find his salvation.

Roakore had learned from Fior that Whill wished to set out first thing in the morning. He said his farewells to his many wives and children, and checked over the contents of his large pack. Seeing that all his needed provisions were included, he gathered his many weapons. He brought his four hatchets and his great axe—and also a new weapon he had himself invented but not yet tried. He called it the Stone Bird. To anybody but one with the powers to move stone, it would have seemed cumbersome. The weapon consisted of two smooth round rocks, twenty pounds each and connected by two thick, steel chains, which in turn connected to a short metal handle. He gazed upon that handle with a smile. He had been working on this weapon for nearly a year and could not wait to put it to use on a Draggard skull. The handle was covered in runes, listing the names of the many dwarf gods, and the names of his father and fallen brothers. Set at the bottom of the shaft was a single diamond encircled by smaller, dark red gems.

Roakore made his way to the main gate and was greeted by Fior, Whill and Abram, and a great many dwarves. After many farewells, the three made their way through the long and winding tunnels that would take them to the surface.

“The king has granted usage o’ the railway,” Roakore told Whill and Abram, who had inquired why they had veered from the tunnel by which they had previously entered the city.

Soon, they entered a large cylindrical room with a wide stairway spiraling up along wall—so high that Whill could not see the top. “These stairs spiral up fer a thousand feet. It be a hell o’ a hike.” Roakore laughed at the frowning men. “Cheer up, lads! Usin’ the rail will save us hours an’ get us out o’ the mountain quicker.”

With that he began ascending the stairs two at a time. After less than an hour, and breathing heavily, the three companions finally came to the end of the giant stair. It ended in a small room, and before them was a large, heavily cushioned metal cart—larger than those used to haul coal and metals, but very similar otherwise. It sat upon a thin metal track that Roakore referred to as the rail. The rail led through a large hole in the wall and into the dark.

Whill eyed the contraption with worry. Without a word Roakore hopped over the side of the cart and sat down, then bid them to do the same.

“Trust me,” said Roakore. “These railways are sure an’ safe. We only have a few accidents a year.” He laughed again. “Whatever ye do, don’t put yer arms

out... and hold on fer dear life.”

He pushed down on the single lever next to the cart, disengaging the blocking mechanism, and then disengaged the brake lever. They began to roll very slowly, literally at a crawl, for many moments. Whill frowned at Abram, who only shrugged. “Roakore,” he said, “are you sure this will be fas—”

The words in his mouth were replaced by his stomach as the cart suddenly shot down at such an angle that it felt more like they were falling. Roakore hooted and laughed maniacally, as did Abram, but Whill could only scream and hold on as the cart descended at breakneck speed down the pitch-black tunnel. Finally the track leveled out almost flat, and they came to an area lit every fifty feet with torches. But because of their speed, the torches passed like fence posts to a sprinting horse.

Whill had found his voice now, and hooted and hollered with the other two. The track led relatively straight, with only small changes in course. Soon they had traveled the many miles, and now the track leveled out altogether. Directly ahead Whill could see the end of the track and the stone wall beyond. He glanced nervously at Abram.

“Yer thinkin’ mayhap it’s time to slow down, eh?” Roakore said, and then pulled back hard on the brake. Sparks flew from under the cart, and the brakes gave an ear-splitting shriek in protest. They began to slow somewhat, but then to Whill’s horror, Roakore flew backwards, braking lever in hand. The brakes let up as they careened towards the end of the tunnel at high speed.

“Not to worry!” Roakore said, somewhat unconvincingly. “There is a backup.”

Whill saw what the dwarf meant, and groaned as he braced himself. Water splashed high as the track suddenly dipped low into a long shallow pool. Although it slowed the cart considerably, they did not stop completely, and all three screamed as it slammed into the barrier at the end of the track. End over end they flew through the air, slamming hard into the wall thirty feet away.

They lay at the base of the wall for a long moment, Whill and Abram groaning. Whill fought his dizziness and stood over the dwarf, who was rolling around in a fit of laughter.

“I take back what I said before, Roakore,” Whill said. “You *are* insane!”

Chapter 16

Smoke and Wings

Whill, Abram, and Roakore walked out into the early morning sun. They were a few miles south of where they had entered the mountain, and closer to the shore. The railway had taken them to the base of the great mountain range, and from the small cave they exited, they could see the dense forest before them.

Whill led the way at a good pace. Having spent so many years with one as knowledgeable as Abram, he could easily determine the direction they must go to get to Sherna. After more than an hour of hiking, Roakore halted them and sat on a rock.

“If the fear o’ Draggard on our tails causes ye to walk so fast, then consider that they would catch us anyway, an’ it would be better not to be exhausted if they do!” He pulled a piece of dried meat from his pack and ripped off a large chunk with his teeth.

Whill winked at Abram. “Good dwarf, I apologize if I set a pace too fast and grueling for you. How long do you wish to rest?”

Roakore’s eyes widened in rage and he began to stand, but then noticed the smirk upon Abram’s face. Seeing the teasing for what it was, he sat back once more and bit off another large piece of the meat. “Don’t ye go being a dragon’s arse, lad, I just don’t see the point in such haste. The meetin’ in Kell-Torey ain’t fer two weeks, an’ ’twill take us no more than ten days to get there.”

Abram regarded him, his smirk gone. “We believe that a friend of ours may be in danger—Tarren, the boy we told you of. If the Draggard followed us from Sherna, then we think it possible they may have caused more than a little trouble in the town.”

Roakore nodded as he stood, still chewing the meat. “Why didn’t ye say so?”

With that he took up the lead. The hardy dwarf surpassed their earlier pace, and indeed, the three were now running through the forest. After no more than fifteen minutes, Roakore abruptly stopped and turned to Whill with a strange scowl.

“How’s it that ye can run so, with the wound ye received to yer leg just two nights ago?”

Whill had forgotten about the wound almost completely after hearing the story of his parents. He had forgotten to act as if he still carried the wound, as Abram had warned him to.

His mind raced for an answer, but Roakore’s gruff gaze told him that lies were useless. “The wound wasn’t as bad as it seemed,” he said with a shrug, and began to walk past the dwarf.

Roakore grabbed him by the arm. “Let me see it.”

Abram intervened. “Can the inspection of Whill’s wound not wait until we reach Sherna? If Tarren truly is in danger, our pause may be detrimental.”

Roakore did not let go. “No, it cannot wait. If I’m to trust the two o’ ye on this long journey afore us, then I need an answer now—an answer that suits me!”

Whill pulled free and pulled up his pant leg, showing the area of his thigh where the wound had been.

Roakore’s eyes widened and he gripped his axe all the tighter. “I should’ve known when ye made the argument about the elves with King Ky’Ell. Yer in league with ’em, in league with the Draggard! Well, Roakore will not be so easily fooled. Come on then, ye assassins, let’s have a row!”

Whill only sighed and rolled his eyes to the sky. Abram, on the other hand, held out his hands in truce. “Roakore, think about what you are saying. Whill’s parents were murdered by the Draggard. What is this lunacy that you speak?”

Roakore spat stubbornly. “Then let’s have the truth from ye! A gash that deep from a Draggard tail don’t heal in a day. Its elf magic, I’m sure. What lie do ye have fer that one, eh?”

Whill looked at Abram. “We don’t have time for this.” He drew his father’s sword. Roakore made a defensive stance and scowled. “This is the sword of my father, forged for him by the elves. My family has a unique relationship with the elven people. And through that relationship we have obtained some of the elven powers. And though I have never even met an elf, I have the power to heal. That is the truth. Take it or leave it. And if you would judge me so for such powers, then so be that as well. You see the elves as enemies though you know not one; your kind curses the Elves of the Sun for what the Dark elves created. And that, my fierce friend, is simply stupid!”

They stared at each other for many long moments. Abram did not move either, looking from one to the other.

“We will see if what ye say o’ the elves is true, young Whill,” Roakore said at last. “But know this, it’d not be wise to ever lie to me again.” And cursing

under his breath he ran off again.

Whill and Abram shared a look and raced after him.

They ran on for several hours, not saying a word. To their left the distant sounds of the ocean could be heard. It was nearing noon, and Abram decided it was time for a break. Neither Whill nor Roakore argued the point.

They rested at the edge of a small clearing. Abram sat back against a thick oak tree and lit his long pipe, while Roakore found a suitable rock to sit on. Whill took a long and needed swig from his water skin, and then poured the cool water over his head. Though it was still spring and the temperature was mild, the run had made him quite hot.

He took a moment to look over the magnificent blade that had been his father's. It was much different from his own, which was longer and much heavier. His father's blade was thin and curved, and very light—though none of those attributes made it any less of a weapon. On the contrary, the blade was perfectly balanced with a razor-sharp blade, a testament to the elves' prowess as weapon-makers.

As he looked at the way the sun shone off the powerful blade and the many small diamonds about the guard, his gaze fell to his mother's ring. He felt a strange bond with both—a connection he could not quite place—and they seemed to help fill a long-empty part of his heart.

Whill was roused from his deep thoughts as Roakore walked over and sat next to him. "So that's the sword o' yer father, eh?"

Whill noted that Roakore was trying to sound impartial. "Its name is Sinomara, named after my father, Aramonis. The elves name their swords to mirror themselves out of the belief that the sword and warrior should be as one to find true harmony."

Roakore studied the blade for a moment with a raised eyebrow. "I admit, the craftsmanship be flawless...though it looks a bit too pretty to be o' any real use."

Whill only grinned, amused by the stubborn dwarf's realization and attempted cover-up of the fact that he had in essence just complimented the elves.

Just then a shadow swept past as something flew overhead. Whill realized that it had been too large for a bird, but too small for a dragon. He looked up, as did Roakore, but there was nothing but the sun high above. Abram was already on his feet and moving out into the meadow as Whill and Roakore followed.

"What's it, then?" asked Roakore as the two came up next to Abram.

Abram only stared north, above the trees at the edge of the meadow. He scanned the tree line for many moments before his eyes quickened. "There." He pointed.

Both Roakore and Whill squinted as they tried to make out the large creature flying low some four hundred yards away. Abram was already gently pushing them back when Whill realized what it was.

"A Draquon? It can't be."

Roakore spat on the ground and patted Whill on the back. "Ye really know how to make enemies now, don't ye?"

The Draquon were a less common, winged version of the Draggard. They were taller, at nearly twelve feet, and had longer tails as well. They closely resembled their dragon relatives, with thick gnarled horns on their head, and long pointed spikes running the length of their back.

The three companions ducked low as the Draquon began to cross the meadow, moving swiftly in their direction. Abram took up his bow and strung an arrow, and Whill followed suit.

"A scout, no doubt," said Whill. Abram nodded in agreement.

Roakore began a low chant then, and started spinning his stone bird.

Abram put his hand upon Roakore's shoulder, gesturing for the dwarf to wait. "It has not yet spotted us!" he said in a hushed whisper.

Roakore shrugged Abram's hand away. "Why wait till it spots us? The damned thing'll be long gone before the two o' ye get off a shot."

Whill winced at Roakore's loud voice. It was as if he meant to give away their position.

"It may not see us," Abram pressed.

Roakore's face twisted into a maniacal grin. "Oh, it'll see us, alright, and I'll not be letting a beast such as that fly free regardless." With that he pushed past the protesting Abram and ran out into the field, waving his arms and yelling.

"Here we are, ye stupid, dragon-spawned, demon-lovin' beast! Come an' taste me blade!"

Abram only rolled his eyes and, with a great sigh, sprang from the woods, bow ready. Their suspicions that this beast was only a scout were proven right when the Draquon reared and turned swiftly in the opposite direction. Whill and Abram let off a shot each but didn't even come close as the beast rose into the air and flew away from them.

Just as Abram was about to chastise Roakore for being so stupid, the dwarf let out a guttural scream and swung the two-stoned weapon in wide arches, gaining more and more momentum as he chanted loudly. Finally he let loose the weapon in the Draquon's direction. Abram and Whill watched in amazement as

the spinning stones ascended higher when they should have fallen, and turned towards the flying beast when they should have gone straight.

The stones gained speed with the help of Roakore's innate abilities to manipulate rock. The weapon came in hard on the beast, and hit with such force that the creature flipped four times in midair before descending to the ground in a heap of flailing wings. It landed less than thirty feet from Whill and Abram, who came running with bows ready.

The Draquon rose to its feet with a roar. One wing was broken but, though it could not fly, it could still run with great speed. Whill and Abram took up a shooting stance and let loose their arrows. The beast snarled defiantly as the arrows deflected harmlessly off its scaly armor.

Roakore was still standing in the same spot he had been, arms extended, chanting. The Draquon charged on all fours, baring its razor-sharp teeth, meaning to devour the lone dwarf. Suddenly Roakore's stone bird came whirling across the meadow. To Whill and Abram it was but a blur as it slammed into the Draquon's chest and sent the beast flying back ten feet.

Instantly Whill and Abram were upon it, blades drawn. Abram went straight for the eyes as Whill hacked and chopped, doing minimal damage to the monster's armor. Suddenly the dazed beast was on its feet again, and clearly angry. Whill and Abram took a defensive crouch as Roakore barreled in from behind with his axe, screaming to the dwarf god of war. The beast turned to face him and brought its long tail around in a great sweep, but the dwarf hopped over it without missing a beat. At that instant, he appeared more ferocious than the Draquon itself.

Jumping again as the tail came in for a second pass, he flew straight at the monster with his axe raised over his head. The Draquon caught Roakore in its massive claws jerking him to a stop and increasing the momentum of the dwarf's great axe. It came down fast, even as the monster realized its folly, but too late. With a primal scream, Roakore buried the axe into the Draquon's head. The creature instantly fell in a dead heap, bringing Roakore along for the ride. Trapped beneath it momentarily, the dwarf spat and cursed, kicked and thrashed, trying to get out from under the massive corpse.

Whill and Abram quickly helped free the dwarf. He emerged unscathed and, with a great tug, freed his axe. Laughing all the while, he wiped the blood from his blade with his sleeve.

"Ha! Thought he could get away didn't he, stupid beast. Ye see me stones take him right outta the air?"

"A great weapon indeed," Abram concurred.

Whill only nodded, his gaze wandering to the west.

“What are ye thinkin’, lad?”

“There, over the trees.” Whill pointed across the meadow.

Abram and Roakore both squinted as they looked to the west. Abram noticed it first.

“Smoke rises in the distance.”

Roakore peered harder at the spot. “That’s the direction the Draquon was headed when he spotted us.”

Whill nodded. “The beast was headed for Sherna.”

They grabbed their packs and started west at a frantic pace. As the hours passed and they neared Sherna, the smoke could be seen much more clearly. They were at least five miles from the town, and at a lower elevation, but the smoke was easily visible. It was thick and black, and even from this distance, Whill could tell that a great many large fires had caused it.

Rhunis stood at the helm of the warship *Thunder* as it made its way steadily eastward. His face was stern, brow bent, and his scowl was only intensified by the burn scar that covered a large portion of his face. He had been sent by King Mathus to find and aid Whill and Abram. Mathus had learned that, upon the pair’s hasty leave from Fendale, they had been tailed by none other than Captain Cirrosa. Rhunis had come across the wreckage of the *Black Dragon* three days after Whill and Abram’s departure and, to his amazement, found it utterly destroyed. He knew well Abram’s prowess as a fighter, and he had experienced Whill’s firsthand, but the idea of the two of them taking down the *Dragon* with only a fishing vessel made no sense; Cirrosa had a crew of more than fifty, and the *Dragon* was a warship. They’d had help in the fight, no doubt, but Rhunis could think of no logical explanation. If one of the many Eldalonian warships had helped in the battle, they would have taken the wreckage to port and been treated like heroes for such a kill. No, it hadn’t been the Eldalon navy, but if not them, then who?—or what?

The king had known Whill and Abram’s destination—a small fishing town on the southeastern coast of Eldalon, named Sherna. That was now the warship *Thunder*’s destination. Soon Rhunis would catch up to Whill and Abram, and find his answers. From there he was to bring them to Kell-Torey, where they were to meet with the king personally.

Rhunis was jolted from his ruminations by the lookout, who yelled down from the crow’s nest:

“Smoke ahead, smoke ahead!”

Rhunis looked eastward and saw it also. They were still five miles from Sherna.

The fires were visible through the trees as Whill, Abram, and Roakore sped through the woods. They had taken a route that would bring them out close to the beach, where they could get a good view of the town. As they reached the edge of the forest they could hear the unmistakable sounds of battle: metal striking metal, screams of both women and men, and the growls and snarls of Draggard.

They reached the edge of the forest, and what they saw took Whill's breath away. Almost the entire town was burning, as was the navy vessel which had been docked when they arrived days before. A few hundred feet from shore loomed a great black ship Whill did not recognize. He watched in horror as some Draggard hacked away at an obviously dead man with glee, taking legs and arms and tearing huge chunks of meat from the bone. It was a scene from a nightmare brought to life in broad daylight. These were beasts of the dark, monsters of the night; to see them under the light of the sun sent a chill up Whill's spine.

A small band of villagers and Eldalonian soldiers had taken up defensive positions around the town hall, which—being made entirely of stone—was not on fire. They were outnumbered four to one but held fast their position in front of the large doors. Around them the Draggard stalked, toying with them, waiting and laughing. These monsters were known for their great cruelty; they would drag out a siege such as this for hours, basking in the horror of their victims.

Above the town hall, twelve Draquon circled like a pack of vultures. Whill watched horrified as one descended and plucked a man from the ranks. It soared into the air once again, and the rest of the Draquon were upon the prey in an instant, tearing him to pieces and dropping them on the men below.

Roakore had seen enough. He grabbed his stone bird and his great axe, and ran out from the trees before Abram could stop him.

“So much for a plan of attack,” Abram said as he rushed out after the dwarf.

Whill unsheathed both his swords and joined his friends in their apparent suicide run. The knowledge that these monsters had killed his parents, and now likely had killed Tarren too, filled him with primal rage. He caught up to Abram as Roakore broke into a battle cry that caught the attention of the nearby Draggard.

The beach was now directly behind them as they charged up the grassy slope toward the town hall, and a host of Draggard rushed to intercept. Roakore let fly his stone bird, which sped to the nearest Draggard in a blur. The beast never knew what hit it as its head was taken clean off its shoulders by the strong chain that connected the stones. The weapon did not slow. At Roakore's silent

command, it turned left and slammed into another Draggard's knees, the heavy stones of the bird shattering both.

Four of the others turned and bore down on Roakore, who immediately charged right at them, and Whill and Abram rushed to catch up. At twenty feet behind, however, they could only watch as the first Draggard engaged Roakore—or rather, tasted his axe.

The sturdy dwarf easily knocked aside another Draggard's spear and spun quickly to sink his axe deep into the monster's side, nearly chopping it in half. He pulled his axe free and spun the opposite way, connecting with another Draggard's head. Through it all he never slowed; Even as two Draggard came at him with axes, he met them with great force, barreling into both simultaneously as they raised their axes. They fell backwards as he charged on and left them for Whill and Abram.

Whill came down hard on the one to the left as it scrambled to get up. He stabbed through the beast's back with both swords as Abram similarly dispatched the other—and they were off again, following the mighty dwarf warrior.

Rhunis spotted the black Draggard ship anchored near Sherna's port, and his greatest fears were realized. His ship's captain instructed the crew to ready the twenty catapults although the other ship had not fired upon them, and appeared to be deserted. Rhunis could see that the town was ablaze, and small battles were playing out within and along the beach. The people needed help. He advised the captain to keep the catapults at the ready, and told his men to make for the town with all haste.

Whill and Abram caught up to Roakore as he paused to summon his stone bird once again. Though they had not yet caught the attention of the main force, many Draggard had taken notice and were coming their way. Whill engaged one as it barreled in, brandishing a nasty-looking spear. The beast stabbed for Whill's belly, but he was too quick; he knocked the spear harmlessly aside with his old sword and, with his father's, stabbed the beast through the neck. He spun to meet the next monster, ducking a spear meant for his head, and sliced into its shin. As he twisted he brought Sinomara around and finished the beast off.

Abram pulled his sword from a dead Draggard and engaged another as Roakore's stone bird whirled past. The dwarf taunted three approaching

Draggard as they bore down on them, when suddenly his stone bird came across low and fast, sweeping the monsters' legs out from under them. The three finished them off quickly.

Roakore then guided the stone bird into another Draggard thirty feet away, and the creature went down with a thud, its head thoroughly crushed. A spear flew by, barely missing Whill, followed by another and another. The three warriors found themselves under a barrage as the Draggard that had witnessed their lethal abilities took a more practical approach.

"There are too many!" Abram yelled as he deflected another spear.

"Bah! We got 'em right where we want 'em!" roared Roakore as he ducked yet another.

They were now being attacked by more than a dozen Draggard.

"We must regroup!" cried Whill as one of the braver beasts jumped at the three, its spear leading the way. Abram blocked the spear and Roakore met the beast as it landed, greeting it with an axe to the groin. Whill quickly chopped its head off.

The rest of the Draggard now slowly advanced, having thrown all their spears. The town hall was still more than two hundred yards away, and hundreds of Draggard beyond these still stood in the way. The warriors were being slowly pushed back steadily, doing all they could do to hold off the spear-throwers. They had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Every building around them was ablaze, and the woods held no options. The attacking Draggard had signaled to their kin, and now dozens of the monsters came rushing at the three, including several flying Draquon.

"We need a plan!" Whill shouted, frantically deflecting the steady assault of spears.

"Block me fer a sec, boys!" Roakore yelled. It sounded to Whill as if the dwarf either had a good idea brewing, or he was indeed crazy. Nonetheless, Whill and Abram stepped closer to Roakore's sides as he closed his eyes and began to chant so fast that Whill could hardly decipher the words. The Draggard pressed on, more than twenty now. Some threw spears, others jabbed with gleeful laughter. Whill and Abram were reaching the end of their abilities. Death crouched ever closer with each passing second.

Suddenly Roakore's stone bird whirled before them, spinning in midair right before the chanting dwarf. Around and around it went in a blur of motion. Roakore moved his right hand in circles before him, tight circles at first but steadily widening the arch. In contrast the stone bird began to spin around and around in wider circles. Faster and faster Roakore's hand moved, and faster did

the weapon spin, until Whill and Abram no longer needed to block any missiles, for none could get through the spinning shield that the flying bird had become.

Whill and Abram looked at each other wide-eyed as Roakore continued his chant. Soon the Draggard gave up on the spears and took a more straightforward approach. Two of the beasts leapt into the path of the weapon as it buzzed before the three warriors. With great howls they came, and with great screeches they were chopped to pieces, their bodies unrecognizable as they landed in bloody pieces all around the ground.

The other Draggard backed away in horror and awe. Even Whill and Abram flinched and gaped at the spectacle.

“I can’t hold it much longer!” Roakore warned as he staggered back, continuing his frantic chant.

“Be ready to rush ’em, Whill!” cried Abram.

Whill, sensing that this indeed was the end, looked at Abram and raised his two swords. “It has been an honor, Abram.”

Abram shook his head, bringing up his own sword with fire in his watering eyes. “And it will be an honor to fight beside you for years to come!”

Whill had to grin. Abram *would* insist on being optimistic, even in the face of obvious defeat.

Roakore let out a final frantic chant and with a heavy sigh fell to the sand. The Draggard had pushed them all the way back to the beach.

Rhunis and his two hundred soldiers rowed frantically towards the beach. As they neared the dock he could finally make out the three fighters. They were being driven towards the water by a host of seething Draggard. At once Rhunis recognized Abram and Whill, though not the third fighter, a dwarf.

“Whill and Abram need our swords, men! Shall we stain them with Draggard blood?”

Every man cheered as the ships reached the beach and the soldiers scrambled to reach the three outnumbered warriors.

Roakore and his stone bird collapsed with a thud. Whill and Abram now faced more than twenty bloodthirsty Draggard. But the monsters did not advance. Instead they backed off a step as one, doubt seeming to suddenly haunt their grotesque features. Then, in the silence after Roakore and his weapon fell, Whill

heard it. From the beach behind them came their salvation in the form of hundreds of screaming Eldalonian soldiers, led by Rhunis the Dragonslayer.

As the Draggard backed up and finally broke into an all-out run, Abram and Whill joined in the charge. Swords held high they grinned at each other, and together they overtook and took down the closest beast.

The soldiers poured onto the beach and were soon killing and trampling the fleeing monsters. On they charged full-tilt towards the town hall, where the remaining Draggard and a dozen Draquon waited. But behind those Draggard stood fifty men who, at the sight of the oncoming rush of Eldalon soldiers, made a charge of their own. Soon the Draggard, found themselves in the middle of two fierce forces: the villagers of Sherna, who fought to protect their women and children with every ounce of their being; and the soldiers of Eldalon, who had sworn above all else to fight to the death against all enemies of Eldalon.

The Draggard had nowhere left to go. They were cornered, and like any cornered beast, they fought. Swords sliced and spears stabbed, and the blood of both men and Draggard alike fell to the dirt. Whill had never experienced anything like it in his life. He no longer depended on his mind to guide him but functioned on instinct and reflex alone, blocking, ducking, and killing all that stood before him. He knew no fear, only rage, and through his body that rage was transferred to his dual swords and into any unlucky beast that found his blades.

Soon Whill found himself fighting alongside Abram and Rhunis. More than 160 Draggard awaited them, hissing and growling, their spears red with human blood. But the men did not relent, did not back down. All around them was pure chaos. The Draggard fought viciously, spears, tails, and teeth. They stabbed, chopped, and bit their opponents; to the right of Whill a man was impaled and raised high, only to be taken swiftly by a Draquon. The men were hard pressed against the vicious monsters but they did not waver, did not relent.

The fighting went on for what seemed to Whill an eternity. To the left of him Abram fought valiantly, as did Rhunis to his right. Together they plowed through the Draggard forces. Abram took a spear to the shoulder, but if he felt any pain it did not show, for rather than crying out in pain he chopped hard at the attacker, cutting deep into its neck.

Whill had abandoned his own sword and now had only his father's. Years of pain and sorrow flowed through him and into the sword he now held, the sword that had cut him from his mother's womb, Sinomara, the sword that had saved his life once before. He thought of his mother and father with every slash, saw Tarren's dying form with every stab, and the injustice of it sent Whill into a rage.

He now fought for the memory of his parents, for the life of Tarren, and for those helpless women and children huddled within the town hall.

Roakore opened his eyes and at first did not know where he was. He lay for a moment upon the beach, blinking at the blue sky above. All around him were great fires, and in the distance were the sounds of battle.

Battle! The dwarf jumped to his feet as he became aware of his surroundings. He turned and saw a great battle playing out more than a hundred yards away. The last thing he remembered was falling to the ground as a host of Draggard had pressed on. Now it seemed help had arrived, for near to the town hall was an army of hundreds of Eldalonian soldiers, fighting hard against the Draggard.

“They’ll not have all the fun,” Roakore muttered, and with that he began his own charge up the beach, his great axe in hand, and a great smile upon his face.

Abram watched as Whill went at the Draggard with wild abandon. The sword of his father slashing, chopping, and hacking the Draggard with ease—too much ease. He watched in awe as Whill not only blocked but chopped a huge, thick spear in half, and in one fluid motion severed the legs of its wielder. Before any of the beasts nearby could react, Whill was upon them, hacking and slicing, Draggard heads and limbs alike flew away before the wild man.

Abram had taught Whill for ten years in preparation for a moment such as this. But never had he expected what he now saw. Whill took down all that stood before him, graceful in his dance of death, meeting aggression with all-out devastation. Though Abram was proud when he looked upon Whill, he was also frightened, for he knew what powers Whill was using, even if Whill himself did not. The thought was more than unsettling to the old warrior.

The men of Sherna fought for all they held dear, and the soldiers of Eldalon fought for king and country, all till the bitter end. The numbers were all but even, and that should have meant a bloody victory for the Draggard. But the creatures fought no ordinary foe this day, no mere men. When a man of Sherna received a mortal wound he fought on, blood flowing freely from his grinning lips, and when an Eldalonian soldier thought he could fight no more he cut through yet another monster. The ground was red with both human and Draggard blood as the sun began its descent from its midday perch.

The men of Sherna would not relinquish control of the town hall's steps, even as they fell one after another. The Draquon swooped down time and time again, plucking hardy men from the ranks and devouring them quickly. Still they fought, even managed to take down one of the flying beasts. Finally Whill, Abram, and Rhunis met the men of Sherna as they fought through to the steps. At the apparent command of the Draquon, the Draggard came around the charging force and regrouped, leaving the entirety of the human force between themselves and the town hall.

Of the fifty men of Sherna, fewer than ten remained; of Rhunis's two hundred soldiers, fewer than sixty stood, most bleeding from more than one nasty wound. The Draggard backed off a bit and the fighting ceased. The Draquon came down from the sky to take command of the diminished Draggard force. The remaining men stood together at the very steps of the town hall, along with Abram, Rhunis, Whill, and a very eager, blood-soaked dwarf.

The Draggard force had taken fewer casualties than the humans, but not many—less than one hundred of the beasts remained, along with eleven Draquon, each of which, to many folks of Agora, could be counted as ten Draggard. The men were outnumbered; the many dead lay about them as a sobering reminder. But they did not fall into despair, they did not give in, could not!

The cry was taken up by none other than Whill, who, despite the fact that he bled from many wounds, showed upon his face not defeat but determination.

“Good men of Sherna!” he bellowed. “Before you stands a host of beasts bent on destroying all that you hold dear! All that you live, breathe, and die for!” He strode towards the Draggard band, lips curled in a snarl, sword held high. The Draggard gnashed at the air, hissed and growled, but they did not advance.

“Shall we lie down and die from our wounds?”

“No!” the crowd answered in unison.

“Shall we leave our women and children as playthings for these wretched monsters?”

“No!” the crowd answered again, and Abram found himself to be one of those many voices. He beamed at the sight of Whill.

“Shall we let these damned creatures take what is ours without a fight?”

“NO!”

“I say then, man to man, shall we make these foul Draggard wish they had never set foot on our beaches?”

“Yes!” the men responded, weapons held high.

“Then come with me now, brothers of Eldalon, and let them know the rage of man!”

“YES!” they cried, and joined the charge taken up by Whill and a certain crazed dwarf.

Before the Draggard could begin to counter, the men pressed in, charging full tilt, death be damned, hearts bent on victory. Whill led the charge with Roakore, Abram, and Rhunis at his heels. He met the front line with devastating effect, taking down three Draggard in one mighty swipe. On he and the men charged into certain death or into victory, it did not matter. The men were focused on one thing and one thing only: the destruction of every last beast upon their beaches.

As the men began to effectively rout the Draggard, the Draquon took to the sky and again began their attack from above. Down they dove into the ranks of men, and up they came, holding their victims in their wicked claws. One such victim, one such man, though he bled from the gut profusely, managed to bring his blade to bear upon his captor. With a great heave Rhunis impaled the Draquon through the neck, and together they fell twenty feet to the sand below.

Roakore brought his axe around in a great swoop, into the torso of one unlucky beast as Abram chopped wildly at another. Before them Whill steadily cut through the Draggard ranks. Suddenly, to Abram’s horror, Whill left the ground, nabbed by a descending Draquon. The beast had Whill firmly by the shoulders, claws sinking deep, wings lifting them high into the air. With one great slash of Sinomara, Whill severed the arms of the flying beast and fell to the ground.

Abram blocked a spear and pushed aside his opponent as he tried to watch Whill’s descent. To his shock and amazement he saw Whill fall twenty feet only to fall upon a Draggard, driving his father’s sword straight through the monster’s head and body and into the sand.

Roakore hadn’t been bothered with any of the surrounding fights, for he was fully enthralled in his own. As he swung he saw the great walls of his homeland, the many chambers of his great mountain. Rage beyond reason drove the stout dwarf as he cut through the beasts before him. His great axe claimed the lives of many unfortunate beasts that day, and as they died, one after another, the last thing they heard was the battle song of the dwarves.

In the midst of the battle, in the light of certain death, few saw the arrows hit the many Draquon, few saw them fall from the sky, and few saw as the elf warrior made her way into the heart of battle.

Abram was hit hard, and to the ground he went. The Draggard came over with its spear, meaning to impale him. Abram rolled to his side as the spear tip hit the ground where he had just been. Taking no time to consider his luck, he thrust his sword up and into the groin of the monster, which had retracted its spear and drove it down hard into Abram's hip.

Roakore planted his axe firmly into one Draggard's head. Then he tugged hard, freeing his weapon as he spun on another beast. The axe cut halfway through the monster, but at the same time the Draggard thrust its tail at him. Through his thick clothing and chainmail the tail sunk, embedding many inches into Roakore's side. The hardy dwarf only roared as he freed his axe and cut down another monster.

Whill knew no pain, he knew no fear. His only emotion made itself clear in the long line of dead Draggard he left in his wake. He spun and twirled, dodged and countered, and no beast could stand for more than an instant before him. All around him men were dying, but so too were the Draggard. Men were falling fast around him, and still a score of monsters remained. He did what he could, all he could do—he fought on. Then suddenly he noticed that the monsters' attention had shifted from the thinning line of the human resistance to the beach to the south. There, upon a steed of black, sat a lone warrior, firing arrow after arrow into the sky and into the Draquon. Those that were not hit by the skilled and deadly bowman flew high and flew far, wanting nothing to do with the deadly creature.

Chapter 17

The Maiden of Elladrindellia

The Draggard were hunted down and killed within the surrounding woods of Sherna, mostly with the help of the two elven warriors. The Draggard ship was quickly destroyed by the catapult crew of the Eldalonian ship *Thunder*. As the doors to the town hall were opened, the many frightened women, children, and elderly looked upon their ruined town.

Whill pushed through the crowd as he ran up the steps to the town hall.

“Tarren! Tarren!” He searched the crowd frantically. For a moment he thought he saw him, but when he grabbed the boy by the shoulder and turned him around, it was not Tarren. Through the crowd he searched, yelling his name. Whill felt sick; hope began to wither as he searched but still saw no sign of him, or the healers he had been entrusted to. He reached the back of the building and turned in despair. His head spun as he grabbed child after child, asking, “Tarren! Have you seen Tarren?”

“Whill!”

The voice rose over the crowd and reached his ears like sweet music. Tarren came running, arms wide. Whill caught him in a tight embrace and then held him at arm’s length.

“I thought you were dead,” he said with a sigh of relief.

“So did I!” said Tarren, wide eyed.

Rhunis lay broken. He had been slashed viciously in the gut and dropped some twenty feet. Abram nursed a nasty spear injury to his hip. Roakore bled from his side, though he insisted it was nothing more than a flesh wound. Whill also showed signs of the great battle, with half a dozen deep cuts on his body, including several claw gashes upon his shoulders. But they had won the day—they had defeated the Draggard army and, to each of them, that was all that mattered.

Abram limped over to Whill, who was busy tending to Rhunis. “How is he?”

Whill replaced the blood-stained cloth upon Rhunis’s gut with a grimace, and spoke under his breath. “Not good, Abram. His body is broken. He has lost too much blood.”

Abram nodded, but his face showed no sign of sorrow. “It will all be over soon.” He stepped aside and bowed slightly as the elf maiden stepped past and looked upon Rhunis.

Whill moved back as the elf bent over the broken man and unsheathed her sword. Thinking she was about to put an end to his misery, he stepped forward and began to object, but Abram grabbed him. “Wait!”

She raised her sword slightly and put her other hand upon Rhunis’s chest and began to chant. Whill’s eyes widened as tendrils of blue light emanated from her extended hand and encircled Rhunis. She focused her attention upon the dying man’s stomach, and the wound began to heal before Whill’s eyes. Then she ran her hand over the entirety of his body, chanting all the while, as the blue light encircled him. She remained that way for nearly twenty minutes before finally slumping down tired.

With a flash the light was gone, and the elf maiden stood with a sweat-covered brow. She gave Whill an encouraging smile and in Elvish, “He will be alright.”

It was the same melodic voice he remembered from his dreams. Abram bowed slightly and said, “Whill, I give to you the elf princess, the daughter of Verelas and Araveal, the lady Avriel.”

Whill could not find his voice. A part of him knew he should make some profound statement, some lasting impression. But all that came to his mind—the only word that found his lips—was “Hi.”

Avriel nodded with an amused smile and glanced at Rhunis, who had sat up and was gazing around with a quizzical expression.

Avriel laid a gentle hand upon Abram’s shoulder and said, “Once I tend to those near death, I will help with your hip, Abram,” Her gaze found Whill once more as she turned to walk away.

“That was her, Abram, the woman from my dreams!”

Abram patted him on the shoulder. “I know, Whill. I know.” He gestured to the confused-looking Rhunis. “Good thing she and her brother Zerafin found us when they did.”

Rhunis looked utterly confused. “What happened? I remember falling and then...” His face twisted as he tried to recall the events that had led to his current state.

Whill helped the man to his feet. “You have just been revived from mortal wounds by the elf lady Avriel. We have won. The Draggard have been destroyed.”

Rhunis gave Whill an odd smile. “The gods be damned! That’s the second time an elf has brought me back from death. Looks like I owe them twice over!”

The three men shared a much-needed laugh—but it was cut short by a gruff voice.

“Bah! Elves and their magic. All he really needs be some good dwarf mead an’ a big-breasted dwarf women to look after ’im,” said Roakore before passing out.

Whill and Abram rushed to his side. Rolling the dazed and mumbling dwarf over, they noticed a very deep wound on his side. His shirt was soaked with blood, and it still bled freely.

“Abram, call Lady Avriel, quickly!” said Whill.

Roakore mumbled something about “Elves and their damned magics.”

Some hours later, night fell on the ruined town. Whill walked among the many wounded within the town hall. Those with mortal wounds had been healed by the two elves, but dozens more lay on makeshift cots, bruised and bloody. Whill had been working without rest for hours, tending to the many wounded, and it frustrated him that the elves would not lend their powers of healing to these men. He had not seen Avriel or her brother in hours and assumed they must need a rest as badly as he did. They had, after all, healed more than a dozen dying men.

He exited the stuffy hall and stepped out into the cool night air. Most of the fires had burned out, but dozens of torches cut through the black night. One fire burned brighter than all the rest; it was to the east and a few hundred feet from the town. Hundreds of Draggard corpses were thrown unceremoniously into the great pyre; wagon after wagon carried the bloody beasts to be destroyed.

Abram and Roakore had been helping gather the human dead, but now the work was all but done. Whill walked over and took a seat on the grass next to Roakore.

The dwarf nodded at the hall. “How they be?”

“As well as can be expected.”

Abram looked tired, and older than his fifty years. His clothes were blood-stained and his hands dirty, but he regarded Whill with the same optimism he had always shown.

“Why is it that the elves do not heal the wounded men within the town hall? Surely it is within their abilities,” Whill said.

Abram glanced to his left. “I don’t know, Whill. Why don’t you ask them?”

He followed Abram's gaze and saw Avriel sitting alone under the shadow of the tree line. "I will," he said with a determined nod.

He walked at first with purpose, his steps sure, his facade stern, however, the closer he got to the seated elf, the more his determination wavered. Soon he was standing before her, silently staring. She sat cross-legged with her eyes closed and her sword in both hands, the center of the blade resting upon her brow. Whill was once again struck by her beauty. He meant to speak but could not find his voice.

Avriel's right eye opened slowly and she peered at him with a raised brow. The two stared at each other for many moments. Finally she spoke in Elvish, letting her blade fall to the side.

"Will you join me?"

He took up the spot next to her without a word, sitting cross-legged as she did. Her eyes traveled from his sheathed sword to his eyes. She smirked. "The way you first stormed over here, I assumed you had pressing business."

Whill was taken aback. "Um, well, yes, but...what were you doing just now?"

She eyed Whill for a moment, and the scrutiny made him slightly uncomfortable.

"I was just resting, a form of what you would call sleep. We elves have different ways of recuperating."

"Were you using the energy within your sword?"

She seemed to ponder this. "Not in the way you would imagine. You see, I am not injured, and so I did not call upon the stored energy of my blade. Rather I was sensing how much energy I had used in the fight and the healing that followed."

Whill frowned. "You can tell how much is left?"

She sheathed her sword and turned slightly to regard him. "There is much you do not know, and you have many questions, no doubt. But for now I need to ask you a few things, if you don't mind."

He shrugged, wondering what in the world an elf such as Avriel would need to ask someone like himself. "Go ahead."

She took a much more serious demeanor. "Do you know what you were doing when you fought the Draggard today?"

"What do you mean?"

"You did not fight as a mere man—pardon the expression—but rather, you were using a technique of...certain elves?"

Whill was at a loss. He remembered the fighting vividly, but he did not know what she meant.

Avriel looked frustrated. “You are a mortal man endowed with the powers of elves. You should not have been able to use those powers until you were rightly taught. But you healed the boy on the ship, you saved the infant child from death, and you healed yourself within the dwarf mountain with your father’s sword.” She held him firm in her gaze. “Whill, did you not notice that your blade felled the Draggard a bit too easily? I watched you from afar, as did my brother. You cut through their scales as if they were cloth, does that not seem strange to you?”

Whill let his gaze fall to the ground as he contemplated her question. Now that he thought about it, he realized that he had killed the Draggard with comparative ease.

“Did I used the energy within my father’s blade, as the elves do?”

She shook her head. “No. What you did is forbidden by the Elves of the Sun. What you did today is a practice of the Dark elves.”

He regarded Avriel with disbelief. “I couldn’t have, I—”

“With your first kill you stole the life energy of the slain beast, and then so with each after; each came easier; each of your enemies’ deaths gave you more strength—or rather, gave your father’s blade more strength. You did not let that power lie idle, but used it to devastating effect. You killed well over twenty Draggard today, and still your father’s blade holds their life force within.”

Whill was at a loss. “I didn’t mean to.”

Avriel eyed him for a moment and finally smiled. “I understand, but please remember: it is the way of the Elves of the Sun to only use our own energy, or that which is rightly given. To take from another in such a way is not our practice. It is a path that can only lead to evil.”

Chapter 18

Unlikely Companions

The collection of the dead continued throughout the night and into the morning. No one slept, even those who could have. For demons newly born see dreams as a playground, and with sleep comes the remembrance of screams, blood, death.

The morning sun shed light upon a village in ruin. Nearly every building had been burned to the ground, save the town hall. The ground was so red with blood in some places it looked as though the earth itself were bleeding. The bodies of men, women, and a few unlucky children littered the village, all covered with shrouds and awaiting the pyre.

So with the rising and settling of the sun upon its midday perch came the burning of the deceased. Hagus the barkeep was among them, along with more than a hundred Eldalonian soldiers, and hundreds of villagers. The survivors—hundreds of widows and children, and a few lucky men—made a wide circle around the great pyre. Some hung their heads, while others looked to the heavens proudly—but all wept. A woman took up the Eldalonian funeral song as the flames were lit, and soon the others joined in. The voices grew stronger as their words rose to the heavens.

*Rest now, my love, till we meet again
Under the tree of the gods, I'll see, my old friend
Rest now, my friend, your work here is through
When my song is sung, I shall be with you
Wait for me, love, and watch over me
Help me to remember what kind of person to be
Life may bring pain, like a cold winter rain
This sorrow will be mine, till we meet again*

The song went on and was taken up by not only Whill and his friends, but also by the two elves as well. After it went for the customary seven verses, and ended with the throwing of many flowers into the great Pyre, Rhunis stepped forward and spoke for the dead.

“Today we say farewell to many good people who died defending those they loved. We say farewell to true heroes. In a time when that word is spoken too freely, we see firsthand its intended meaning all too clearly. The spirits that rise from the ashes this day are heroes by right and by deed. For none cowered before the nightmare that befell your village this day’s eve. None failed in their duty to kin and country; none ran to save themselves. No! They fought on—against all odds, and against the most terrible foe imaginable.”

He walked in a circle around the pyre as he spoke, looking every man, woman, and child in the eye.

“So when someone asks you of the one you lost, tell them they fought and died valiantly in the Battle of Sherna, and speak those words with your head held high. For they lived life as we all do, but they died heroically—which is as much as any man can ask. We all, every one of us, will die; that is inescapable. But we will not all be remembered—we will not all find immortality through deed and song. No, all of us will not. But what of these spirits that fly free this day? Will they be remembered?”

Rhunis circled faster as he spoke, his words becoming louder with each sentence. The shimmering eyes of the people stared back at him, their tears running down proud faces.

“Indeed yes!” Rhunis cried. “They will be cherished by those whom they saved and remembered in song by all throughout the ages. So this day, weep for your losses, weep for fear of an uncertain future, but do not weep for the spirits before you. They have achieved the greatest of all seats in the afterworld. Smile for them now, and be proud!”

The crowd broke into cheer. Tears fell and smiles gleamed, and an exhausted Rhunis took his leave. Whill, along with Abram and Roakore, followed suit, leaving the people to their mourning.

They came upon Rhunis shortly after, outside his tent. He sat upon the ground, taking large gulps from a bottle of dark liquid. Whill patted him on the shoulder. “I feel for your loss. No doubt you knew many of the fallen soldiers as friends.”

Rhunis looked up, raised his bottle to the heavens, and took yet another long swig. Wiping his mouth, he accepted condolences from Abram and Roakore as well, and then got to his feet. He offered his bottle to the other three, and they all took a hearty drink in turn.

Roakore took a second swig from the bottle and rounded on Rhunis. He slammed his fist into his chest and bowed slightly before the scarred knight. “Rhunis, Dragonslayer o’ Eldalon. It be an honor to meet ye. I be Roakore, son o’ Ro’Din o’ the Ebony Mountains.”

Rhunis, having dealt with the dwarves before—and being aware of Roakore’s title—replied in earnest. He slammed his fist to his chest and bowed slightly. “Well met, Roakore, son of Ro’Din of the Ebony Mountains. I knew that my friends here traveled with a dwarf. But I knew not that they kept such esteemed company.” He offered his hand in the customary human greeting and the two shook.

They were soon joined by Avriel and Zerafin. Abram, being acquainted with all, introduced everyone. Shortly after, they all retired to Rhunis’s tent, giving the villagers their peace, and emptying many bottles of wine.

The conversation went on for more than an hour, and various tales of adventure and folly were shared. Whill enjoyed the company of the others immensely, though he found himself staring at Avriel far too often. Roakore had relaxed around the elves, it seemed, and the talk turned eventually to the upcoming meeting in Kell-Torey.

“That is the reason I followed you from Fendale,” said Rhunis as he popped yet another cork. “King Mathus ordered me to follow the two of you when he learned you were being trailed by Captain Cirossa. Upon finding you, I was to see that you made safe passage to Kell-Torey. Whoever you are, Whill, King Mathus sees it prudent that you make that meeting.”

All in the room besides Rhunis shared knowing glances. But Rhunis was no fool.

“Well then, out with it. Who are you?”

Whill looked at Abram, who only offered a shrug. Whill hated these formalities, but knew they were necessary. He stood and faced Rhunis. “I am the son of Aramonis, rightful king of Uthen-Arden.”

Rhunis looked at Whill dumbfounded. He glanced at Abram and then the others. He seemed to ponder for a moment, and then went down on one knee before Whill. “It is an honor, and a great joy, to meet you, King Whill. Your mother was the beloved princess of Eldalon, and your father was the greatest king of his time. You have my blade, and my undying loyalty.”

Whill looked down at the kneeling knight. He felt uncomfortable and a bit silly, but he knew that Rhunis was serious. “Please stand, Rhunis. Though I appreciate the gesture, I am not yet king.”

Rhunis stood and refilled everyone’s glasses. “To Whill, rightful king of Uthen-Arden—may he take back the throne which is his, and bring peace to Arden!”

“Hear, hear!” cried Roakore.

“Hear, hear!” cried Abram. They all clanged glasses and took hearty drinks.

Abram and Roakore lit their pipes in the short silence followed. Whill looked to Avriel, who smiled approvingly. Rhunis shook his head in wonder.

“I never would have imagined that the child of Celestra had survived. This is indeed great news.” His brow furrowed. “But how did this come to be?”

“That tale would be better told by Abram,” Whill said.

Abram told Rhunis the entire story, with Avriel adding here and there when it turned to Elladrindellia. To Whill’s amazement, he learned that she had helped in his healing as an infant. What astounded Rhunis was that, not only had the Draggard been the attackers, but Addakon had seen to it.

“I have never liked Addakon, though I have met him only twice,” Rhunis said. “There was always something off about that one—nothing like your father, Whill, nothing at all. Your father was a great man: he helped his people, he was just and honest—but Addakon—something about the man always made me uneasy. I can’t quite place it. He always had an air about him of superiority and greatness, a condescending smile...oh, how I despise that smile. *Nothing* like your father, I say.”

Roakore spoke up for the first time in a while. “Aye, nothing at all, I too once met yer father, and later yer uncle. Ye be yer father’s son, an’ not o’ yer uncle’s make.”

Zerafin, to whom Whill had not yet spoken beyond introductions, then addressed him. “I met the both of them when they came to be trained many years ago, and I can say that we all felt the difference between them. The older and very wise of our people even urged our mother not to let Addakon be trained. She knew his heart, do not doubt, but she had made a pact with the late king of Arden those many years before. She could not break her vow, and both twins were trained in the ways of Orna Catorna.”

There came a slight tap upon the tent, and then another. Rhunis raised a hand for silence. “Enter.”

An Eldalonian soldier threw back the flap. Seeing the great company Rhunis was entertaining, he bowed low repeatedly and said sheepishly, “General Rhunis, sir, I apologize for the interruption, but there is pressing business within the town still.”

The knight got to his feet. “Of course.” He nodded to the surrounding group. “If you will excuse me, then.”

Abram stood. “I think I’ll join you. I’m sure the good people could use as much help as possible.”

Roakore wiped wine from his mouth with his long beard. “Aye. I think I’ll make meself useful, too.”

“I’ll be along shortly,” Whill said as the three departed.

Zerafin held up the wine bottle, gesturing to Whill. “No, thanks, I’ve had enough,” Whill said.

The elf smiled as he poured himself and Avriel a small amount. “What is on your mind? You wonder how it is that we came upon you, yes.”

“You read my mind.”

Zerafin chuckled. “Not quite. It is simply a logical deduction. We would not enter your mind without your permission—unless you were in grave danger, of course, as Avriel did when you so weakened yourself healing the boy.”

Whill had known deep down that it had been real. Nonetheless, hearing it spoken of so plainly was a comforting confirmation. Zerafin scratched his hairless chin and asked nonchalantly, “Did you realize that you would have died if Avriel had not intervened? You gave Tarren so much that you left nothing for yourself.”

Avriel shrugged shyly. Whill thought for a fleeting moment he saw her blush. Zerafin chuckled once again. “My sister has always been modest.” He smiled at her. They held their gaze for only a few seconds, but Whill had the feeling he was missing part of the conversation. Avriel raised an eyebrow at her brother and turned to Whill.

“To answer your question of how we came upon you—we left Elladrindellia shortly after the incident with Tarren. We were instructed to find you and attend the meeting in Kell-Torey.”

“We were able to locate you rather easily,” Zerafin explained. “Since my sister was one of the healers in your infancy, you have always shared a bond.”

Whill looked at Avriel with more wonder and admiration than ever, though his new feelings were accompanied by something else—a notion that his growing fondness was that of a silly young mortal. Avriel returned the gaze with a smile, and Zerafin went on.

“It is hard for a human to understand such things, I know, but in time you will learn to understand these bonds, and to use them. You will no doubt share such a bond with Tarren, though he will be oblivious to it. You will be able to decipher where he is, for instance, and what he is doing. Also, though neither I nor my sister have experienced it..”

He paused and looked at Avriel. She continued her brother’s thought. “You may share a similar bond with those you killed, since you took their life energy for your own,” she explained. Seeing Whill’s startled look, she added, “Do not worry, we can teach you to ignore them. It is not known for certain, though it is rumored, that the Dark elves are haunted by those they have taken from. Some can sever the bond or learn to ignore it. Others...”

Zerafin spoke up. “Others are driven mad by the voices, and find silence by their own blade.”

Whill pondered that statement for a moment, appalled by the prospect. Avriel continued. “Do not fret at that, Whill, we will teach you to be rid of them. We need to set our sights on Kell-Torey, where this most important meeting awaits us all; and from there, Elladrindellia, where you will be trained like your father before you.”

Whill breathed in deeply and slowly exhaled, taking in all he had heard. He had one pressing question he could not ignore: “How long will the training take?”

Zerafin furrowed his brow and shook his head. “Our mother has made a pact that states you shall be trained for the mandatory year. Is your haste so great that you would see this time as a burden?”

Whill sensed that he had angered Zerafin, and perhaps Avriel. He held out his hands defensively. “No, no, I mean no disrespect. And I am grateful for all that the elves offer.”

“But?”

“But war rages now within Isladon, the Draggard multiply as we speak within the Ebony Mountains, and Addakon becomes more powerful by the second.”

Zerafin gave a hearty laugh, which earned him a scowl from Avriel. “So you wish to forsake your training so that you might end the war within Isladon, destroy the Draggard, and defeat your uncle Addakon—not to mention the true evil behind all this, Eadon. All this you will accomplish on your own? To do these things you need not our help?”

Avriel spoke before Whill could. “Save your condescension for one more worthy, brother. You know what he means.”

Zerafin looked to Avriel with fire in his eyes, but slowly that fire was replaced by a smile. “Of course. I had forgotten how hasty humans can be, sister. I meant no offense.”

Whill sensed a silent battle between the two. “I did not mean to offend you, Zerafin, son of Verelas. Nor do I mean to offend the elves. I am hasty, I admit, but I have much on my mind and much to do.” He slumped back in his chair with his hand upon his brow, seemingly exhausted. “You must understand that I have just learned who I am. Just a few days ago I was only Whill, a ranger of Agora. Now I am the rightful ruler of a kingdom to which I have seldom ventured and care little about. I am to defeat a mighty king in league with the most powerful Dark elf in history, and yet I almost killed myself healing a child.”

Avriel turned to Zerafin with a raised brow once again. Her brother flashed her a look and addressed Whill. “I am the one who should apologize. I may have forgotten the position you have been put in. But understand, you cannot and will not do this on your own. You will need friends, and friendship we offer.”

Zerafin offered his hand and Whill took it. “Whill of Uthen-Arden, son of Aramonis, son of Celestra, descendant of the great king who took in the elves when we needed friendship most: I offer you mine—undying, unending, until time spreads thine ashes.”

Whill squeezed the elf’s hand. “And I offer you mine in return. I thank you, Zerafin, son of Verelas, prince of Elladrindellia.”

Avriel stood also. Time seemed to slow as Whill looked into her blue eyes. She too offered her hand and spoke words of promise; ever so softly, ever so beautifully, did they escape her lips.

“I offer to you, Whill of Uthen-Arden, my undying, unending, and boundless friendship, so that we may together, all of us, find peace.”

Whill thought for a moment that he would not find his words. Her voice and her gaze had more effect on him than the wine. After a moment he composed himself and responded, “And I mine, Avriel, lady of Elladrindellia, daughter of the great Verelas—until the day I die.”

Zerafin broke the silence that followed. “Then it is settled. We shall travel to Kell-Torey, and then on to Elladrindellia.”

After Whill had exited the tent to help within the town, Zerafin turned to his sister and studied her for a moment. Avriel sighed.

“What, brother?”

“What indeed? This is not a game, nor a childhood fantasy.”

She was taken aback. “What lunacy has befallen your tongue?”

“I remember an elf child who would lend an ear for hours to any storyteller recalling the prophecy of Whill of Agora.”

Avriel laughed quickly. “What of it?”

Zerafin leveled his gaze on her. “You studied the prophecy for years, every piece of every scroll that mentioned him. Your life’s work has been for this man, this human.”

“But he is the one! I have merely been preparing.”

Raising an eyebrow, he said, “You have been in love with his legend since you were a child. How does the real person strike you? Is he everything you wished?”

Avriel scoffed at her brother's teasing and then puckered her lips to one side in thought. "It is very strange, don't you think, to meet one so often spoken of as he?"

"Yes, sister, indeed it is."

"The oddest thing is...he is exactly what I had envisioned."

Zerafin scowled and sighed. "This could be disastrous. I fear your feelings could—"

"Could what, brother? It has been written; it will come to pass. He is Whill of Agora, the one we have waited a millennium for. Whether I love the idea of him is of no concern. It is not the same as loving the person."

Zerafin could only shrug. "We shall see."

Chapter 19

The Common Road

The remainder of the day was spent salvaging what they could from the destroyed town. Riders were sent out to the nearest villages, and to Kell-Torey. Though no one thought another attack likely, they would all breathe a little easier when reinforcements arrived. Whill spent most of the day with Tarren, who asked a hundred questions about the dwarf city. Whill answered them happily. When the stars finally took to the night sky, he was more than glad to see them. He, Roakore, and Abram had been up since leaving the mountains, and all fell into a much-needed sleep.

Whill awoke the following morning to the smell of pork and eggs drifting on the still-smoky air. He turned his head from the sky to Roakore and Tarren sitting by a fire—the lad no doubt asking more questions of Dy’Kore. Roakore noticed Whill and took the opportunity to break conversation with the young human.

“Aye then, finally. Thought ye might sleep through the day, lad. The boy here’s got more questions than there be stars. Says he never seen a real dwarf, he does. I tell him, I ain’t ever seen a fake one,” he laughed and slapped his leg.

Whill chuckled and accepted a hearty share of breakfast. All around him were similar camps with similar fires. Families and groups of soldiers were all now starting their day.

Soon Abram arrived with Rhunis and the elves, each leading a horse. Rhunis helped himself to a piece of pork and ruffled Tarren’s hair. “So here we all are. This is good.”

He gestured behind him to a knight leading a black stallion and a pony. “These are for you,” he said with a smile as he addressed Whill and Roakore. “We have many miles before us, and I for one would prefer to ride.”

“I had assumed we would journey to Kell-Torey by water.”

Abram gestured towards the sea. “*Old Charlotte* has been destroyed. And Rhunis’s vessel must stay docked here for protection. We could wait for a royal escort, but that would take a few days.”

Whill nodded. “Days that we don’t have.”

Soon they left the still-smoldering Sherna behind. A group of soldiers from a nearby village had made station at dawn, and a small fleet was expected within the ten-day. Whill knew that the townspeople were in good hands, and he doubted they would see any more trouble. The Draggard had only attacked the town because he had been in it. The best thing he could do for Sherna was to leave.

Though he had recently learned that he was heir to the Uthen-Arden throne and fought a horrible battle, and though death and destruction seemed to follow him like a morbid shadow, Whill was in good spirits. With the ever-inquisitive Tarren, his old friend Abram, both elven and dwarven royalty, and a legendary knight of Eldalon at his side, he felt good indeed.

They headed west along the old and seldom-used road leading from Sherna to Kell-Torey. They rode for many miles, Tarren talking much of the time, until the sun crested the midday sky and it was time to stop and rest.

The riders dismounted and made camp next to a small creek. The horses and pony were left to drink and graze, and Roakore—the most hungry of the group—started a strong fire.

“Got me some good meats from one o’ them townswomen,” Roakore boasted as he took from his pack a half-dozen slabs of venison. “Said it was the least she could offer for me help.”

Avriel put her hands upon her hips and gave Roakore a look. He huffed and made as innocent a face as he could muster. “What was I to do? I may have insulted the poor human if I said nay!”

Everyone had seen the exchange, and none could help but have a good laugh at the poor dwarf’s expense. Roakore threw up his arms and tended to his cooking. The only ear he found was that of a young curious lad who had joined him to learn the secrets of dwarf cooking. Roakore put an arm over Tarren’s shoulder and looked back with a scowl at the rest of the group, which caused another small fit of laughter. “Bah. Forget them, laddie. They can think what they likes. Let ’em have their dried meats and their stinkin’ cheese.” Tarren only smiled.

Avriel and Zerafin had taken up a conversation with Rhunis as they brushed their stallions. Abram took the opportunity to talk with Whill, who was sitting on the ground, sharpening his sword.

“I’ve a riddle for you.”

Whill regarded him quizzically. “I had thought you ran out of riddles for me to solve when I was Tarren’s age.”

Abram chuckled. “Oh, this one is a stumper.”

“Alright then, let’s hear it,” said Whill—never one to turn down a riddle.

Abram cleared his throat dramatically. “How does one keep his mind on the mission at hand when he has fallen helplessly in love with an elf princess?”

Whill said nothing. For a long and silent while he and Abram simply stared at each other. Finally Whill scoffed and went back to sharpening his blade, and Abram to smoking his pipe. After a few minutes, Whill stopped and set aside his sword.

“I’m not in love with her.”

Abram tapped his pipe on a nearby rock and regarded Whill with one raised eyebrow.

“Don’t give me that look,” Whill said.

“What look?”

“You know what look?”

“I didn’t know I was giving a look. Perhaps I have a tick.”

Whill let his gaze wander to Avriel. He couldn’t deny what he felt. “Alright, you win, Abram. As always, you have seen into my heart and soul.” He took a deep breath and asked in a surrendered tone, “What do I do?”

Abram let his victorious smile fade and pondered for a moment. “I do not know what will become of this. History tells us nothing of human and elven romance, or the ramifications. But I know this: Your feelings will be used against you, whether she shares them or not. Your enemies will target the ones you love. It is hard to understand, but you must bury your feelings deep, Whill. She must not know. Though she may already suspect, you must not speak of it. You must not think of it.”

Whill considered this for a long moment. “And what about you, Abram?”

“Me? What of me?”

Whill laughed. “And so the wise man does not see.” He shook his head. “You old fool. What about you? I love you like a father. Should I hide that also?”

“That’s different.”

“How so?”

“The feelings a man has for his first love are more powerful than any he will ever know. This is written by both men and elves. I may die in the upcoming wars—you will have others to lean on.”

Whill shook his head as if he thought the notion absurd. Abram grabbed his arm. “Listen to me, Whill.” His tone and demeanor demanded attention. “I may fall, Tarren may fall—any may fall, and you still will be uncompromised. You will be hurt, both in mind and soul, but you will survive. If your love is lost, however, you may become that which you strive to defeat. This I say as a warning and nothing more.”

Whill regarded him for a moment, and then looked at Avriel and the others. “I understand. But I think you put too much on me alone. You treat me as some kind of savior. I am but one man. One man! I cannot...I will not be held responsible for the fate of Agora! The elves will fight without me. The humans will fight without me. And the dwarves will fight till the end no matter what. Yes, I intend to back my father’s throne, but if I fail, it should be of no large consequence to the cause.”

Abram sighed. “I had hoped to let the revelations of your lineage set in for a bit before...” He nodded to the elves, “Those two had sought you out for reasons other than your lineage.”

“I thought you had but one riddle for me,” said Whill dryly.

“I believe the elves can better answer this one my friend.”

Whill threw up his hands, stood and began pacing. He was tired of hearing about himself so. He had barely gotten used to the idea of his lineage...and now there was more? Without a word he turned and left Abram and his secrets.

Abram simply puffed on his pipe and left it all to the gods.

Roakore and Tarren were in deep discussion about dragons and dwarf gods when Whill slumped down next to them.

“Just tellin’ yer boy Tarren here ’bout the dragon gods,” Roakore explained. “Meat’s got a little while to go, still.”

Tarren piped in with his usual enthusiastic demeanor. “Aye, Roakore told me all about the dragon and dwarf gods. It’s really good stuff, Whill, you should hear it! All about the Prophet Ky’Dren and—”

Whill cut him off and recited the old tales to take his mind off of Abram’s implications: “Ky’Dren came to the dwarves at a time when they were lost. They had no religion or deeper social structure other than that of the nomad. Ky’Dren told them he had been sent by the dwarf gods to lead them; to give them a better life; to show them their purpose.”

Roakore nodded with approval at Whill’s summary. Tarren became jubilant. “Whill, I didn’t know you knew so much of the dwarves! What else do you know?”

Roakore patted the boy’s leg. “A great deal about all things, I imagine. A great deal.”

Whill spoke to no one the remainder of the break. They all ate their share of the venison, packed up, and headed out once again. Tarren asked to ride with the less-than-enthusiastic dwarf next. They travelled the remainder of the day, and

briefly into the night, along the old road leading to Kell-Torey. They met a few merchants, and also a group of soldiers headed for Sherna. Rhunis informed them that he had charged the reconstruction of the town to his second-in-command. After a short briefing the soldiers were off once again, and the riders made camp for the night.

Roakore made another large fire and went about cooking the remaining venison—with the help of a tired but eager young lad. Whill took the time to speak with Avriel and her brother, and found them tending to their horses. Not being in the mood for small talk, he walked up and simply said what was on his mind.

“Abram tells me I have a larger part in all of this than I know. Though I cannot imagine how my part might become any greater, I trust you will enlighten me.”

Avriel and Zerafin stopped what they were doing and looked at the faraway silhouette of Abram, and then at each other. They seemed to share a silent communication and finally nodded, putting down their brushes.

“Sit then, and we shall tell you the tale,” said Zerafin.

Whill sat upon the ground, as did the elves. Twenty yards away the fire burned, casting faint orange light upon the two storytellers.

Avriel began. “Thousands of years ago there lived within Drindellia an elf prophet by the name of Adimorda. He was a skilled fighter and healer, but he was best known for his foresight.”

“Foresight?”

“Yes,” Zerafin said. “Adimorda is now known as the greatest elf prophet to have ever lived—which is no small feat, considering that our history dates back hundreds of thousands of years.”

Whill lit up. “Yes, now I remember reading of him. Vaguely, however; I was a child then, and the books I had of the elves spoke little of him. I remember them saying that he could see into the future.”

Avriel nodded. “He used his powers unlike any before him. When first he looked into the future—and then later events proved him right—he became obsessed. He spent years pouring his energy into his blade, and used the stored power to strengthen his mental abilities.”

Zerafin took over without missing a beat. “As more and more of Adimorda’s predictions came true, his followers increased. They would travel from hundreds of miles around to give him their stored energy in exchange for a glimpse of the future. With so much energy at his disposal, he began looking farther and farther into the future: first decades, then hundreds—even thousands—of years.”

Avriel's eyes shone wet in the faint firelight. "Then Adimorda saw something that terrified him, something that would change him forever and drive him into a lifelong obsession—the destruction of Drindellia. He saw the rise of an evil elf lord; the creation of hideous beasts; the fall of his homeland. We know now, that elf lord was Eadon, and the beasts the Draggard. Adimorda knew he must do all he could to prevent this from happening. He devised many plans and began to carry them out, but soon found that, with every one, the results would be the same or worse."

Whill cut in. "He looked to the future to see how he had helped?"

"Precisely," Zerafin said. "And found that nothing he did would help. He could not alter a future so far away."

Whill's mind began to hurt as he thought of the possibilities. He put his hands through his hair and let out an exasperated breath. "Then what did he do?"

"He created a weapon," said Zerafin. "He thought that if he could store enough energy within it, with the help of his followers, then the wielder would have a chance at defeating the Dark elf. But his plan backfired. He looked once again into the future, only to discover that the Dark elf himself would eventually acquire the sword, and all would be lost."

"But that was not all," Avriel said. "He would not give up so easily. To see to it that the Dark elf would never use the sword, he made it so that no elf could ever wield it. He created the Order of Adromida, a group of his followers who would dedicate their lives to his cause."

Zerafin took his turn. "Adimorda disappeared shortly after that, and was never seen or heard from again."

Whill was shocked. "Was he murdered?"

"No one knows," Zerafin said. "Some speculate that he poured all of his life energy into the blade, leaving himself none. Within his chambers, his followers found three words written in blood."

The intensity of their combined stares made Whill uncomfortable. "What did it say?"

"Whill of Agora," said Avriel.

Just then Abram joined them. "You speak of Adimorda, I see."

Avriel concurred. "The last scrolls of Adimorda spoke of one who would wield the blade Adromida, one who would rid the world of the Dark elf Eadon and his many legions. Whill of Agora."

Whill now saw it all clearly. Though he was reluctant to believe he had such a part to play, the evidence was undeniable. "The sword Adromida cannot be wielded by an elf?"

"Correct," said Zerafin.

“So it is up to me. I alone must wield the blade and destroy Eadon.” His voice held little enthusiasm.

Avriel looked from her brother to Abram, and finally to Whill. “There is one other who could wield the blade.”

Whill knew before she had finished. “Addakon.”

Abram nodded. “Yes.”

“Where is the sword?” asked Whill. “Was it brought from Drindellia?”

Avriel shook her head with dismay. “We do not have it, nor do we know where it is. For thousands of years the Order of Adromida did what they had been sworn to do. It was composed of hundreds of monks, and each and every elf poured their life energy into that blade. Every day, all day, there was always someone within the temple, strengthening the blade, for thousands of years.”

Avriel paused and stared at Whill, scrutinizing his reaction. When he only stared back, she let out a huff. “Whill, do you understand the great power that Adromida possesses? Having been given the energy of so many for so long?”

Whill thought on it for a moment. “No, I cannot. It is unimaginable. The wielder of such a blade would be like...like a god.”

“Yes. And can you imagine what Addakon would do with such power?”

Whill knew then that if his uncle ever got his hands on the great elven blade, all would be lost. Whether he liked it or not, he—it seemed—was truly the only hope.

Abram lit his pipe and blew out a puff of smoke. “Now you begin to see. This is why I think that Eadon has come to Agora—he is in search of the blade, but also its wielder. It seems that he has found Addakon. And together they will stop at nothing to acquire Adromida. I believe that is why Addakon killed your father. With he and his unborn child dead, the only man with the power to wield the blade would be himself.”

“And now he knows that I live. The throne is but a minor issue, is it not? Addakon wants me dead so that I cannot find the sword first.”

“Indeed.”

“Then why are we heading for Kell-Torey when we could be looking for the sword? Do we have any clues to where it may be?”

Zerafin put a hand to the air, gesturing for Whill to relax. “We have been looking for the sword, of course, since we learned of your existence.”

“But what ever happened to the blade? Who took it?”

Avriel looked in Roakore’s direction, and said in a lowered tone, “The dragons.”

Whill gave out a frustrated laugh and threw his arms up. “Of course. Dragons!”

Avriel only nodded, unamused. “When the war of Drindellia began, Eadon destroyed the Temple of Adromida and took the sword as his own. Though he could not wield it, he kept it for himself. He knew that if his enemies had it, they might find a way to use it against him. We elves had a strong friendship with the dragons for thousands of years, and they viewed Eadon’s creation of the Draggard as a great insult.”

Zerafin took up the telling. “Avriel was born after the wars had begun, but I remember when it all started. I was 120 years old. Our father begged the dragons for help, but most refused. Less than twenty decided to form an alliance with us. That was near the beginning of the War of Drindellia, and though the dragons aided us greatly in the many battles, the Dark elves were too powerful. We were defeated, and all but one of the dragons who aided us were killed.”

Avriel interjected. “That dragon, the red dragon Zhola, with the help of a host of elves, managed to steal Adromida from Eadon. The elves were killed, but Zhola returned the sword to our father. Our father told him to leave, to take the blade somewhere safe, somewhere far away. And so he did, and was never seen again.”

There was a pause in the story as Whill looked at the ground, his mind racing. Abram sat likewise, puffing his pipe. Avriel went on.

“We have spoken to a few of the dragons, though they are hard to find these days. As you know, they have been mostly driven from Agora by dwarves and men. The Agoran dragons live now on Drakkar Island, but few dare venture there, not even us elves.”

“The dragons of Drakkar do not know of the old alliances between dragons and elves,” Zerafin added. “They are wild and unfriendly, to say the least. Those elves who have tried to find out anything about Zhola have either died trying or found out nothing useful.”

Whill still felt hopeful. “But if there is anything to learn of Zhola, it is to be learned on Drakkar Island, is it not?”

Avriel was hesitant. “Correct.”

“Then that is where Addakon will be looking—and that is where I must look.”

Zerafin laughed. “You will go to Drakkar Island alone, and what? Simply walk into the dragon’s lair and ask about Zhola?”

“What choice do I have? I will wait until I am stronger, of course, when I have learned the ways of the elves.”

“It sounds foolhardy, but he is right.” Abram grinned at Whill. “And I will be there next to him.”

“As will I,” said Rhunis as he walked over to the small gathering. “Who better to have with you on Drakkar Island than Rhunis the Dragonslayer?”

“What are ye all talkin’ ’bout?” Roakore called from the fireside. “Quit yer yappin’ and come get dinner while it’s hot.”

They did as the gruff dwarf told them and ate beside the fire. Fresh-cooked venison, cheese, and bread: not such a bad meal for the road—and it was only made better by Rhunis’s wine. To Roakore’s relief, Tarren had switched to pestering the elves with his hundred questions. Whill watched as the beautiful Avriel animatedly told Tarren a tale of the elves. He tried not to stare but found it difficult indeed. A few times Zerafin caught him, though he said nothing and gave no indication as to whether or not he approved.

Tarren went on to beg the elf maiden for a song, and she happily agreed. All other conversation died as Avriel sat up. To Whill she was like an angel, so beautiful did she look in the firelight. As she began her song, he heard an angel’s voice to match.

*The dreaded day dawned, birthing a blood-red sun
Upon the beaches of Alshtuir stood our king
He stood proud with his men, those who would die
The finest of weapons the strongest of armor
The greatest of heroes shone in the sun
Our boats sailed away that most dreaded of days
Tears of a queen fell into the sea
Tears of a king fell into the sand
Over the hill the fell beasts they came
The elves of darkness stepped onto the sand
As the ocean took us to safety unknown
The battle began with the cry of our king
Over the waters it echoes, still to this day
To remind us what was given, so that we may live*

No one spoke. Rhunis, Abram, and Whill all stared at Avriel with wonder. Roakore looked at the fire, trying to hide the moisture in his eyes. Zerafin smiled and placed a hand on her shoulder. Avriel smiled at them all and wiped a tear from her eye.

“I apologize—that was not the happiest of songs, I know, but it is my favorite.”

Whill smiled back. “No, no, it was beautiful. I have never heard a voice with so much...feeling.”

Avriel wiped her eyes once again and stood. “I think I will find some rest.” She laughed as she looked at Tarren. “It seems as though the boy already has.”

Everyone laughed as they too looked at Tarren. He was sitting cross-legged with his head to the side, having fallen asleep sitting up. Avriel gently laid him down and covered him.

Zerafin stood. “We have a long road ahead and you should all get some rest. I will take first watch.”

They all shared good-nights and fell asleep one by one, Whill last of all. He lay staring up at the stars for some time, considering all he had learned. He laughed to himself at the memory of being overwhelmed in finding out he was a rightful king. Compared to hearing a five-thousand-year-old elven prophecy about himself, that news had been nothing. The stars danced and his mind raced, but eventually he found sleep.

Whill raced up the beach. The dragons had seen him, and they came—by the dozens, they came. They flew low, their wings dipping in the ocean with every beat. Only a short distance away an elf sat cross-legged, chanting quietly with his sword lifted to the heavens. Though Whill did not recognize the elf, he knew him to be Adimorda, and the blade he held—the ancient blade of legend—was Adromida. Whill raced toward him but seemed to get no closer—rather he was sinking quickly in the sand beneath his feet. Adimorda continued his chant, oblivious to Whill’s peril. Behind the elf stood his own father, sword held high, wearing a look of pure hatred, ready to strike down the elf. He realized it was not his father but Addakon. Whill screamed to Adimorda; the dragons neared; Addakon struck.

Whill’s screaming woke him and the rest of the camp. Zerafin kneeled by his side, a look of worry on his face. He extended a hand and addressed the others. “It’s alright, go back to sleep. He was having a bad dream.”

Abram came to his side as well. “What was it, Whill?”

He shook his head and laughed, embarrassed. “It was nothing, really. Just a dream, like Zerafin said.”

“Given the dreams you have had of late, I would not take any lightly if I were you.”

Worry was etched into Zerafin’s brow. “My sister was able to reach you in your dreams. Do you think maybe Addakon, or Eadon—?”

Whill cut him off. “No, no.” He shook his head. Could his dreams have been influenced by his enemies? Given recent events, he decided he really had no way of knowing. Nothing he heard would ever seem strange again. In the new world he had been thrust into, anything seemed possible.

“It is my turn to keep watch, Zerafin,” Abram said. “Get some rest, my friend.”

Zerafin nodded, never taking his eyes off Whill. Finally his serious look was replaced by a friendly smile. “Very well, then, but I shall like to hear of this dream later.”

He took his leave as Abram and Whill walked a few yards out of camp. They circled the perimeter in silence, Abram seeming to sense that Whill needed a moment to get his wits about him. There was little wind on the edge of the road to Kell-Torey, and the spring night was unusually warm. This came as a welcome change to the cold winter that had recently passed. Crickets chirped all around them, and every now and then the strange sound of bats filled the air. Whill had only slept for a few hours, but he was not tired; rather he found that his head was quite clear.

Abram ended the silence with a pat on Whill’s shoulder. “Have you forgotten that tomorrow is your twentieth birthday?”

Whill laughed. “With all that has transpired, I had forgotten completely.”

“Actually it is your birthday already—so says the moon.” Abram stared beyond the heavens to a place lost to the past. “I cannot believe it has been twenty years.”

Whill stopped and turned to Abram. “I had never realized, nor have I properly thanked you for, all you have done for me. I cannot imagine a life with you not at my side. So now, twenty years after the beginning of it all—thank you, Abram. Thank you for everything.”

Whill hugged him hard, and gave him a firm pat on the back, which Abram returned. He held Whill at arm’s length. “You have surpassed my greatest expectations in every regard, Whill. It has been an honor.”

The young king smiled, but it faded as his eyes moved to the woods. Abram understood the look instantly. “What is it?”

Whill surveyed the surrounding forest. “Listen—the insects and frogs. They have stopped.”

“So they have.”

They quickly and quietly returned to camp, where they found Rhunis and Roakore already awake and alert. Rhunis gestured them to come quietly. “Zerafin woke us a moment ago. He and Avriel have ventured into the brush.”

Roakore looked annoyed. “So what is it, eh? What’s the excitement about?”

Whill surveyed the woods once again, a chill running down his spine all the while. “The frogs and crickets have stopped singing to each other.”

Roakore huffed. “It’s about time, those little monsters kept me up half the night.”

“SHH!” the others exclaimed.

“Draggard are about,” Whill said. “Don’t ask me how I know, I just do. Ready your axe.”

Roakore nodded, but rather than his axe he took in his hands his stone bird and began to chant quietly.

Rhunis gave the dwarf a queer look. “What is he doing?” he asked no one in particular.

“What we should all be doing—preparing,” said Abram, as he slowly unsheathed his blade.

Just then the scream of a dying Draggard ripped through the air. Three great flashes of light erupted from within the forest, and Zerafin and Avriel came dashing out of the woods.

“Prepare for battle!” yelled Zerafin. He and Avriel each reached down and gathered stones. With a spoken word, the stones began to glow brightly. They threw them into the woods in every direction illuminating the still night.

Only then did Whill realize that Tarren was still asleep, snoring even. He gently shook the boy. But to no avail. He shook harder. “Tarren, wake up!”

“Do not bother,” said Avriel as she threw a few more stones into the woods. “I have made it so he will sleep soundly. The boy does not need to see this.”

Whill nodded, grateful for Avriel’s thoughtfulness.

Zerafin looked back at the others. “They have surrounded us.”

“Twenty, maybe thirty of them,” added Avriel.

Zerafin surveyed the night sky. “And at least a dozen Draquon. Ready your bows, and guard the boy.” He strung an arrow of his own.

Roakore seemed not to hear any of it as he stood with eyes closed, chanting still.

So they waited: Abram, Whill, Rhunis, and Roakore, with their backs to the fire and Tarren lying next to it. Zerafin stood guard on one side, Avriel on the other, facing the illuminated woods.

They did not need to wait long. No longer seeing a reason for stealth, the Draggard erupted from the shadows. Just as quickly the elves stretched out their arms at the attackers, an unseen energy hit the Draggard. The beasts were lifted into the air and thrown back into the shadows.

Whill could only watch in awe. Roakore saw also, and knew that it was time. With one last loud chant, he raised his hands and the stone bird whirled to life. Up into the air it flew, and with a thud it connected with a flying Draquon. The beast fell to the ground ten feet from the fire, its head crushed.

Whill and Abram sprang into action, firing shots into the night sky as ominous shadows flew overhead.

“Duck down!” shouted Avriel, and all four warriors obliged. A split second later a Draquon’s tail whipped overhead, and Avriel shot quickly. Before her warning had even begun to echo through the forest, the Draquon fell with an arrow through its eye.

From his crouch Whill noticed that the Draggard which had been thrown backwards by the energy blast had regrouped. “Watch out!” he shouted, as the Draggard threw their many spears in unison.

The missiles came whirling in, and Whill lifted his sword to deflect the onslaught, but there were too many.

The elves each raised a hand, and the spears swiftly changed course and flew into the night sky. More than a half dozen Draquon fell from above, the weapons protruding from their many wounds. The Draggard who had thrown them hissed and growled as they charged in. Once again the elves sent a shockwave of energy to throw them back.

Whill felt helpless as he watched the elves unleash their devastating power. He and the others stood at the ready. Roakore’s stone bird whirled by and took another Draquon from the heavens. The elves turned their focus to the flying Draggard as well. They raised their arms, chanting in Elvish, and blasted multicolored spells into the sky. Burnt and broken bodies fell from above. One unfortunate beast landed directly in the fire, and embers and burning wood flew in all directions. Rhunis’s cloak caught fire, as did Tarren’s blanket. The knight stomped on the blanket as Whill and Abram slashed and stabbed at the thrashing Draquon still alive in the blaze.

Roakore settled his sights on the two closest winged beasts, who were dazed but not down. The stone bird pounded mercilessly back and forth as he guided it from one Draquon’s head to the other until they moved no more. The elves engaged the others with their devastating swords as the Draggard regrouped and charged at the warriors.

Whill again was left to watch in awe as the elves took down the beasts with graceful precision. The Draggard were no match for their power. They fell one after another as the siblings cut through blade and armor, bone and flesh. Roakore let his stone bird fall and breathed in gasps as he took up his axe.

“They’ll not have all the fun!” he huffed, and charged into the fray. Rhunis was right behind him. Whill and Abram, reluctant to leave Tarren, watched as the others made short work of the remaining Draggard.

With the last killing stroke came again the darkening of the night. Whill thought that, with the threat gone, the elves had extinguished the glowing stones. He soon realized that was not the case.

“Be ready!” said Avriel in a hushed tone.

Whill was chilled once again; there was a hint of fear in Avriel's voice. The six formed a tight circle around the fire and Tarren.

"What is it?" asked Rhunis.

Zerafin closed his eyes for a moment. "A Dark Elf."

"A *powerful* Dark elf," Avriel added.

"Bah! Bring 'em on!" said Roakore, as he put his stone bird back in motion. "I see him hiding."

"Roakore, don't!" warned Avriel, but too late. Roakore released his weapon and it disappeared into the night. Just as quickly as it left, it returned—hitting Roakore square in the chest and sending him flying over the fire. He did not move.

"Damn!" exclaimed Zerafin. "All of you, hold!"

From the woods where Roakore had sent his stone bird, a figure emerged. He came boldly from the shadows and into the light, not twenty feet from the group. He was indeed a Dark elf. His long black hair was tucked behind tall, pointed ears that were adorned with many earrings, and he wore no armor—a fact Whill found more than a little unsettling. Instead he wore a flowing black robe. The hood was drawn back, revealing a shiny black, dragon-scale tunic underneath. His face was as fair as any elf's, but for the swirling black tattoos.

Zerafin stepped forward and spoke in Elvish. "Go now and tell your master that you and your band of monsters have failed here tonight, or you will not see the dawn."

The Dark elf did not move. Instead he laughed, a wicked, guttural laugh. "Ah, yes—the noble Zerafin. Much like your father you are, but a little less brave. As I remember, you left him to die and went sailing away with the other elf children. How valiant your words seem now."

Avriel stood beside her brother. "Your insults have no power."

The Dark elf took a step forward. "And the princess of the fallen Elves of the Sun, Avriel. It is such a treat to see you again. I shall enjoy every moment I spend with you henceforth, my love, do not doubt. But for now I have your coward brother to deal with!"

A flash of red light emanated from his hand and traveled toward the two elves. They raised their hands in return and from them leapt their own energy to meet the attack. The Dark elf laughed once again.

"I see you need the help of your sister to meet my challenge! How fitting. This only shows once again the greater power that is to be found within darkness."

The elves almost seemed to be at a stalemate, but the siblings looked slightly more taxed in holding the Dark elf's attack at bay, while he showed not a sign of

effort.

Rhunis shot an arrow at the elf. It flew straight at his head and stopped dead, floating only inches from his flesh. With his free hand the elf reached out, snapped the arrow in half, and let it fall to the ground.

“Humans, I find, are the most interesting of minor creations. They are brave, I must say.” The elf’s face twisted with rage. “But none too smart!” He clutched the air with his fist and Rhunis was lifted off the ground, his hands frantically gripping his throat.

Zerafin gave a cry and charged ahead, sword in hand. Avriel was forced back many steps, having to hold back the Dark elf’s energy on her own, but not for long. Zerafin quickly engaged the elf, who had by then drawn his own sword. Avriel, now free of the energy attack, rushed forward to aid her brother. Rhunis fell to the ground.

Whill watched on in awe as the three exchanged blows. The siblings fought well together, but so fast was the fighting that it was hard for Whill to follow. He looked to Abram. “What do we do?”

“What can we do?”

Whill found himself useless.

Zerafin received a slash to the leg but fought on. Avriel scored a minor hit to the Dark elf’s shoulder. He jumped back out of reach and lowered his sword as the elves stood at the ready. The Dark elf looked at his bleeding shoulder and laughed as the wound healed in an instant.

“Fools! You cannot defeat me. You have felt my blade; you know it to be true. Why fight on when to do so is folly?”

It was Avriel’s turn to laugh. “You are the fool. We have had five hundred years to prepare our blades for the likes of you. Have you so quickly forgotten the ways of the Elves of the Sun?”

“You should have left while you had the chance,” said Zerafin.

The Dark elf soon understood. Zerafin and Avriel locked their free arms and came at him in a spinning, attack. The elf was forced back on his heels as he frantically parried blows that neither Whill, Abram, nor Rhunis could register. Zerafin struck followed by Avriel, and though both were blocked, the Dark elf had to bring his blade low to counter the second strike. When he did Zerafin was there with a thrust through the chest. As the blade sank, the Dark elf extended his free arm and there was a flash of light. Avriel’s blade flew from her hands as the Dark elf slashed her stomach. Zerafin stabbed again, this time through the neck.

The sight of Avriel’s blood maddened Whill. With a cry he charged forward with his father’s blade.

The Dark elf's laugh became a gurgle as blood poured from his neck. He slashed again and severed Zerafin's sword hand at the wrist. As he reeled back in pain, his sister thrust both hands forward into the open air. A shockwave of energy rushed forth and shattered the kneecaps of the Dark elf. He fell to his knees, but thrust forward once again, and impaled Avriel through the gut.

Whill watched in horror as the blade came out of Avriel's back. He screamed and brought back his blade for a killing blow, but stopped dead as the Dark elf raised his free hand. Whill felt more pain than he had ever known as red light emanated from the wounded elf and hit Whill with steady pulses. The evil creature laughed as he looked Whill dead in the eye. "Everyone you love will die horribly, fool human—"

The Dark elf fell quiet as Zerafin pulled his sword from the Dark elf's throat and hewed off its head. There was an explosion of magic as his blade cut through the dark elf's spell shield. Whill fell to the ground next to Avriel as Zerafin extended his hand toward the elf's body. It erupted in flames, and the pyre burned on as he poured forth great amounts of energy to incinerate the Dark elf—until not even ashes remained.

Chapter 20

Dwarf Pride

The sight was a bloody one. More than twenty dead Draggard littered the ground, along with nearly a dozen Draquon. Roakore was still out cold, though Whill could see his chest heave slightly as he breathed. Rhunis coughed violently, his throat having been nearly crushed. Zerafin bled from his severed hand, and Avriel lay upon the ground, close to death.

Whill's pain had subsided as soon as the Dark elf died. Now he looked upon the elf maiden whom he had grown to love in such a short time. Abram was already tending to Roakore, who had awakened and was trying to stand.

Whill took Avriel in his arms and looked into her blue eyes. She coughed and blood trickled from her lips. He felt something inside him tear at the sight of the dying elf. Rage welled within him as he watched her slowly slipping away. Tears welled in his eyes.

"Give me..." Her voice was so soft that Whill hardly heard her.

"What?" he asked. "Give you what?"

"My sword," she whispered.

Whill moved to find it, but then he saw Zerafin standing next to them, Avriel's sword in hand. Whill took it from him and placed it in Avriel's bloody hand. Zerafin placed his hand on his shoulder.

"You should step back."

Avriel took the blade in both hands and placed it upon her chest. Instantly she seemed more aware as she closed her eyes and wrapped herself in bright blue tendrils of healing energy.

"The wounds are grave," Zerafin said. "It shall take a moment. But she will be alright."

Whill looked at his bloody stump. "And you—can you heal such a wound?"

Zerafin laughed. If he felt any pain he did not show it. "I could actually grow another if I needed. But simply reconnecting the original will take far less energy."

Whill could not shake the feeling that he was caught up in a strange dream as he watched the elf press the severed hand to his bloody wrist. The same blue tendrils encircled it.

He left the elves to their healing and rushed over to check on Roakore. Abram was trying to keep the stubborn dwarf from getting up.

“Let me up, ye damned fool, I don’t need no healing! I don’t need no help!”

Abram cursed the dwarf. “Every rib on his left side is broken, and one must have punctured his lung, for he is coughing blood. Still the fool refuses the elves’ help and insists he is alright.”

Roakore lay growling under Abram’s restraining arms. Whill shrugged. “Let him up, then. He says he is alright, and so he must be.” He winked to Abram on the sly. “Give the good dwarf his dignity.”

Abram let go and Roakore got to his feet with much effort but not a sign of discomfort. He shoved Abram weakly. “At least the lad has some sense!”

The three walked back to the fire and found Zerafin and Avriel waking a sleepy-eyed Tarren. Roakore addressed Abram out of the side of his mouth. “I thought ye said they was both badly wounded.”

Abram looked down at the dwarf’s left side. “They are excellent healers, as you know.”

“I’ll ready the damned horses,” Roakore huffed, and stormed off.

Abram looked on, worried, as Whill watched Avriel’s every move. His visual scrutiny was cut short as Tarren woke and gave a shout upon seeing the many dead Draggard.

“Shh, it’s alright, Tarren. They are all dead.” Avriel stroked his head.

Tarren pushed her hand aside and made a disappointed face. “Aw, you let me sleep through it! I wish I could have seen it—what happened? Did they breathe fire like dragons, did those other ones really fly, did—?”

“There will be time for questions on the road,” said Whill. “We still have a long ride, and we must leave now.”

“Not until we have destroyed the remains,” Zerafin said. The elves went to work incinerating the corpses with a word and a raised hand.

The others broke down camp quickly and doused the fire. As they walked the horses to the road, Avriel came up next to Whill, who was ahead of the others.

“I’m alright,” she said. “Thank you for your help.”

“I did nothing.”

Avriel raised an eyebrow. “Really? Did you not care?”

“Yes, of course I did! I—”

“You did care—you cared enough to cry, and for that I thank you. You are a good friend, Whill of Agora.”

He was at a loss for words. He was not embarrassed that she had seen him cry, but rather overjoyed that she had called him friend.

“As are you, Avriel of Elladrindellia.”

She smiled brightly and slowed to walk alongside her brother, who now had the overexcited Tarren as a passenger. Whill guided the group the rest of the way to the road with the widest smile he had ever known.

Soon the sun began to rise in the east, sending red, orange, and purple light dancing through the thin clouds. The group had many more days to Kell-Torey, but they traveled now at a much faster pace than previously. They knew now that they were being followed, and an attack could come from behind at any time—or by ambush up ahead. That being so, Zerafin rode a quarter-mile in front of them, and Rhunis a quarter-mile behind.

They traveled in this manner for hours, keeping the horses at a steady trot. Finally Zerafin stopped and let the others catch up to him.

“The horses need a rest, as do we all, short though it will be.”

Abram dismounted with a groan and walked over to Roakore’s pony. The dwarf was taking slow, labored breaths and sat slumped against his pony’s mane.

“How is he?” asked Whill.

Abram gave Roakore a small shove, but the dwarf did not move. “He is asleep.”

“He is badly hurt.”

“Yes, but the fool would not ask for help if he were on his deathbed—not from the elves.”

Whill lit up. “Not from the elves, aye.” He walked over to Zerafin but found him busy answering Tarren’s many questions about the battle. He searched for Avriel and found her not far away, kneeling by a small brook and filling her water skin. He kneeled down next to her and dipped his own empty pouch in the cold water.

“I ask a favor.”

“What is it?”

Roakore is badly hurt. But he is very stubborn. For whatever reason, he will not ask—or consciously accept—you or your brother’s help. Stupid, I know,” he added, worried that she might take offense.

Avriel laughed. “No, no, not stupid. The dwarves are a stubborn bunch that much is true. But it serves them well. Without such will, they could not have achieved all that they have. They are tough as stone, as they say.” She leaned in closer, as if divulging a secret. Whill’s throat went dry. “But deep, deep inside, they are like any of us. They feel love, pain, and fear.”

They stood. “So,” Avriel said. “You want me to help you heal Roakore?”

“Yes. I mean, I healed Tarren on my own, but of course in my own healing I needed your help. I think that I can do this. I *need* to do this.”

Avriel raised a hand. “I understand, Whill.” She paused in thought. “I will give you my sword. Beware, for it holds great power. Before my brother and I went on this journey to Kell-Torey, we were given gifts by many elves, gifts in the form of energy offerings. You must focus on Roakore, much as you did on Tarren. But you must not let your emotions get the better of you. Clear your mind. Think only of Roakore’s injuries. Do not let him take more than you intend to give.”

“I understand.”

She locked eyes with him for a silent moment. “Do you? Do you understand that if you give him too much, he will drain the blade and die? If you are not in control the entire time, you may kill the both of you.”

If Avriel intended on scaring him, she had succeeded. He gazed back at her, now unsure.

“Remember, Whill, give him only what he needs. Do not take from the blade for yourself, and focus on his injuries. You can do this. I have faith in you.”

That was all Whill needed to hear. Together they walked the game trail back to the road. Rhunis had gathered everyone else’s water pouches. Upon seeing Whill and Avriel’s were full, he said, “That way, then.”

Zerafin was dueling with Tarren, each with a wooden stick for a sword. Tarren waved happily. “Look, Whill, Zerafin is teaching me how to fight!”

Just then the elf smacked Tarren atop the head with his mock sword.

“Ouch!” the boy said with a scowl.

“That is your first lesson, young one: let nothing distract you from the enemy at hand.”

Roakore sat with Abram in the short grass at the side of the old road. They each sported a smoking pipe. The dwarf took his puffs with great care and tried to act as if nothing bothered him.

Avriel handed Whill her blade with a nod. He could feel the power within it. He took long, slow, calming breaths and went over to them. He sat facing Roakore, the sword concealed behind him.

“How do you feel?” Whill asked nonchalantly.

Roakore puffed on his pipe and began coughing uncontrollably. Whill noted that he had bloodied the ground before him.

“Do ye ask fer the elves or fer yerself?”

“I ask as a friend, and I hope you would do the same.”

“Bah, the pain ain’t nothin, just a few busted ribs is all. I ain’t gonna die from it, if that’s what yer thinkin. I know the elves are dyin’ to practice on me,

but I ain't asked fer help and I ain't needin' none." He finished with a violent cough that produced more blood than before.

Whill thought for a moment. "I was raised partially by Abram, as you know, but I lived the first years of my life with a great healer. She taught me many things." Roakore eyed him suspiciously, but Whill only smiled. "Listen. You practically saved Abram and me atop that mountain against the Draggard. Let a man pay his debts the only way he can—let me help you. I know that you do not ask for help, but please accept that which I offer."

Roakore eyed Whill for a moment and then went into another violent coughing fit. When he was done, and had painted the grass with more red, he nodded. "Alright then," he said, swooning. "What did ye have in mind?"

"Lie on your back, if you will. And close your eyes."

Roakore wearily obeyed. Abram gave Whill a suspicious look. In his left hand Whill clenched Avriel's blade. He let his right hand fall upon Roakore's chest. At first he did not take from the sword, but rather he used his right hand and grazed Roakore's chest in circular motions. He cleared his mind, focusing his entire being on his friend. Very slowly he tapped the energy within Avriel's sword. He jolted slightly as he felt the first waves of power flow from the sword and into his body. He had the sudden urge to take from the sword for himself, but he closed his eyes and fought it back. He guided the energy through his body and into Roakore's chest.

Zerafin walked over to his sister, who was watching Whill from afar, and spoke to her with his mind.

Tell me you didn't give him your sword to heal the dwarf.

Avriel smiled mischievously. You think he is not ready?

Of course he is not ready! He has had no training in the ways of healing. Yet you give him your own blade!

She kept watch over Whill, and did not turn to look at her brother. He has healed before. Yes, I know what you will say—he almost killed himself. But I believe he can do this. I believe in Adimorda, and so I must believe in Whill of Agora. He is our only hope, dear brother. You know this as well as I. And so we must let him do as he will.

Zerafin did not take his eyes from his sister. He knew her heart better than any.

"You love him." He spoke aloud now.

Slowly she met her brother's gaze. Avriel could not lie to him, even if she wanted to. She smiled to herself and pondered his statement.

"It seems I do."

Her brother breathed heavily. "You know what is said about such matters."

"But do I care?" she snapped back. "Nay. Many elves have forsaken love for law, but to what end? We have hid away for centuries in Elladrindellia, venturing from our given lands only to help in the wars. We—you and I, all of us—have met humans whom we liked, even loved." She took his arm. "Yes, brother, remember even you have fancied a human woman."

Zerafin turned on his sister. "And now she is dead! Centuries lie in the wake of her last breath."

Avriel made her tone soft toward her anguished brother. "That she is, but had you been allowed to teach her, to show her our ways, would she not be here today? I fear we have erred in not allowing such unions. Elves and humans both would be better off now if we had shared more in the past."

"You forget, this is a law laid down by the elders, our mother among them."

"Laws change like the seasons. I will one day be an elder. Or you, Zerafin. You have only to take it and the throne of Elladrindellia is yours. Mother wishes it."

"You know that I will not! Father may yet be alive, somewhere."

Avriel looked mournfully upon her brother. "Drindellia fell. Why do you hold on to this...?"

"This what, fantasy? Has Whill not been your fantasy since childhood, a fantasy now come true? So allow me this: I know it may not seem logical, but I feel that our father is alive."

Whill dared not open his eyes. Behind his lids he could see the faint blue light. The power surged through him now; it came like a rushing river. The mental dam he had built had been overrun. Roakore's damaged body was taking all that it could, more than it needed. The dwarf's chest heaved and his body stiffened. Whill tried with all his might to let go, but he could not. He was but a vessel now, no more in control than a man in an avalanche. He gathered all his mental strength, summoned all his willpower, and with everything in him he screamed to the sword, *STOP!*

To his amazement, it subsided. He opened his eyes to find Roakore lying still before him. Abram, Rhunis, and an amazed-looking Tarren stared down at him. Whill lifted the sword of Avriel and stared in wonder. Leirva, the sword of the

elf maiden of Elladrindellia—he had wielded it. Avriel and Zerafin came over to him.

Avriel offered Whill a smile. “I knew you could do it.” She extended her arm to take the sword.

“You did well,” said Zerafin.

Whill handed over the powerful blade. “What of Roakore?”

Avriel and Zerafin both regarded the dwarf. Avriel laughed. “Well he seems to be fully healed, and then some.”

“Yes, our gruff friend should be awake any moment and full of dragon piss.”

Roakore’s eyes popped open and he jumped to his feet. He jerked his head in all directions, eyeing each of them. He frantically felt his chest and his ribs.

“What in dragon’s hellfire happened here, eh?” He snorted and spat. “No blood, me side don’t hurt, and why do I feel I might explode from within?”

Whill waved off the others, who were starting to giggle. He put an arm around the dwarf and walked him away.

“Roakore, do you remember nothing?”

Roakore eyed the others over his shoulder with a scowl. “I remember—I don’t know. I remember stopping fer a rest and then—”

Whill stopped him. “I offered to help you and you accepted. You did not ask for help, and probably didn’t need it. But I felt obliged to do what I could and I tended to your wounds, minor as they were.”

Roakore felt his ribs again. “I agreed?” He looked back at the others. “Is this the work o’ those two damned elves? They think they need to look over me—aye, me!”

Whill shook his head. “No! No! They did nothing, I swear to you on the blood of my father. I alone tended to you, I alone.”

“That damned Dark elf sent me own weapon back at me. Took a good hit, I did.”

“A hit that would have killed a dragon,” Whill agreed.

Roakore’s scowl slowly left his face. “Yer a good healer,” he said, and went to join the others.

Whill knew that in his own stubborn way, Roakore had just said thank you. A smile spread across his face as he followed the dwarf.

Rhunis and Zerafin were leading the horses back from their drink at the brook. Abram and Rhunis had started a small fire and were preparing what was left of the venison. Whill walked over to Tarren and took the boy by the shoulder.

“Listen, Tarren, I ask a favor of you.”

“Anything.”

Tarren's tone was so serious, it almost made Whill laugh out loud. He composed a serious face to match. "Do not tell Roakore what you saw. You may not understand, but trust me and give me your word."

To Whill's surprise, Tarren winked. "Oh, I understand. If Roakore knew he was healed by elven ways, we wouldn't hear the end of it. Don't worry, Whill, your secret's safe."

He laughed out loud and rustled Tarren's hair. "Good lad."

After a quick meal, the companions were off again. They were many miles from Kell-Torey and had days ahead of them. But the mood was light, the talk merry.

They had passed a few roads branching off from the main road, leading to other villages, but they did not venture down any. Trouble had followed Whill since Fendale, and he did not intend on endangering anyone else. Danger was a shadow that wrapped itself like a cloak around Whill of Agora. He did not know how he could possibly live up to the prophecy. He had barely wrapped his mind around being the son of a king. At moments it was all too much, and he found himself having to mentally stomp out the fires of fear and doubt. It was in those moments that he thought of his new-found friends. If any good at all had come out of the last few days' revelations, it was the company he now kept. Never had he met dwarf nor elf; never had he seen such fierce warriors.

"You are not such a bad warrior yourself," said Avriel as she rode by.

Whill smiled at the compliment but quickly realized that Avriel had read his mind. He quickened to ride beside her. "I thought you would not read my mind without permission."

"And I have not."

"But what you said—it was along close lines to what I was thinking."

"I did not read your mind as much as you did the telling." She smiled. "You were projecting your thoughts of us. Unintentionally, it seems."

Whill blanched. "You can hear my thoughts if they're...about you personally?"

Avriel slowly moved her horse closer to Whill's. "If you are thinking intensely enough about me, or someone, it is sometimes hard for that person to ignore."

Whill looked away. *Great!* He thought. *She probably already knows. This is so unfair. Dammit, she'll hear you. Right, relax, Whill. Don't project, don't think it. Not that word. Choose another. Dragons! Yes, dragons—big ones, small ones. A dragon flying through the midnight sky against a full moonscape....Avriel astride the dragon upon a velvet saddle, as naked as—damn it, man, shut up!*

Whill fell back, thinking of nothing but witch's warts as he came to ride next to Zerafin.

"You have to teach me how to not project," he said.

Zerafin smiled. "If you wish. Why? Are you afraid of offending naked dragons?"

Whill gulped and slowly fell back again. It was safest it seemed, to ride beside Abram.

They rode on for the remainder of the day. As night fell, they stopped and made camp once again. They had eaten the remaining venison, to Roakore's dismay. He had not had it in quite some time and had a keen liking for it. He strode up to Whill and patted him on the back. Whill was almost knocked over by the strong hand.

"C'mon then, lad, let's get us all some dinner."

Whill tied off his horse and retrieved his bow. "Night hunting?"

Roakore scoffed. "Is it night? I see fine no matter the light. I was raised within a mountain, ye remember."

They ventured into the dense forest under faint, cloud-covered moonlight for more than ten minutes. Roakore was, Whill discovered, following a game trail. He came to a stop, lifted his broad nose in the air, and took a long slow sniff.

"Hmm. Somethin's about." He went left and Whill followed. After a minute they came to a clearing where a small herd of deer sat in the grass. Roakore crouched and cursed the wind under his breath.

"No time fer stealth, lad. The wind'll give us away soon, don't ye doubt."

Whill strung his bow and took aim at the closest deer. Roakore grabbed his arm gently.

"Let me, laddie," said Roakore, and he started his stone bird a-whirling.

The deer became aware of the hunters as the soft whoop of the weapon resonated through the night air. The stone bird came in with a blur as the deer got to their feet and began to leap into the woods. The stones caught one round the neck, a buck with a magnificent set of antlers, it fell to the ground and moved no more.

"Bahaha! Now that's how it's done, laddie!"

They returned to camp to find that a fire had been started. Roakore found a suitable stone to work on and washed it off before spreading salt upon it. He hung the deer from a tree and skinned and butchered it with the help of Tarren, who was more than eager to use one of the dwarf's hatchets.

From the woods Avriel had gathered handfuls of leeks, herbs, roots, and a few wild potatoes. She laid them out next to the fire and began washing them.

Roakore nodded in approval. "If only we had a pot we could get a bit o' warm stew a-brewin'."

Avriel rose purposefully and went looking around at the surrounding stones. Roakore and the others watched with interest as she found one she liked, a large one the size of Roakore's head. She lifted it with ease and brought it near the fire. Avriel stood before the rock with the firelight catching her raven hair. She put a hand to the hilt of her blade and extended a hand to the stone. Suddenly the rock began to indent in the center until it was almost flat. Then the edges of the flat stone rose while the center remained upon the ground. Avriel took measure of her work. Roakore stared in awe at the large stone bowl she had just created.

"Will that do?" she asked.

Roakore only nodded with an approving smile.

Water was gathered and soon a hot venison stew was brewing. Around the fire everyone sat, except for Zerafin, who was walking the perimeter on guard duty.

"'Bout an hour the food'll be done," said Roakore as he found a suitable rock to sit on.

"Sure smells good," Tarren piped up. "Say, Roakore, why didn't you make a bowl like Avriel did? You have powers over stone, don't you? Or so I've overheard."

"Bah, I coulda. I can do more than that with stone, boy. Why, half me chambers are covered in me own creations!"

"Really! What can you do?"

Roakore stood and pointed to the rock he had just been sitting on. "Sit there, lad, if ye dare."

Tarren sat. Roakore lifted his hands in the boy's direction and began to chant softly. Tarren yelped and held tightly to the stone as it began to rise into the air. Around the fire and over everyone's heads the stone circled slowly. He began to giggle. Faster and faster he circled on the stone until he was laughing hysterically. Roakore made the stone go so fast that eventually Tarren could not hold on. With a yelp the boy went flying through the air over their heads, end over end, and slammed into the ground with a thud.

If he was hurt he didn't show it, for he ran back to the group, cheering, "That was great! Oh, boy, wait till I tell my sister I met a dwarf who can make people fly on stones!"

"Bahaha," Roakore laughed as he slowed the stone and brought it to its place.

Avriel looked at the dwarf, intrigued. "It is amazing, the skill you have with the manipulation of stone, good dwarf. I have heard rumors that you dwarves

have powers akin to our own. I see perhaps they are true.”

Roakore’s eyes lit up. “*Akin* to yours? That I doubt. ’Twas a gift given to Ky’Dren and his line by the gods. Do *your* powers come from the gods?”

“Our powers come from ourselves. But Roakore, you must be able to manipulate more than just stone.”

Roakore scoffed at that. “Bah, what else is there fer a dwarf, lady elf, but stone? Why would I want to be manipulatin’ anythin’ else?”

“You may be right; the manipulation of stone would be the most prudent power for a dwarf to possess. But I wonder, can you move...this tree limb, for instance?”

Just then a small limb from the wood pile floated into the air and rested at Roakore’s feet. He scowled at her.

“Now listen, elf, I ain’t needin’ to prove nothin’ to ye.”

Avriel put up her hands defensively. “I do not mean to insult you, good dwarf. I simply believe that the powers you exhibit over stone can be used on anything.”

Roakore settled a bit. “Well *I* simply don’t. I believe I can move stone, and so I can.”

“Ah, but if you believed you could move that limb, could you not do it?”

“But I don’t.”

“But what if you did?”

“I don’t be knowing ’cause I don’t be believing!”

Suddenly Tarren spoke up. “I believe I can move the branch, Avriel. But see?” He scrunched up his face and concentrated on the wood. Finally he gave up with a puff of breath. “I believe, but I can’t.”

Roakore kicked the branch. “Well, lad, that’s ’cause no gods gave ye or yer kin the powers.”

“It is because that part of your mind has not been awakened, Tarren,” said Avriel.

Tarren gasped. “So I could be taught? Could you teach me?”

Just then Zerafin approached from the shadows. “No, we cannot teach you. It is forbidden.” Avriel scoffed and leaned back on the grass. “Though many of us, including my sister, do not agree with the law, it has been laid down by the elders.”

Tarren sulked. “It sounds like a stupid law.”

Zerafin found a seat next to the boy. “It may sound stupid, but there is reason behind it. The elders fear teaching humans our ways. Such power in the wrong hands can lead to disaster, as is the case of Eadon. Many pure of heart have been

corrupted by the power that our ways bring. It must never be abused, and it can never be used for personal gain, lest corruption and greed overwhelm the soul.”

“That’s the last thing we be needin’—a bunch o’ human Eadons walkin’ around,” Roakore said.

“The elders’ sentiments exactly.”

Whill had been listening keenly and something occurred to him. “What do the elders think of me, of my training in the elven ways?”

“Many are against it, but it is part of our debt to the kings of Uthen-Arden,” answered Avriel.

“What about the prophecy?”

“Many do not believe it,” Zerafin said.

“Really.”

There was a long silence, which was finally broken by Abram.

“Well, I believe it.”

“So do I,” said Tarren

“I always have,” Avriel agreed.

Rhunis gave Tarren a little shake. “I think with friends like these, anything is possible.”

Everyone laughed, Whill included, though he noticed that Zerafin had not concurred.

You were projecting again. Whill’s eyes moved to Zerafin. *Yes, I also believe the prophecy.*

Whill nodded, feeling foolish. *I really need to learn how to stop doing that.*

Roakore announced that the stew was done, and everyone filled a traveling cup and enjoyed the hot meal. After many helpings Abram sat back against a tree stump and lit his pipe. He looked up at the stars as he patted his belly.

“Ah, Mallekell is bright tonight.”

Both elves looked to the heavens at the elven constellation of Mallekell.

“Where’s Mallekell?” Tarren asked.

Avriel pointed. “There. You see those three stars? They are the center. From there you can make out the arms and sword, and that one there, the brightest one, is the eye of Mallekell.”

Roakore scoffed. “That there, those three an’ that one? That be the stars o’ Ky’Dren, ain’t no elf.”

“For you, good dwarf, it is of Ky’Dren,” Zerafin said. “But to us elves, it is of Mallekell.”

Roakore only scowled and shook his head. “That brightest star there, it’s the gateway to the Mountain o’ the Gods, it is, an’ nothing else.”

Whill knew nothing could be said to the dwarf about his belief, and no more was said on the subject by the elves. Tarren, however, cared not. He had learned already the history of Ky'Dren.

“So who is Mallekell?”

Avriel looked to the boy and smiled at his innocence. “He was the first elf to become enlightened since the ancient years, our first teacher in the ways of Orna Catorna. He gained enlightenment exactly 10,091 years ago. That is when the age of enlightenment began, and the reckoning of years that we use today.”

Roakore seemed jealous of the lad's attention. “*Our* reckonin o' years began with the settlin o' the Ky'Dren Mountains. 'Tis why it's the dwarf year 5170. That's also the human reckonin', ye know, since ye humans never bothered with the reckonin o' years till ye met us dwarves.”

Tarren ignored him, so interested was he about the first enlightened elf. “So—ten thousand years ago, eh, Avriel? What is enlightenment, anyway?”

“Enlightenment is a human word for a state of mind seldom reached. The Elvish translation is Orna Catorna. Our written history dates back hundreds of thousands of years, through many ages. Mallekell ushered in the age of enlightenment, though it is said that we elves had such powers tens of thousands of years before.”

Zerafin took up the telling. “Of the many ages of the elves, there is one called the God Wars. It is written that elves had gained power as had never been seen upon Keye—Keye being the elven name for our world. The ancient elves had grown into two factions, and war had begun, much like what we have seen with the Dark elves and the Elves of the Sun.”

Avriel scoffed. “Exactly alike they are. We are repeating the past as we speak; the struggle of good and evil wages on. While some use the power to help others and advance our people's quality of life, others only use the power for themselves. But once one goes down the path to personal power, he shall seldom return. The ego is a ravenous beast, and will stop at nothing to gain more.”

Tarren was enthralled. “So who won? Who won the War of the Gods?”

Zerafin bowed his head, a great sorrow showed in his stoic face. “No one. Both sides lost.”

Tarren looked disappointed. “But how can both sides lose? Didn't good defeat evil? Didn't the heroes win?”

Avriel shook her head. “No one won. Hundreds of thousands died, cities burned. The age of the Wars of the Gods went on for nearly one thousand years, until there was nothing left to fight for, until all had been destroyed. At the end of the wars less than a thousand elves remained. The most powerful of all elves

was Kellallea. She had finally defeated the armies of her enemies. After the final battle she stood before her followers and gave her last order.”

Firelight shone upon her face as she spun her ancient tale. She seemed to Whill like a goddess among men, so beautiful was she. Every mannerism was a compliment to her being, every gesture intoxicating. In a panic he did not show, he wondered if he were projecting. It did not relieve his fears when Avriel looked his way as she told her story.

“Kellallea ordered her followers to never again practice the ways of Orna Catorna, to abandon all memory of enlightenment. It was argued that only greed and evil had destroyed so many lives, that goodness and love could now thrive. But Kellallea would hear none of it. She had decided what she must do.”

She paused and listened keenly to the night air. The others, who had been so enthralled in the tale, did the same. Tarren looked around behind him, to the dark woods beyond their clearing by the road. “And then what did she do? What did she know she had to do?”

Zerafin took up the telling. “She used her great power to steal from her followers all of the energy that remained within their blades. She stripped them of all power.”

Avriel gazed into the firelight. “She made them dumb to all knowledge of Orna Catorna. They would remember what had been, but not how it was achieved. She said that we were not ready for such power, and maybe never would be.”

“So that’s it?” Tarren asked. “She got rid of magic?”

“That she did, for a time,” answered Avriel.

“She viewed it as a curse, and at the time indeed it was,” Zerafin said. “She and all the others had lost their lands, their loved ones, everything they held dear.”

Avriel continued. “She ordered the survivors to rebuild, to remember, and to find peace with the land and each other once again. She promised to watch over all, and to help the pure of heart, and then...”

“And then what? What happened to her? Is she still alive?”

“Yes, she is,” Zerafin said. “She is the oldest living elf.”

Tarren’s eyes widened. “Where is she?”

There was a tear upon Avriel’s cheek. “She was within Drindellia. Those thousands of years ago she used all of the power she had taken and took the form of a great tree. By the time of my father she had grown to the height of a mountain—her branches stretched for miles. She was the most beautiful being under the heavens.”

“She became a tree!” Tarren exclaimed.

Whill smiled. "She became a tree."

"As big as a mountain!" Roakore boomed.

"She became a tree," Zerafin concurred. "It was under her great branches one autumn day, within the city of Kell, that Mallekell gained Orna Catorna, or enlightenment, for the first time. He said he had achieved through meditation a state of mind that allowed him to reach the mind of Kellallea within the great tree. He had done what the first of the elves had done, what Kellallea herself had done in that ancient and lost time—he had reached a state of mind in which understanding of the universe came to him in a rush of clarity.

"Kellallea had two choices: destroy him, or teach him what she knew, and revive the knowledge and power that had nearly destroyed the elves."

"What did she do?" Tarren asked, at the edge of his rock.

Roakore threw his arms in the air. "The elves got powers, don't they, silly boy? What are ye thinking she did? The lady just told us 'bout the age o' enlightenment." Avriel smiled at him, appreciating the fact that he took interest in her people as she did his. "Yes, she trained him, and he others, and here we are once again, fighting against that which caused the taking of powers, the fight between good and evil rages on."

"As it will eternally, as it must," added Zerafin.

Whill sat up. "Eternally, as it must?"

Zerafin looked at Whill. In the firelight his sharp features seemed, for the first time, alien. "Yes, as it must, eternally."

"Then this fight—these times, me, us—none of it matters?"

"Yes, and no. We are simply forces of nature blessed with thought. The war that wages in your heart, in my heart, upon the beaches of the world, within the clouds, the storms, the disaster, the growth—it is all the same. It is all a small part of the great being."

Tarren scrunched up his face once again. "Huh?"

Avriel chuckled. "My brother's spiritual beliefs are hard for many to grasp, though they are not new to my people. What he is saying, Tarren, and Whill, is that we are but a part of a larger being, the one being."

Tarren still looked confused. Roakore patted him on the shoulder. "I'm with ye, lad. They lost me at 'she turned into a tree.'"

The night seemed to rush back in, the air, sounds, and sights beyond the firelight. A quiet had fallen over the camp during the telling, as if the world hushed to hear the tale of itself.

In that moment Avriel gave Whill a look of utter serenity and profound joy.

You felt it, Whill, just now, didn't you? That is what my brother speaks of, that is what you felt. It is our true self seeing itself. I am a part of you, you are a

part of me.

Whill stared back at Avriel. The connection he felt that night, to his friends and to the world around him, within him, became his own enlightenment.

With the meal done and clean-up finished, everyone settled into their respective bedrolls for the night. There was still a chance of ambush, and Rhunis wanted all up before the dawn to begin a long day of hard travel. He took the first guard, disappearing into the brush without a sound. The fire now burned to coals, and the stars above shone bright. Avriel and Zerafin had laid enchantments around the camp, or so they said, for Whill knew nothing of such things. Talk had shifted to the many different factions of elves, which enthralled Tarren and Whill alike.

“So you mean there are a buncha different elves? With different powers?” Tarren asked from his bedroll. He lay on his belly, propped up on his elbows and face cradled in his hands.

“Yes, there are many different schools of study for us elves. But not all of us achieve mastery over even one.”

“Not all are like you and Avriel?” Whill asked.

“No, not at all, we have many among us who have not yet excelled in any study of Orna Catorna. Those who have never mastered Orna Catorna number five times the number who have. A course of study in one faction alone can require more than one hundred years.”

Tarren yawned. “So not all elves even have any powers.”

“They do, but not all are masters. Basic teachings are a part of any elf’s childhood education: levitation, psionics—the art of what you call telepathy and the like—healing, and many more.”

Whill was enthralled. He had read nothing about these things in the books he had read. “What are the different schools of study?”

“Hmm. Well, there are healers, the greatest of which can heal dozens of others at once, from great distances. To attain such abilities takes hundreds of years of intense study.”

Whill thought of Avriel and must have projected. “Yes, like my sister, who healed you from hundreds of miles away. She is most proficient in healing. As well she might be, with over three hundred years of study.

“There are also the Ralliad, or druids, I suppose you would call them. They are lovers of nature, worshippers of Keye. Once called upon by the ways of the

druid, many take the form of animals. They are guardians of nature, and as such they live within it, seldom seen, some never.”

“Gosh,” Tarren said dreamily.

“Then there are the Morenka, or monks. These elves study and worship existence alone, and care not for the petty dealings or wars of the rest of us. They believe in no enemy, for they see everything as one.

“The Krundar are masters of the elements, and of them there are four factions: wind, keye, fire, and water. With the rise of the Dark elves there came a need for a warrior faction, masters in the arts of battle. The monks argue that warriors only add to the problem of violence, even in self-defense. But we warriors remind them that they would no longer have a life to ponder lest we kept them from harm.”

Tarren rubbed his eyes, fighting to stay awake. “So what are you and Avriel? What have you mastered?”

Roakore piped up from his stone pillow. “Sounds like he’s a mix o’ everythin’, don’t it, lad? A mutt, ye call it, don’t ye? No offense, good elf. I should call it as the humans do, a jack o’ all trades. Though I ain’t seen no druid in ye yet.”

Zerafin laughed. “A little, though Ralliad is not my most proficient of skills. If I may, good dwarf, you seem to be a Krundar, an elemental, with a proficiency in the power over Keye, or earth. That is what my sister was getting at earlier.”

Roakore scoffed and rolled over. “Bah. I be a master of me dwarf ways, call ’em what ye want.”

Tarren had fallen asleep at last, and nothing more was said that night. Whill lay back, his mind racing, thinking of the different factions and arts to study. How would he really learn anything but the basics in just a year with the elves?

Chapter 21

Kell-Torey

The cool night air blew softly, the scents of spring lingered. The sky was black, but for the soft orange light emanating from the city and faintly illuminating the clouds above. From their perch on the hill, the companions took in the extraordinary sight.

Kell-Torey was a city built during war times, when borders and boundaries were uncertain. Thus it boasted a fifty-foot wall, thick and strong, which circled its entirety, more than four miles from end to end. Every five hundred feet along the wall there stood a watchtower, which loomed more than twenty feet above the wall. Though the wall stood fifty feet high, it did not obscure the view of the surrounding world completely. Not being within a flat valley, the city enjoyed many views of the wider world. Thus, from their viewpoint, the companions could see many buildings beyond the city walls, including the immense, breathtaking Castle of Kell-Torey, which sat higher than all others. Though Whill was still many miles away, he could guess its enormity. Its size was not due to the royal family's greed but rather to the fact that the castle acted as a fortress in times of war. It could easily house thousands of citizens, and sustain them comfortably for months.

"There it is," said Abram. "Here, Tarren, we can find you safe passage back to Fendale."

Whill gestured toward the city. "Shall we?"

They made their way down the hill and to the city gates at a slow trot. They were tired, one and all, but they were away from danger for now. As they approached the open gates, four soldiers advanced to block the way. Rhunis went to the front of the group as they halted, pulling back his cloak and hood to reveal both his face and his armor.

"General Rhunis!" said the closest guard with a bow, which the other three copied.

"Stand tall, soldiers," Rhunis ordered. "Put this to ledger and quickly. We have traveled many miles and seek hot food and warm beds."

“Of course, sir, we will not hold you up.” The soldier nodded to the ledger-keeper, who sat on the right side of the gates, quill in hand.

“I, Rhunis, High Knight and General of the Eldalon Army, arrive with six guests to Kell-Torey: Abram and Whill, who should be known to you by now, the Prince and Princess of Elladrindellia, Zerafin and Avriel. The dwarf Roakore, soon to be king of the Ebony Mountains, and the boy Tarren.”

The ledger-keeper quickly wrote down names and titles. Rhunis said no more and led the companions into the city.

At this late hour the city was asleep but for the patrolling guards and the occasional group of drunkards. The part of the city they traveled much resembled Fendale; its houses and buildings were built mostly of wood and brick and clay, and being closest to the gates, they were the newest expanse of growth. Here those new to the city made their homes. People of all trades—blacksmiths, healers, mystics, shopkeepers, traders, and even thieves, gamblers, and other shady elements—would first have to make their names known in this part of the city, the Outer Rim. To come to a city as great as Kell-Torey and not start out within the ever-changing and often-dangerous Outer Rim, one needed to have a good connection to someone on the inside. The Rim swallowed more dreams than it nurtured, often sending men down dark paths of self-destruction. Thus taverns and opium lounges were plenty along the Rim’s many lonely miles.

Given the common failure of the many would-be entrepreneurs, many found themselves joining one of the thieving guilds of the Rim. Within Kell-Torey, as in most large cities of Agora, thieving guilds were commonplace. Though their locations were usually unknown, their presence was undeniable. One could make a very comfortable living within the guilds, assuming one was fast with the blade and quick with the tongue. Guild-masters themselves seldom kept residence within the Outer Rim, but rather lived lavishly near the center of the city.

The companions, led by Rhunis, made their way down the winding main street toward the Castle of Kell-Torey. Tarren, who now rode with Whill, asked candid questions about the city. Rhunis answered many of them, being the most knowledgeable on the subject.

As they rode deeper into the city, the surrounding structures changed noticeably. Gone were the clay and wooden homes and huts, replaced by large stone buildings. The buildings grew taller, the streets cleaner. Taverns there were, as loud and smoky as any, but in fewer numbers. The shops and stores boasted well-crafted signs and woodwork, unlike their shabby Outer Rim counterparts.

The Kell-Torey guards became more prevalent here as well. They patrolled almost every corner in pairs, each with a shining whistle around their necks and

sword at the ready. They did not don the elaborate armor of the Knights of Eldalon, but rather a less cumbersome breastplate, shin guard, and forearm guard. An open-faced helmet sat upon their heads, and around them flowed a long blue cloak with the Kell-Torey standard upon the back.

To the right Rhunis pointed out two, twenty-foot-high statues. They were of men similar in appearance, one only slightly taller than the other. They stood side by side each with an arm around the other. In their free hands they each held a sword to the heavens.

“They were the founders of our great city and the first kings of Eldalon. The brothers Kell and Torey,” Rhunis stated as they passed by the statues.

More than halfway to the castle, the city’s architecture became ever grander. Great pillars rose up out of the cobblestones on every corner of every building. Whill knew that this was the most ancient part of the city. Here the heroes of old were depicted in the form of statues—kings of days past, queens, famous knights, and scholars. The famous poet Corindia’s statue stood tall and proud upon the steps of the Kell-Torey School of Knowledge, his head bent in thought as he looked down at the scroll in hand.

Rhunis pointed out the grand coliseum a block away and to their left, looming over the neighboring buildings. It was well over four times the size of the one in which Whill and Rhunis had battled within during Fendale’s Winter’s End Celebration. The Kell-Torey coliseum hosted many events, from circuses to gladiator battles and public executions.

A few more blocks and to the right stood the immense Eldora Library; founded by the renowned scholar Arious Eldora. The library boasted the largest collection of books, scrolls, and writings in all of Agora, and poets and scholars from all reaches of Agora came to study here.

The companions passed the Kell-Torey School of Healing, the great Alamora School of Law, and the First Bank of Kell-Torey. Finally they came to the castle gates. In the moonless night, with only the orange glow of the many torches, the castle wall looked even more immense. Before them stood only iron gates, but they knew that beyond the gate, great metal doors sat ready to be engaged at a moment’s notice.

Rhunis was again easily recognized by the castle guards, who unlike the others were Knights of Eldalon. He dismounted and approached one of the guards with open arms.

“Theolus Klemus, what Knight of Eldalon did you steal this armor from?” laughed Rhunis as he embraced the knight and gave him a heavy pat on the back.

“I was promoted from city guard last week,” said Theolus, beaming.

“Long overdue, I say, long overdue indeed.”

“I’ve been on this post for five days, you know, ordered to wait for you and your friends. Damn glad I am to see you finally arrive unharmed.”

Rhunis raised his unscarred eyebrow. “Ordered to wait for us, eh? Then that means you can show us to warm beds. We’ve had a long journey and wish nothing more than sleep on a soft bed.”

“Considering the companions you travel with, I imagine your stories will be worth more than a dwarf’s hoard—forgive the analogy, good sir,” Theolus added hastily to Roakore. “But word has it, Rhunis, that you left Fendale chasing the pirate Captain Cirrosa. And news came just hours ago about a battle within the port town of Sherna.”

Rhunis chuckled. “Amazing how word can travel faster than horses. You’ll hear those stories and more, my friend, but not this night. We are weary and wish to be led to our boarding.”

Theolus gave a disappointed sigh but smiled. “Of course. Follow me.” He led them beyond the castle gates and then past seven more.

“The eight castle gates of the Castle of Kell-Torey,” Whill mumbled under his breath. Seeing the immense gates, he understood how the castle and city had survived hundreds of years of war. Whole armies could try for weeks to get through to no avail, losing thousands in the process. More than a thousand years before during the War of Eztule, the Eztulian army had advanced as far as the fourth gate. But early one morning, two weeks into the siege, the horns of the Ky’Dren dwarves had rung out and the fourth gate opened. Side by side the dwarves and humans fought, as they had countless times before, and by nightfall Eztule had been defeated. The losses for both sides had been great. Much of Kell-Torey had been destroyed, along with half its army. Of the ten thousand dwarves who marched to defend their neighbors, only three thousand returned, without their beloved King Korzonn. Both dwarf and human songs spoke of the dwarf king, and both say he took more than one hundred of the Eztule with him before he fell.

Whill recited the story to Tarren as Roakore bowed to the fifteen-foot statue of Korzonn, which stood tall and proud atop the fourth gate. It had been made of steel and encrusted in gold leaf from the axe tip to the boots. Korzonn stood defiantly, his axe at the ready and fire in his eyes. Whill guessed that many foes had fallen to the crazed dwarf, frozen with fear. Roakore slammed his fist to his chest and bent low. Tarren mimicked the action with a serious expression.

Beyond the gates lay the courtyard, which was huge even by the standards of a castle, for the Castle of Kell-Torey more resembled a small village than anything else. The courtyard held hundreds of buildings—housing for soldiers, weapon storehouses, training rooms, and the like. To his right Whill noticed an

immense archery range, which he made a mental note to visit; to the left stood one of many stables. The companions dismounted as Theolus instructed the stable boy and called for servants to take the baggage.

They were led into the foyer, which opened into the Great Room. The ceiling was more than fifty feet high, from which hung a brilliant chandelier holding dozens of torches. Before them was a staircase wide enough to accommodate ten men abreast. It went up twenty feet and split into three separate stairs, one going straight and the others veering off to the left and right. Upon the walls hung many portraits of kings and queens past, along with the banner of Kell-Torey and Eldalon's other major cities.

Theolus led them up the middle stair. "You will be staying in the royal guest suites, of course," he said, leading them down a hallway off the stair. After a few minutes they turned right once again and finally came to a large wooden door. Theolus led the companions through it and to their rooms before bidding them all good night.

Whill entered his room with Tarren in tow. Without even a look around, he fell upon the bed and quickly went to sleep, exhausted by the long journey.

Roakore lay upon his bed, which was too big and too soft. He could not sleep and found that he was not tired in the least. Since Whill had "helped" him with his wounds, he had found himself full of energy. He mumbled to himself as he tossed and turned. He had been healed by elf ways, he knew. He cursed under his breath at the thought of it. What would his people think, what would his father think? Here he was, lone heir to the throne of the Ebony Mountains, and he had gotten himself wounded in a battle aiding humans.

Roakore was sure his wounds had not been grave, but then there was Whill's aid. Deep down Roakore knew that Whill had used his elf-like powers to heal his broken ribs. That made it twice that he had been healed. That would not do. Roakore promised himself that he would save the lives of Avriel and Whill and even the score before this cursed business was through.

Five days they had until the meeting. What in Ky'Dren's name was a dwarf to do in a human city for five days? Roakore huffed, threw back his covers, and got up from his too-soft bed.

Whill awoke abruptly and looked around at his surroundings. He did not recognize where he was, but then remembered he was in Kell-Torey. Next to

him, sleeping soundly, was Tarren. There came a knock at the door and Whill got up and answered it. He opened the door to find an older-looking man wearing purple robes. He was bald but for short white hair about his temples and the back of his head. He looked to be in his sixties. He wore no facial hair but for his bushy eyebrows, and his face had seen too many winters. But his eyes were kind, his smile bright, and Whill knew that the man before him did not feel as old as half his years.

“Good day, Whill,” the man said with a bow. “My name is Johanah, and I have been appointed as your servant for the entirety of your stay here.” Before Whill could argue that he did not need a servant, Johanah continued, “And may I say that it is a great honor to serve one such as you.”

Whill could only offer a thank you and a nod. “I am available all hours of the day or night for anything you might need,” Johanah said. “So please do not hesitate to call upon me, I will answer swiftly.” Whill then noticed the chair that sat outside his door on the right. He realized that his servant literally sat waiting instruction.

“Have you been waiting here all night?”

“Of course I have, sir.”

“And this is where you will wait until I call.”

“Of course, sir, unless I require bodily relief, for which of course I will ask permission.”

“You don’t have to do that. I mean, I will get along fine. You need not spend your days and nights waiting on me.”

Johanah looked puzzled, even hurt. “But I must, sir. I have been ordered to serve you and the lad Tarren as long as you sleep within these walls.” He bowed his head sadly and took a deep breath. “I can assure you, my age in no way inhibits my duties. My family has served the kings for seven generations, sir. We are the best at what we do, renowned even. Please do not send me away, good sir. I will serve you well, I promise.”

Whill put up a defensive hand. “No, no, it’s not that. I am sure you are excellent at what you do. It is just...I am not used to such treatment.”

Johanah’s head was bowed in shame, his eyes on the floor. Whill knew he had upset the old man. He put a hand upon Johanah’s shoulder and said what he knew he must to give the man his dignity once again.

“I am sure you will serve me well, Johanah. I am glad to have one such as you in my service. Forgive my ignorance in such matters.”

Johanah lit up once again. “Thank you, good sir, but it is not my place to forgive you for anything, only to thank you.”

Whill nodded with a half-hearted smile. This would take some getting used to.

“Do you or the lad require anything at this time, good sir?”

Whill thought for a moment. What would someone of his apparent stature ask of a servant? “We could use fresh bath water, and our clothes need to be washed. Some fruit and eggs and bread would do also, please.”

Johanah visibly cringed at the word please, and Whill made the connection. One did not say please to a servant.

“It is now seven in the morning. The king asks that you and your friends join him for breakfast at nine. Shall I send confirmation?”

“You shall.”

Johanah smiled and bowed again. “Very well, good sir, I shall send confirmation and return to start your bath water.” With that he turned on his heel and swiftly made his way down the hall.

Whill sighed and returned to his room and a sleeping Tarren. He had not taken the time the night before to look around his room, so now he did.

The room before him was immense. It boasted white marble floors and walls, with a twenty-foot-high ceiling. The bed in which he had slept and Tarren now slept in was huge. It looked as though it could sleep ten, with its numerous blue and purple silk pillows and thick blankets. The headboard was wooden, as were the posts, which held a thin blue fabric that hung down on all sides and matched the bed decor. The banners of both Eldalon and Kell-Torey hung upon the wall to the right. Next to the bed was a wardrobe that boasted numerous dressers and shelves. Whill found that his traveling pack and weapons lay within, untouched. To the right of the bed and closet, adjacent the wall from which the banners hung, was an opening to another room. This room, like the other, was crafted with marble floors and walls. To the right was a large bathtub built up from the floor.

Whill returned to the bedroom and walked out onto the balcony and gazed at the courtyard below. The morning sun had risen and its bright light now fell upon a marvelous garden of early-blooming flowers of every color.

Beautiful, is it not? Said a voice within his mind, the voice of Avriel. Whill turned right, then left, and saw her twenty feet away, standing on her own identical balcony. Gone were her traveling clothes, replaced by a thin white silken robe opened slightly in the front, revealing more than Avriel may have intended. Whill was left speechless, mind and mouth alike, at the sight of her. He felt his face flush and a strange heat overcame him as he looked upon the elf maiden. The sun’s light pierced the robe, making it all but translucent. Whill was paralyzed in the midst of Avriel’s well-proportioned beauty.

I spoke of the garden, came Avriel's voice with a laugh. Embarrassed, he turned his head quickly to regard the flowers. When he looked once again to Avriel's balcony, she was gone.

After a bath and change of clothes, Whill was led by Johanah to the king's dining room. The room was no less than Whill would expect from the dining hall of the king. Massive chandeliers hung from the cathedral ceiling, and the floor was highly polished. The walls were of wood—detailed and masterfully carved; swirling patterns bordered intricate artwork. The table was no less beautiful, long and thin, with large, well-crafted chairs. It could seat more than twenty comfortably, though only two were seated there this morning: King Mathus and Abram.

Johanah bowed to the king. "I give you Whill of Agora, my good king."

With that he turned and left, closing the large oak door behind him. King Mathus rose from his seat and walked towards Whill. Abram remained seated to the left of the king, pipe held between grinning lips

"Whill. How eager I have been to meet you."

"And I you, King Mathus."

The king shook Whill's hand firmly for a moment and looked over his features. "You have your mother's eyes," he said. Then he released Whill's hand and gestured to the seat at his right.

"Please, you must be famished. Have a seat and we shall dine and talk. A grand adventure you have had since your stay in Fendale, I hear."

Whill took his seat, as did Mathus. With a snap of the king's fingers, a door opposite the one Whill had entered through opened. Two female servants entered. One pushed a wheeled cart of many covered dishes, while the other one brought a variety of beverages. The servant with the food removed the lid of each serving plate before putting it on the table. Whill's mouth watered as he realized how hungry he really was. Upon the table was laid fruit, boiled eggs, thick red steak, pork belly, bread, and white cheese. The servant with the beverages then added pitchers of milk, cider, water, and wine. The servants gave a low bow.

"That will be all," said the king with a nod and a smile, and the servants exited. He poured himself a glass of milk. "Please help yourselves. I would have them serve us our plates, but I would rather be alone just now."

Whill took a little of everything, and was relieved when Abram and King Mathus did the same.

"Rhunis tells me that you had a run-in with a Dark elf, of all things. Can you imagine, in Eldalon?"

Whill swallowed his food and cleared his throat. "That among other things."

The king nodded. “Yes, among others. Rumor has it the two of you defeated Captain Cirrosa. I must hear that story.”

Whill raised an eyebrow at Abram, who was enjoying a bit of steak. “Abram is the storyteller, I’m afraid.”

“That he is indeed,” Mathus agreed.

Over the next hour Abram, with Whill’s help, recounted the many days since they had so hastily left Fendale; the fight with Captain Cirrosa, the journey to the mountains, the meeting of Roakore, and the battle with the Draggard. Then had come the battle of Sherna and the meeting of the elves, and finally the fight on the road to Kell-Torey. The king listened intently, asking few questions. He seemed angered by the battle of Sherna, and joyous to hear of the Draggard defeat. Finally the tale was over. Abram sat back and lit his pipe.

The king sat in contemplation for a moment. “It is a miracle that you all made it through unharmed, especially the boy Tarren. Not many ever see a Dark elf and live to tell about it—nor the *Black Dragon*, for that matter. Your deeds these last few weeks alone ensure that your names will live on in song for generations. Yet you are not even twenty years old!” He leaned forward, elbows upon the table. “The question is, what do the two of you plan to do next?”

Abram shrugged. “I will follow Whill’s lead, wherever it may take us.”

“Good king,” Whill said, “I had thought such talk would be better suited for the meeting, but I may tell you now—I intend to aid Isladon in whatever way I can. And if I may—I understand I have been invited to the meeting, and I am honored, but I don’t understand what place I have there.”

King Mathus laughed. “What place, you ask? You are the rightful king of Uthen-Arden, my boy, as I am sure you know. You have as much right as I to attend.”

“I understand. But I have no army, no followers. My own kingdom does not even know I exist.”

Abram spoke up. “But you do have followers, and you will have an army. You rallied those men at Sherna and led them to victory. You have a strength that you underestimate, my friend. And do not forget the power of the spoken word—news of the Battle of Sherna beat us to Kell-Torey. Your people know of you, do not doubt. Those whispers have been floating on the breeze for a long time now. Your people want you to be real. They need you to be. You seem but a myth to many, a legend. But soon you will show them that the legend is flesh and blood, that the myth is true.”

Mathus spoke, his voice serious. “You plan to learn the ways of the elves, do you not?”

Whill was shocked. “Yes—yes I do, in time—”

“And do you think it wise to risk your life in the inevitable battle within Isladon?”

“How did you know?”

King Mathus finally smiled. “Do not forget, I am your grandfather. There were no secrets between my daughter and I. Do not fret, your family’s secret is safe with me, grandson.”

Whill felt a lump build in his throat. *Grandson*. All his life he had yearned to know his true lineage and now before him sat his grandfather.

“Thank you” was all that he could say.

King Mathus sensed Whill’s emotional state, for he simply smiled and turned to Abram. “Do you think Whill should fight?”

Abram stroked his beard and looked up at the ceiling. “Let us see what comes of the meeting. It may be that the elves will elect to go also. Either way, Whill is now a man and must decide what is best for himself.”

Roakore stood at his door, scowling at the young man before him. “What do ye want, anyway, wakin’ me at this hour?”

The young man bowed low. “I apologize, good dwarf, but it is three hours after sunrise and I thought you might want your breakfast.”

“Me breakfast, eh? What if I do?”

The young man nervously scratched the back of his neck. “I will bring you whatever you desire, sir. If I may. My name is Ithellio of the house of Noranan. My family has served the kings for more than two centuries. I have been appointed as your servant for the duration of your stay.”

Roakore traded his scowl for a grin. “Servant, eh? Well, then, Ithellio. What do ye offer?”

“Offer?”

“Fer *breakfast*, lad! What do ye offer fer food?”

“Ah. Anything you desire.”

“Good then. Bring me a pound o’ bacon, greasy but crunchy, a pitcher o’ goat’s milk, a half dozen eggs sloppy, and a good fresh loaf o’ bread. And don’t be skimpin’ on the butter.”

The lad bowed low once again and stepped backward. “Very good, sir. I shall return shortly.”

Roakore slammed the door before the lad had finished speaking. His room was the same in design and layout as Whill’s, and soon he discovered the large tub with its two waterspouts and hand pumps. He scratched his head and

investigated the balcony. Below he saw the vast gardens with their many fountains and pools. To many humans such a sight would inspire awe, but to the gruff dwarf the flowers seemed a waste of space. Instead he looked past the gardens to the castle walls. It was upon looking at the cold, well-shaped stone that the dwarf was awed.

Zerafin entered his sister's room without knocking; he had contacted her through his mind, and she had bade him enter. Avriel sat upon a well-cushioned and pillowed sitting couch, combing her long hair. She wore a white silken robe. Elves lived many centuries, and had beliefs and ways very different from those of humans. Within elven society, shyness and self-consciousness did not exist. Zerafin found nothing strange about the way his sister was dressed; it was morning, after all, and the castle was warm, the silk comfortable. Avriel's servant, however, though well trained, was unable to hide his blushing face.

Zerafin looked at the man. *So you have one also.*

Yes. I find them quite handy, actually. Are you still not used to the idea of human servants? You have visited human royalty many times in the past.

Have you seen into him?

Avriel let out a chuckle and spoke aloud, startling her servant. "Of course I have, brother, do you really think me so unprepared?"

"Leave us now," Zerafin told him.

The middle-aged man was visibly scared but did not move. "My lady?"

"Yes, leave us," Avriel said. "Thank you for awaiting my instruction."

The servant bowed low and exited the room without looking or speaking to either of the elves. As the door closed, Zerafin shook his head. "Why anyone would let themselves be reduced to that level is beyond my comprehension."

Avriel stood and returned her brush to her nightstand. "You know as much as I of the history and traditions of humans. It is considered an honor to them."

"An honor to make yourself like a dog? I know the traditions, but I will never understand them." He picked up an apple from the fruit basket.

Avriel went to the wardrobe, disrobed and began dressing herself in her chosen garments. "You think that Eadon will try to reach Whill through possession?"

"I do. If I were Eadon and knew that Whill was here in Kell-Torey, so well hidden and protected, I would resort to possession to kill him. The boy Tarren, for example, would be a perfect subject."

Avriel appeared fully clothed from the wardrobe with a look of disgust. “Sometimes you are very morbid, brother. Morbid, but brilliant. Tarren, you say?”

Zerafin nodded as he ate his apple.

“I have a thought you might find compelling, though it is not mine alone—Mother voiced it to me first,” she said. “What if...what if Eadon does not want Whill dead?”

Zerafin swallowed his last bite hard. “Go on.”

“If you were Eadon, and you knew that Whill of Agora existed—the very one spoken of in the prophecy, the one who is destined to wield the sword Adromida—would you want him dead? Would you gamble that his human uncle could wield the blade in his place? And what if Addakon does find it? How long do you think he will put up with Eadon once he has such power? Evil will turn on evil.”

Zerafin thought for a long moment. “If I were Eadon I would try to bring Whill to my side, and somehow gain the power of the blade.”

“You believe that Eadon wants Whill captured.”

“Yes, which is only another reason we should watch him that much more closely.” He gave her a sly look. “Which I doubt you will mind doing.”

Avriel rolled her eyes. “That again.”

“What? I do not try to mock you. I only speak the truth.”

“What is it?”

“I know you feel for Whill deeply. I am glad for it, believe me. I have not seen you smile so many times in so few days since you were a child, since Drindellia. He makes you happy. I understand. He has awakened a dead place in your heart that not time, nor elven love interests, have been able to. He is mortal, a mere human, yet you see him as a legend. Not an equal, but as a superior. You see in his eyes the last hope for our people, the redemption of our father, our homeland. Is this why you love him?”

Avriel turned from his gaze. After a moment she looked up into her brother’s eyes, her own wet with tears that had not fallen. “He looks at me in a way that no one else does. I see lust, yes, and the recognition of beauty that I am aware I possess. I have seen this in other men, human and elf—even dwarf, for that matter. But there is something more, something that poets of old could only hint at. When he looks at me I am a little girl again. I, an elf warrior of 650 years, a princess to her people, am reduced to childhood in his eyes. He disarms my heart with but a glance, and lights a fire within me that the oceans could not quench. I do not know why; I do not care. I feel more alive than I have in centuries. Is it due to his title, the prophecy, I think not. I am not infatuated with him, as you

might hint. Infatuation and love branch the same tree, but they bear two very different fruit. I love him for who he is inside.”

Zerafin embraced his sister. “Then you have my blessing.”

Avriel hugged her brother and finally let her tears fall onto his shoulder, though they were now tears of joy.

Abram sat smoking his pipe; rings still lingered in place many feet above. They had long ago finished their meals and were now simply chatting. The king was telling Whill one of the many stories of Abram’s heroism during the Draggard battles that had taken place since he was but a lad. Whill was enthralled but also slightly sickened by the many stories of near death. He wasn’t sure whether he was more impressed or angered by the tales, realizing just how close he had come to losing the only father he had ever known.

The king finished his latest tale, sat back, and enjoyed a large gulp of wine. Then he put down his drink and set his gaze upon Whill—who got the impression that the king’s next words would not be light-hearted, for his face had become grave, as if he had finally decided upon something most unpleasant.

“I have news of Tarren’s father, and family.”

Whill let out a breath and held a faint hope that it was good news.

“It seems that when Tarren was kidnapped by Cirrosa, his family was murdered.”

Whill put his head in his hands. He felt the king’s hand on his shoulder. Abram began to curse. “By the gods! That wretched scum of a man! Never have I wished I could kill a man twice!”

The king’s arm fell from Whill’s shoulder. “I am sorry, Whill, but it seems the boy cannot return to Fendale. Nothing awaits him. I have had my men look into his family line, and it appears those who perished were all that was left. The inn also is gone, burned to the ground.”

Whill fought back tears, rage, shame, and sorrow. Again it had been his fault; again good people had died because of him; his parents, the slave men of Eldon, the people of Sherna, and now this. He felt something shift within him. He felt he might explode, and began to tremble.

Whill ground his teeth in anger; his hands had become fists that pulled at his hair. Abram rose quickly and moved around the table to Whill. Into the prone young man’s ear he spoke, calmly and soothingly.

“Control yourself, Whill. Do not let it build, do not let it consume you. Fight it.”

Whill barely heard the plea, so consumed was he with pent up-*rage*. He had caused the deaths of too many, had learned too much in the last few days. The pressure proved too much. He saw behind his closed eyes the great pyre upon the beaches of Sherna, the hundreds of smoldering bodies. He saw the slave men he himself had cut down in battle, the face of Tarren streaked with tears. He stood and clutched his stomach as if some demonic beast was trying to claw its way out. He screamed.

Abram's voice managed to break through Whill's consuming *rage*. "The table, Whill, focus it all on the table! All of it! Let it go!"

Mathus backed away as Whill focused all his *rage*, all his shame, everything, sending it from his mind and into his fists, slamming the large oak table before him.

There was a deafening boom as the table exploded into a million pieces. King Mathus and Abram were blown backwards by the shockwave that followed the release. Whill looked down upon his bloodied hands in awe. Hundreds of splinters had sunk deep in his hands, body, and face. He felt his knees buckle and he slumped to the floor, thoroughly spent. He heard Abram and King Mathus yell his name in unison and saw Zerafin and Avriel rush into the room.

Then his eyes closed.

Chapter 22

The Orphan

Whill found himself floating high above a battle. The land was charred and smoldering, the sky above choked with smoke, and the ground itself seemed to bleed. Below, a great battle surged. Whill was horrified as he looked upon the warring masses. Draggard swarmed upon the field, greatly outnumbering their enemies. The scene was a slaughter; men, elves, and dwarves alike lay dead or dying. The remaining armies of Agora were being devoured as the deep and menacing horns of the Draggard sounded, rising into the smoke-filled sky like the evil moan of a demon of death.

“Dohr la skello hento!”

Whill was jolted conscious as a surge of energy coursed through his body. Zerafin spoke again in the elven language, and the hundreds of splinters were pulled from his body by an unseen force. Then came the blue light, enveloping him and healing his many wounds.

Avriel was at Whill’s side in an instant. “Are you alright?”

He looked into her eyes but could not speak. The memory of his dream was like a phantom hand upon his throat. He looked around wildly, wondering where he was. Before him what had been the table was now nothing but kindling. The chairs had all been blown back, and the many banners upon the walls were riddled with holes. Zerafin went to the king and Abram in turn and extracted the splinters and healed their wounds.

Whill saw the blood of both and was sickened. “I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt anyone, I—”

“We know, Whill,” said Mathus. “It is no matter.” He got to his feet with Zerafin’s help.

“I’m afraid it is. And a dire matter at that,” Zerafin said. “Once again you have nearly killed yourself, Whill. Your training cannot wait until we reach Elladrindellia. For your sake, and for the sake of those around you. Your training starts today. You must learn to control the energy.” He looked towards Avriel. “And the emotions within you.”

Whill sat in the garden across from Zerafin. The sun had descended beyond the castle walls, but not the unseen horizon. The sky was dark blue, with hues of red and orange announcing the oncoming dusk. No breeze stirred within the garden; it was as silent as a tomb. Zerafin sat looking at Whill for a moment. He was seated on the grass, legs crossed one over the other in a meditative stance. Whill mimicked Zerafin's posture and stance and awaited his command.

"All creatures possess emotion," the elf began. "Some more than others and some more intensely than others. You, my friend, seem to possess a great passion, which is neither good nor bad. But if you cannot control those emotions, and you continue to let them manifest into uncontrolled energy, then you will become a danger to everyone around you. Do not despair, Whill. You are human, after all, and we have come to learn that humans not only let their emotions run wild, but thrive on them as well. You could say that you humans are addicted to your emotions."

Whill listened intently, though he did not quite understand what Zerafin meant.

"Close your eyes, Whill, and think of nothing. Focus on your breath and nothing more. You see how shallow and quick it is. I would like you to breathe as deeply as you can, slowly, ever so slowly. Now hold your breath there for a moment before letting it go, slowly, ever so slowly. That's it. Breathe in, breathe out. Clear your mind. Straighten your back, raise your chest, and lower your shoulders. Relax the mind and body. Let yourself be at peace."

Whill did as he was told, and a feeling of great peace overcame him, freedom from his troubles, emotions, and responsibilities.

"This is called earth pose," Zerafin said. "We elves use this pose for reflection, to calm the mind and body and create unity throughout."

Zerafin said nothing more for some time as Whill continued to relax. After a time he spoke again. "Now slowly open your eyes, and come back to the garden."

Whill reluctantly obeyed. He opened his eyes to find Zerafin smiling at him.

"How do you feel?"

Whill thought for a moment. "I feel...refreshed, calm, and relaxed."

"Good. We will delve deeper into the many stances and meditation techniques of the elves in the future. For now I would like you to practice this stance daily, for as long as suits you. Now. Close your eyes again."

Whill did so and waited further instruction. Moments passed, and then suddenly Zerafin slapped him across the face hard enough to make it hurt. Whill

opened his eyes suddenly and broke his stance. “Why did you do that?”

Zerafin laughed. “Why, indeed? Focus on your emotions now, Whill. How do you feel?”

Whill put a hand to his cheek. “Angry, of course.”

“But why are you angry? Did you decide to be angry?”

“No, I did not *decide* to be angry. You slapped me and that made me angry!”

“Ah. So I have the power over you to make you feel as I wish. By my actions, I can determine how you feel. Is that what you mean?”

Whill knew Zerafin was getting at something, but did not quite know where he was going. Moments passed as they stared at one another. At last Whill proved the more impatient. “No, you do not have that power over me. I feel the way I wish to feel.”

“Really?” asked Zerafin, and slapped Whill hard again. “So I did not just change your attitude, your emotions? Do you feel no different now?”

Whill was fuming, his nostrils flared, his fists clenched. He could not deny what Zerafin implied. “Alright, yes, you made me mad. So what? Anyone would be angry after being slapped.”

“Would they, now?” He leaned back onto one elbow. “Now I ask you, did I make you upset, or did you decide to be upset when I struck you?”

Whill thought for a moment. “You made me upset.”

“Wrong, my friend, wrong. You, or the world around you, have taught your brain through your life experience that you must become angry when someone slaps you. You are reacting to the world around you through a set list of responses you have chosen for yourself. You are no more in control than a sailor in a storm. And with the power you now possess, and the power you will soon gain, that simply will not do.”

Whill realized Zerafin made perfect sense, and he could not help but feel a little embarrassed. He decided to test the elf’s theory. He pretended to be pondering, then quickly brought his hand up to slap Zerafin. But the elf proved the quicker and stopped Whill’s hand inches short of its destination.

Zerafin laughed. “When you can do that, I will have no more to teach you.”

Roakore sat in his room upon a couch that was too soft, answering the questions of a boy who was too curious. He was glad to hear a knock upon the door. “Come in, me friend, please do!”

Whill peered in. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“No, no, do come in an’ sit down a bit. We were just chattin’ is all.”

“Roakore was just telling me how the dwarves use the dirt and stone from the tunnels they dig. I always wondered where it went.”

“A good question indeed,” Whill agreed. “Roakore, would you mind if Tarren and I had a word?”

Roakore stood. “No, not a bit. Was ’bout to get a breath o’ fresh air, anyhow, need to stretch the legs a bit. I ain’t used to being cooped up like this.”

Tarren gave Roakore a confused look. “But haven’t you lived most of your life in caves?”

Roakore could only give a weak laugh at being caught in his contradiction. “Right, then, ye two talk. I’ll be about.” With relief, he left the room, closing the door behind him.

Tarren began to speak but Whill silenced him with a raised hand. Whill got control of his emotions before facing the boy, and then took a deep, long breath. Before he could speak, Tarren asked, “What is it, Whill?” His demeanor had changed. His face was flushed, his eyes haunted. “Is it my family? Please, what is it?”

“Yes, Tarren, it is. It seems that when the pirates took you, a fight must have broken out, you see. Word has come from Eldalon...”

Tarren shook his head. “No, no, no, please say it’s not true, please, no. I saw the smoke, I saw the fire—when they were rushing me off to the docks, I knew something bad had happened, but I thought—I hoped—”

His shoulders shuddered as silent sobs racked his body. Tears began to slowly fall from his nose. Whill leaned closer and spoke softly. “Cirrosa’s men killed your family, Tarren. None survived the fire. I’m sorry. Oh, dear boy, I’m so sorry.”

Tarren looked up at Whill with eyes that pierced his heart. “You can save them. You can use your powers. Bring them back, Whill, please, bring them back!”

Whill pulled Tarren to himself and held the sobbing boy as his own tears fell. He rocked Tarren as his muffled voice pleaded, “Bring them back, bring them back.”

Whill pulled away and held him firm. “I cannot, Tarren, no one can. My powers are limited to the living, not the dead.”

“But that baby! You brought the baby back! You did!”

Whill shook his head. “The baby had only just begun to pass. Her spirit still held to this earth. That is why I could help her.”

Tarren was left unable to speak.

Avriel sat in her room in a meditative stance. She had extended her consciousness outside of herself, and had witnessed the exchange between Whill and Tarren. She withdrew to give them privacy during this moment and slowly opened her teary eyes and returned her attention to herself. She had been witness for more than six hundred years to the cruelty and pain life so often dealt, yet it had not hardened her to the point of apathy. She brought her knees to her chest and hugged them. “The poor boy.”

The morning sun slowly rose, its rays spreading across the world and finding their way to Whill’s closed eyes. He awoke to find Tarren leaning against the thick stone balcony rail, silently overlooking the courtyard. Whill sat up but did not stand. He didn’t know how to approach the lad. Tarren sat like a statue, unmoving, seemingly lifeless, and Whill knew only too well the pain the boy felt, if not as deeply.

Whill found his words at last and went out onto the balcony. Despite the early hour, the courtyard below was bustling with activity. Soldiers marched past in groups of four, while others sparred or practiced at the archery range. Though there were countless things to see below, Whill could see that Tarren focused on nothing before him. He simply stared forward, unmoving, distant.

Whill spoke softly, choosing his words carefully. “Tarren. I’m sorry about your family. I could say that I feel somewhat responsible for it all, for merely coming into your life. But Abram, I am afraid, would prove one way or another that I am not. These things happen, he would say. They cannot be changed, and they cannot be altered. I do beg to differ.” He looked into Tarren’s distant eyes. When he did not look back, Whill gently grabbed his shoulders. “Tarren I was not strong enough to see. I did not know. If I had, I would have stopped it all from happening—know that I would. But believe me when I say—no, I vow—that no ill fate shall befall you again. So long as I am here and able to stop it, nothing will happen to you. I swear on my life.”

At last Tarren met his gaze. “I miss them.”

Whill fought a lump in his throat. “I know you do, lad. Of course you do. But take heart in the time you had together. Honor and remember them always, and you will have gained their approval forevermore.”

Tarren hugged Whill but this time did not sob. “What will become of me now? Now that my family is gone?”

How ironic life was, Whill thought. How often the parts we play are changed, whether we are ready or not. Seldom could one pinpoint when and how one’s life changed, when one had to step up and take on the unknown. But Whill knew at that moment that this was one of those times.

“I shall claim you as my own, Tarren, as my ward. You have no family aside from those who perished, and therefore I have the right, as your recent guardian, to do so. You shall be named my ward, and shall be recognized by my remaining family who, I have just recently found out, is the royalty of Uthen-Arden and Eldalon.”

Whill smiled as Tarren gave him the most puzzled look he had ever seen.

Whill took the opportunity to speak with Abram and the king over breakfast. As planned, the meal was not served in the king’s grand dining room, which was under repair, but rather in Whill’s own room. The food was set on a small table on the balcony overlooking the bustling courtyard. Whill entered the room to find Abram and King Mathus already seated and waiting.

“I am sorry for my tardiness, but I had pressing...issues to deal with,” said Whill as he took a seat at the circular table.

“No need for apologies, Whill,” said Mathus. “How is the lad?”

Whill shrugged. “As well as can be expected, I imagine.”

“It is a tragedy indeed,” the king said. “His entire family...unspeakable.”

Whill sat up and breathed deeply, trying to appear confident. “I have claimed him officially, to him and now to you, as my ward. It is my right as his last caregiver and I have taken it. I expect him to be welcomed into the Eldalon royal family, and that he will be treated as such.”

Whill dared not meet Abram’s eyes and so instead he watched the king’s reaction. He was silent for a while. Finally he lifted his glass of orange juice, drank, put it down, and said, “So be it. I will have it seen to immediately. The boy Tarren is now your ward.”

He took Whill’s hand. “I sincerely and openly welcome Tarren into our family, as I have you.”

Whill finally looked at Abram, who only smiled and drank his milk. “And let it be known to your sons and whomever else holds stock in my claim: I want only the Uthen-Arden throne as my own, and look forward to the bond we shall share as nations.”

Mathus raised his glass. “To the rightful king of Uthen-Arden, my grandson, Whill of Agora.”

As the door closed behind King Mathus, Whill finally let out a sigh of relief. Abram sat down and lit his pipe.

“You never fail to surprise and impress me, Whill.”

“Trust me. I thought it out, and I know what it entails. It was the only honorable thing to do. And I like the lad.”

“You did right. I am proud of your decision and the way you handled yourself this morning. And I may be a fool, but I feel as though I have gained a grandson myself.”

Whill smiled. “You have, my friend.”

Since only ashes remained of Tarren’s family, and they were hundreds of miles away, oak ashes were provided for Tarren in their stead. Once the ashes were recovered from the destroyed inn, placed in an urn, and sent from Fendale, they would be given to Tarren. The funeral ceremony was held some miles outside of Kell-Torey, upon a hill of Tarren’s choosing. The king attended, as did Whill and the rest of the companions. It was a symbolic ritual in which Tarren could say goodbye, spread the ashes, and honor his fallen family.

The spring had only just conquered this stretch of land, but the air was mild. Tarren opened the urn and spoke bravely.

“Goodbye, Father. Goodbye, Mother. Farewell, Grandpa, Gram, sisters. I will honor and remember you always.” Tears welled in his eyes, but he went on. “I will be a man soon, and although you have already been avenged, I offer the promise that I will be a good man and fight for those who cannot. I will be just and true, that you may forever look down upon me with pride.”

He fell to his knees as he opened the lid. The faint spring wind carried the ashes high into the air, though it should have been too weak to do so.

Whill stepped forward and put a hand upon Tarren’s shoulder. “I say farewell also, and promise to hold Tarren to his oath. I swear upon the name of my father that I will do all I can to raise this boy to become a man you would be proud of. I hope I do not fail where you have succeeded.”

His words rose up with the ashes into the noonday sun, and there disappeared.

Dinner that night was a solemn affair. Tarren stayed behind in his room, wanting to be alone. The remainder of the group ate with King Mathus and discussed the coming meeting, which was but a week away.

Abram sat back in his usual after-dinner posture, pipe in hand, head back, and hand in his pocket. “What numbers do you think we can expect from our neighbors to the north, King Mathus?”

Mathus took a small sip of wine. “Hmm. Maybe five thousand.”

“Five thousand!” Whill cried. “I’m sorry, Sire, but five thousand! Against the numbers we will face, that is but a small band.”

The king frowned. “What do you know of the numbers we will face, Whill?”

Whill glanced at Zerafin and Avriel. “I had a vision after the incident the other night.”

King Mathus sat up in his chair and put his hands together. “Go on.”

“I saw a great battle, possibly a hundred thousand Draggard, and thousands of Addakon’s soldiers. We were greatly outnumbered, good king, greatly. It was...it was a slaughter.”

Mathus thought for a moment, then addressed Zerafin. “How well can such a vision be trusted?”

“Such visions can be very reliable, depending upon the source,” the elf replied. Whill shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “We elves have many seers of the future, some vaguely correct, and others known to be right on all accounts down to the last detail. Given what I know about Whill, the fact that he has not been trained but exhibits many elven abilities already, I would not dismiss his vision lightly. But I would not embrace it, either.”

Whill let out a sigh and sank back slightly. Zerafin noticed this small objection. “Whill is going through a change that few can fully understand, not even we elves. Our powers come to us at an early age and grow with us. Whill, on the other hand, has been thrown into this new world with little knowledge of what is happening to him and even less control. He is already dangerously powerful, and will only get stronger. With the right training he will flourish, but for now we can only speculate on whether these visions are real.”

Abram addressed the king. “I, for one, give heed to Whill’s warning, if nothing else for the fact that it makes sense. A Draggard queen has these many long years festered within the mountains, laying her thousands of eggs.” Roakore spit on the floor at the mention of the queen Draggard. Abram went on. “I believe that if we do not bring a force to meet the army that awaits us, we will lose this battle.”

The king raised his hands. "We shall talk of this no more. Save it for the meeting. I will take all that has been said and consider it over the next few days. When we meet with the king of Shierdon, we shall chose a path." He stood, and the others followed suit. "And Whill, I want to be informed immediately if you have any more...visions."

"Yes, sir," Whill said with a bow, and he and Abram headed towards their rooms.

"He doesn't believe me," Whill said.

"You must understand that this is all very new to Mathus. Yes, he knows of the elves and their many powers, but he is a practical thinker, not easily given to whims of fancy."

"I know, I know. But we don't have time for speculation! The wrong decision at the meeting will mean the deaths of all who venture forth in this war."

Abram stopped. "The vision was that bad, eh?"

Whill nodded solemnly. Just then Roakore caught up. "Eh there. Rhunis has invited us all to see the many pubs within the city, an' I fer one could use a few pints o' Kell-Torey's finest. What say ye meet us in an hour's time in the courtyard?"

Abram grinned. "I'll be there, good dwarf."

"I could use a night out myself," Whill concurred.

Chapter 23

Thugs, Brew, and Goodbye

The sun had gone down beyond the walls of Kell-Torey. Whill, Abram, Zerafin, Avriel, Roakore, and Rhunis walked along the cobblestone streets of the great city. The streets were fairly quiet this time of night, as most of the shops were closed for the day. The few who did wonder the streets were the occasional beggar, soldiers, and the drunkards. Rhunis led the group to a small pub five minutes' walk from the castle. Music spilled from the open doors, as did the sounds of many people talking. The Crooked Arrow, as it was named, was Whill's kind of pub—small and not too crowded, with a long bar and pretty barmaids.

Rhunis motioned for the group to enter before him. “This, my friends, was always my favorite pub when I was stationed within the city.”

The Crooked Arrow looked like dozens of other pubs, with a long bar at the adjacent wall and many tables and chairs throughout. To the left was a small stage and dance floor where two fiddlers, a flute player, a man with many different-sized drums and other percussion instruments, and two female singers played an upbeat version of the old drinking song, “The Night I Gained a Cross-eyed Wife and Lost My Shoes.” Half the bar patrons sang, stomped, or clapped along with the tune. The atmosphere was pleasant, and laughter and song filled the air.

Most of the many tables were occupied, so the companions made their way to the bar area. Surprisingly enough, the pair of elves did not get as many looks or stares as Whill had expected, nor hushed whispers, though he did notice one gruff-looking man nudge his buddy at the sight of Avriel. Whill was surprised when a rush of resentment welled in him as he saw the way the man eyed her.

The bartender was a tall and lanky fellow with short, pitch-black hair and a thin mustache. He had a proud nose and eyes like a starless night. But the smile he wore put one at ease instantly—that is, until he spoke. The man had a loud voice, even for the noisy bar, and something in the tone made it sound as if he

were talking down to everyone, whether or not that was his intention. Rhunis beat on the bar a few times and the bartender walked over, smiling wide with every step.

Rhunis gave the man a nod. "Is old Harlod not working tonight?"

"No, not tonight, nor any night, for that matter. The old bird retired, said he had enough of the bar life. Bought a boat, he did, said he was gonna spend the rest of his days lazin' away at sea. Used to be in the navy, I guess. Anyway, Parpous Hellious bought him out 'bout a month ago. I just tend bar. Name's Dirk, by the way, Dirk Magirk." He extended his hand. "An' you must be Rhunis the Dragonslayer, hard to mistake the nasty scar there. You're quite a legend in this city."

Rhunis didn't shake the man's hand, but instead he motioned to his five seated friends. "I'll have a pint of Torey brown ale. Give my friends whatever they want, on me."

Dirk looked down the row at the seated companions, past Whill and Abram, briefly at Zerafin and Avriel, and finally set his gaze on Roakore, whose chin barely cleared the bar. Dirk swaggered down to the dwarf. "And what can I get ya, master dwarf? A few thick books to sit on, perhaps?"

Abram shook his head at Whill. "Here we go."

Roakore leaned in closer to the bar. "I'll take a pint o' whatever Rhunis ordered, an' a shot o' black rum."

Dirk chuckled and began to ask the others for their orders when Roakore interrupted. "And know this, ye gangly dragon turd. Make a joke about me height again an' ye'll be lookin' me face to face as I beat ye with yer own legs." He laid one of his four hatchets on the bar.

Dirk gulped so hard his prominent Adam's apple seemed to jump. The rest of the group gave a hearty laugh. Whill and Abram both ordered the same brew as Rhunis. Whill recognized the barrel of Dragon's Brew by the insignia, but he dared not bring it to Roakore's attention. The elves both ordered water, which earned them both a queer look from Dirk. Before the barkeep could get the water, Roakore stopped him.

"Hold on, Dragon Turd!" Roakore set his gaze on the elves. "Now, ye two have healed me scratches without me permission. The least ye could do is share a pint o' ale against *your* will." Avriel began to speak but Roakore interrupted. "Eh, eh, before ye go tellin' me some tree-huggin' tale 'bout keepin the body clean, consider it yer duty as an ambassador. Ye wouldn't want to be pissin' off dwarf royalty, would ye?"

Zerafin chuckled, and Avriel pulled a straight face. "Very well, then. Mr. Magirk, We shall have whatever our friend here is having."

Rhunis turned to Abram and Whill as he took a drink. “Something here ain’t quite right.”

“What do you mean?” asked Abram.

Rhunis shifted closer. “I’ve known old Harlod since I was old enough to order a beer, and this story of Dragon Turd’s just don’t make sense. Harlod loved this bar. He used to be a slave, and when his master died some thirty years ago, he freed Harlod and left him this bar. I can’t see him selling this place to no one for nothing. I think I’m gonna need to have a talk with Parpous Hellious.”

“You think maybe it was a gambling debt?” Whill asked. “Was Harlod that kind of man?”

“No, he was not, and he had no vices to mention, either. No, knowing who Parpous is, I’d say that Harlod gave over this place quite against his will.”

Abram took a drink and wiped his beard with the back of his hand. “Who is Parpous Hellious?”

Rhunis scowled. “He is guild master of the largest thieving guild in the city, the Black Hand. And here he is now.”

Parpous entered the pub with a swagger, followed by an entourage of thugs, twelve in all. They made their way to the largest table in the place and with a look cleared the seats. The tables’ former residents, along with all others in the bar, obviously knew who he was, and moved accordingly.

Parpous was a large man, at least six-foot-five, with a barrel chest and a scarred face he no doubt was proud of. He was a creature of the streets, a cutthroat who had not only survived more than forty years among the scum of the city, Rhunis said, but had risen to the top of the heap. The two men seated to his direct left were his second and third in command, Torell and Malthious. Both of their lives had been saved more than once by Parpous, and as many times spared. They were loyal to the death.

The band finished a song and instantly broke into the ever-popular “Kiss My Eldalonian Arse.” The bar erupted as all in attendance sang along. Roakore slammed down his beer, belched loudly, wiped his beard, tossed back his shot, ordered another, and stated with wild eyes, “Now this is me kind o’ music, ha ha!”

“And this will be a wild night,” Abram muttered. To that Whill could only smile and hold his glass up in a cheers.

Whill took a drink of his ale and eyed Rhunis, who rarely took his eyes off of Parpous. Parpous’s cronies had no doubt noticed the attention and had surely informed their captain. Whill could only imagine what this might escalate into, but rather than being apprehensive about the confrontation, he welcomed it with

excitement. He laughed to himself as he imagined what Zerafin might say about that. Then as if by magic, Zerafin, who was to his left, spoke.

“You cannot stand the thought of injustice, especially towards this former slave, and have been all day long fostering great anger about Tarren’s family’s fate. You want nothing more than a reason to release your inner rage.”

Zerafin proceeded to take a drink casually, as if he hadn’t just read Whill’s mind.

“I thought you said you never invade someone’s mind without permission. I wasn’t projecting to you.”

“One does not have to be a mind reader to know your thoughts at this moment, Whill. They must simply pay attention.”

A barmaid came over with a tray full of drinks. “These are from the generous Parpous.”

Everyone waited to see what Rhunis would do, even the ever-thirsty and seemingly carefree Roakore, for all had heard Rhunis’s story, and all stood by their friend. Rhunis accepted the drink with a nod, so the others did the same. Parpous nodded also and drank from his own glass. The motion caused his sleeve to fall back, exposing many jeweled bracelets to match his many rings. Rhunis slammed down his empty drink and rose from his seat. Before he could take a step, Whill stood. “Should we join you?”

Rhunis eyed the companions one and all and simply nodded. Avriel looked at her brother for a moment and grabbed Rhunis’s hand before he stepped forward. “I must inform you, Rhunis, I sense a being below us, in the basement. He is old, frail, and in much despair. Possibly it is your friend.”

Rhunis’s eyes flashed. “Will you trust me on this and do as I ask?”

“Yes, of course.”

The band had finished their latest song and told the energetic crowd they would be taking a break. More likely, Whill thought, they could tell what was coming and decided it wise to take their valuable instruments somewhere safe.

Parpous watched Rhunis come toward him, and the man opposite him gave up his seat. Parpous stood and extended a hand to Rhunis. “Ah, Rhunis the Dragonslayer in my pub—what an event, eh, boys? It is an honor, friend.”

Rhunis shook Parpous’s hand but did not smile or say anything. He simply let the air go stale.

“Yes, well, then, please do have a seat.” Parpous motioned with his hand while his eyes scanned the companions. Rhunis sat, and Parpous went on. “What brings you, great Rhunis, to my pub—to my table, for that matter? What is the honor?”

“*Your* pub? As I remember, this is and has been for many decades Harlod’s pub. Or have I been away so long?”

Parpous gave a crooked, gold-toothed smile. “Indeed, my friend, you may have been away too long. I now own this here pub. Bought it from the old man not a month ago. He said he wanted to spend the rest of his days sailing the wide ocean. Said he’d had enough of the bar life.”

Rhunis leaned closer. “That’s odd, because I’ve known the old man for many, many years, and I know that he despises the sea. No wonder, being that he spent three months on a slave ship after being taken from his murdered mother’s arms and brought here from the outer lands. I also know that he loved this place more than any other on earth. So answer me this, Parpous, why do you lie to my face, and why do your men tense their sword arms at the sound of the truth?”

Parpous chuckled, and his cronies followed suit. The big man clapped his hands together. “Rhunis, my friend, you are a clever one, but I assure you, the old man gave over this bar to me and I am now the owner. And I intend on keeping it that way.” He leaned closer also and his smile faded. “What do you say to that, *friend*?”

Rhunis breathed deep as he leaned his head back. “I say you let the old man loose from the basement, give him back his pub, and never bother him again.”

Parpous flinched at the mention of the basement. “May I remind you that I have dealings with the king?”

“And need I remind you that I do as well? Dealings with the king! You are talking to one of his commanders. And by the king I order you to do as I’ve said, or you will pay dearly.”

Parpous’s nostrils flared. “Is that a threat?”

“Not really, but how does this suit you?” Rhunis stood and planted his white knuckles on the table. “If you do not do as I say, I will cut your arm off and beat you with it!”

Roakore chuckled. An instant later the room erupted. Parpous thrust a dagger at Rhunis, but before the blade connected Rhunis grabbed his arm and twisted it violently. Roakore took hold of the table with his powerful hands and sent it crashing into the seated entourage. Though Parpous had only shown up with twelve, it seemed that many of his men were in the bar as well. They attacked the companions from all sides, some with fists, others with a blade. Whether they were ignorant of a dwarf’s strength or simply stupid, they soon discovered the truth. Roakore sent man after man flying as he laid into them with his powerful punches. Those that attacked him did not soon get up, if they got up at all.

The elves too made short work of those before them with their strange dance of kicks, dodges, and punches. Whill and Abram fought side by side and tried to keep up with the three. All the while Rhunis and Parpous exchanged blows until finally Rhunis bested the man and sent him crashing to the floor, his nose and jaw apparently broken. The crowd hardly noticed until a howl split the room and everyone stopped.

Rhunis, true to his word, had chopped off Parpous's arm with his sword, and was now beating the man mercilessly. Parpous's men froze.

"Call off your cronies or I'll kill you where you lie!"

Parpous spoke through broken teeth. "Do as he says!"

Everyone watched as Rhunis raised the man off the floor and shoved the severed arm back into the socket. He motioned to Avriel. Parpous whimpered with pain. "Now listen closely *friend*," Rhunis said. "You have a choice: keep this bar for your own and I shall feed your arm to the dogs, or you keep your arm and give the pub back to Harlod. Which will it be?"

"My arm," Parpous said, almost inaudibly.

"What was that?"

"My damned arm!"

"Very well." Rhunis turned to Avriel. "Heal it, my lady."

Avriel took hold of the bloody arm, paused to ensure that it was set right, and then closed her eyes. Blue tendrils of healing energy burst forth from her hands and wrapped themselves around the wound. After a moment it was over, and both Avriel and Rhunis let go of the man.

Parpous eyed his arm with wonder, as did all in attendance. The crowd gasped and cursed in awe. Rhunis pointed at Parpous. "On your honor, if you have any left in you, and on that of your men, you must now swear to leave Harlod alone, to never bother him again as long as you live, nor any of us, for that matter. You will go about your days happy you did not die here tonight, and if you seek any form of revenge, you will pay with your souls." He looked at Avriel. "Curse them with rotting disease should they break their oath."

Avriel suppressed a smile and raised her arms to the heavens. "*Olda thenn hendo drelancer hilgo dor!*"

Parpous and his men all stared wide-eyed at Avriel. Rhunis broke the spell. "Now swear it on your lives!"

"I swear, I swear!" Said the fearful men.

"Now get out of here!" Rhunis ordered.

As the men scurried for their lives, Roakore burst into laughter. "Heh! This man knows how to party! What pub we goin' to next?"

Just as Avriel and Zerafin had sensed, Harlod was found bound and gagged in the basement. Rhunis released him and brought the weakened man upstairs. His grey hair was caked with blood, his clothes tattered, and his body too thin. Rhunis called to the barmaid. “Fetch some hot tea, please. And heat up some stew.”

Avriel was already tending to the old man. Blue tendrils of energy mended his many wounds and gave the old man the strength he would need. His eyes cleared and his grimace turned into an amazed smile. “Tell me I have died and gone to the heavens. An elf maiden here, in my pub!” His eyes fell upon the companions and Rhunis. “Rhunis, my old friend! Such company you keep. Elves, dwarves—tell me I am dreaming,”

“No, my friend, this is no dream. How do you feel?”

“Twenty years younger.” He looked around the trashed pub. “Now what in the blazes happened here?”

Whill woke from a dreamless sleep, the morning breeze from the open balcony door caressing his cheek. The air was cool but welcome, for it soothed his slight headache. Tarren stood within the balcony archway, staring out onto the courtyard. Whill watched him for a few minutes and decided that the boy probably had been there for some time and would not move any time soon. Whill rose from bed and pulled on his pants. He tried to make a bit of noise as not to startle Tarren when he approached him.

“Beautiful morning, it is not? Good day for sailing.”

He hoped that Tarren had not folded himself into an inner shell of despair and self-pity. If his spirit had been broken, he would no longer laugh, no longer speak so jubilantly, would no longer see any good in the world. Whill had seen it before, in men and in women, and in children. But his fears were put to rest when Tarren looked up and nodded. He did not speak, he did not smile, but this small acknowledgment was enough to tell Whill that he would be alright. He would cry, he would lose himself to despair time and again, he would curse the heavens. But he would not let the cruelty of the world defeat him.

Whill smiled to himself and put a hand upon Tarren’s shoulder. For a long time they watched from their perch as the courtyard bustled with activity. To the west were many soldiers, marching, sparring, and practicing archery. At last Tarren spoke.

“I want to learn how to fight.”

“And you will, Tarren. You are now officially part of the royal family of Eldalon, be it as it may, you will be taught a great many things. You will become both a scholar and a fighter. But all in good time.

Tarren looked up into Whill’s eyes. “I want to start my training today.”

Whill met his gaze. He understood, and he nodded.

Whill honored Tarren’s wishes and let him begin his training. He then met Zerafin in the garden once more for his own training. He found the elf in the meditative pose he’d used the day before. Whill copied his pose and let himself fall into a state of relaxation. For more than fifteen minutes he meditated, awaiting Zerafin’s instruction.

Open your eyes, Whill.

Whill looked around but saw no one, only the lush, empty garden. Zerafin was gone.

All living things are made of energy ,from the frog to the squirrel, from the flower to you and I. Today your training is to pinpoint my location.

“How do I...?” But Zerafin did not answer. Five minutes came and went. “How do I...?” he said louder.

You start by keeping quiet. I am addressing you through your mind. If you wish, I can hear you as well. Simply think what you wish to say, and focus on me...project.

Whill closed his eyes and thought of Zerafin. *How do I...?*

Much better. To find me you must first decipher the beings around you. Close your eyes and focus on the energy that flows within and around yourself. See with your mind.

Whill did as he was told and imagined that he could see the energy around him. For more than ten minutes he could decipher no more than the blackness beyond his eyelids. Then he saw something.

I see swirling light, Zerafin. It has no color I can place, but rather it is all colors, swirling into itself all around me.

Good, Whill, very good. What you see is your own life force. In essence, it is you. Now focus your attention outside of your own life energy. Look beyond it. But do so slowly, and do not be startled.

Whill focused on his own life energy and then slowly peered past it, through the clouds of swirling light to the world beyond. He gasped as the energy of the garden hit him all at once. An ocean of swirling colors and light met his mental gaze and blinded him. In the confusion he opened his eyes.

I warned you not to be startled, Whill. But take heart in knowing that all elves open their eyes at first sight. This we call Aquilla Tel. You have done that which takes many elves hours to achieve. Do you require a break?

Whill shook his head and closed his eyes once more. *No.*

Very well. See your own life energy again, and once more go beyond it. See what is before you, the life energy of the garden.

All around him was light, light in the form of life energy. He saw plants and flowers, trees and insects, all with their own distinct auras. At first it seemed like a blinding ocean of color, with no distinct shapes or features. But the longer he viewed the garden in this manner, the more clearly it all became. Unlike normal sight, mental sight had far fewer boundaries. Nothing was solid; rather, all things appeared to be translucent light. This being so, Whill could see beyond the large akella plant before him, and the rose bush beyond that. Then he gasped as he saw Zerafin, seated in the meditative position about twenty yards away. His aura was bright white at the center and gradually turned to yellow and then orange as it dissipated.

I see you.

“Very good,” said Zerafin aloud, as he rose and came toward Whill. “Now come back and see with your eyes. Mental viewing takes more energy than you think, especially from one such as yourself.”

Whill reluctantly pulled back with his mind and found blackness once more. He slowly blinked and rubbed his forehead as he became dizzy. “Yes, I guess it does. I am a bit worn out, and have a slight headache.”

“As well you might. I would suggest you get some rest, but there is another lesson I want to teach today. Here, this will help.”

Zerafin lifted his hand. Within his palm, a small ball of pale blue light formed as if from mist. He pulled back his hand slightly and then pushed the ball forward. It floated quickly through the air and hit Whill in the chest. Instantly Whill was revitalized. His headache vanished, and all weakness left his body.

“That was amazing. But...didn’t it weaken you? Giving me your own energy?”

Zerafin shook his head and raised his hand, pointing out the ring on his index finger. It was silver with a small blue gem the size of a cranberry at the center.

“The energy came from this.”

Whill reached out and touched the ring. “You can store energy in things other than your swords?”

“Of course we can. The energy from our swords is stored in the gems within them. Long ago we discovered that gems like this one could be used to store energy. When a sword is made for an elf warrior, a gemstone much larger than

this one is stored within the hilt of the weapon. The stone within can hold an untold amount of energy, and so almost anything can be a host for the energy stones—swords, knives, axes, rings, bracelets, and so on. In fact, many elf warriors have gemstones imbedded within their own flesh, in case they are stripped of their weapons.”

“Have you done this?”

“Do I look like a fool?”

Of course, Whill thought. A warrior would be a fool not to do such a thing. “So...where is yours?”

Zerafin only smiled. “When you have practiced mind-sight a bit more, you will be able to find it yourself. For now I would like you to try something else.” He looked around the garden for a moment as if seeking something he had lost. “Ah, this will do.” He picked up a rock that was about the size of a child’s fist and set it between him and Whill.

“You have exhibited a vast amount of abilities and powers that most elves do not begin to acquire until they have practiced the ways of Orna Catorna for years, sometimes decades,” Zerafin said. “Now I would like you to try something else that I do not doubt you have the ability to do. I want you to move this stone without touching it.”

Whill awaited further instruction but none came. He shook his head. “But how do I...?”

“How did you heal Tarren? How did you heal the infant? Tell me, how did you use the energy within your father’s blade?”

Whill thought for a moment. “I don’t know. I just...wanted things to happen. I wanted Tarren to be alive, I wanted the child to live, I...I wanted the Draggard to die.”

“Well, then, there you have it. You must *want* to move the rock.”

Whill focused on the rock and envisioned it moving. Nothing happened. He asked it to lift. Nothing happened. He tried to rock it back and forth. Nothing, Zerafin only gave him a blank stare and lowered his gaze to the stone.

For more than twenty minutes Whill tried to move the stone, but to no avail. Finally, with a frustrated sigh, he gave up. “I can’t do it. I—”

“Stop right there, before you say something foolish and ridiculous. You can do anything you believe you can. That is not some inspirational babble meant to give you confidence, it is the absolute truth. You, me, we—all beings possess the ability to do incredible things, but not many have the belief that allows it to happen. You humans are taught at a very young age by your elders the so-called laws of nature. All you have learned is what they have been able to do or not do. The possibilities are never practiced because a wall of doubt lies before your

imagination. But what does it take for a possibility to become a reality? It takes one person doing it—and then, then, my friend, it is a law. It is real.”

Zerafin focused on the stone and instantly it rose into the air. It hovered above their heads, less than four feet off the ground, then slowly floated above Whill.

“Look at me, Whill.” As Whill did so, the rock fell and hit him on top of the head.

“Ow!” Whill protested as he rubbed the bump.

Zerafin laughed. “Now you know it is possible, else your head would not hurt.”

Chapter 24

The Meeting of the Kings

The following day the sound of trumpets assaulted the morning tranquility of the courtyard. Whill arose to discover what the noise was about. From his window he could see that someone had just arrived, someone of great importance.

“Tarren, come quickly, you must see this!”

The lad hurried to the window. “Is it the king of Shierdon? Has he arrived for the meeting?”

“I believe so.”

A small army of soldiers entered the castle gates, marching in a line five abreast and ten deep. They wore full armor, silver with a flowing purple cape that stopped at the knee. At each man’s side hung a great sword, with a purple-fabric-laced hilt and a purple gem set at the base. At the head of the troop walked two soldiers carrying the flag of Shierdon. The flag was also purple with a silver hawk at the center. The hawk, Whill remembered, was a beloved pet of the Shierdonians. They had taken the creatures as pets and hunting companions over six hundred years before. The hawks were used to send correspondence in times of war and peace. They could deliver a message in one quarter the time a horseman could; they could silently find prey miles away, and catch a fish twice its size at their master’s command. The great hawks could go unseen in the daytime as well as at night, for their feathers changed color to match their surroundings, much like a chameleon. They were named silver hawks because of all the colors, silver was the one they donned naturally when not trying to hide. One of Shierdon’s greatest strengths was its command of these great birds, which had been bred to reach the size of ponies, with wingspans of over ten feet.

The people of Shierdon had even trained a great number of these birds to carry the smallest of men, who were called the Hawk Knights of Shierdon. They were an elite army of specially trained soldiers, small but very strong and fiercely quick. In combat they carried a crossbow and a pair of long, thin

daggers. Their armor was thick leather, three layers thick, with mail between each. Every inch of the knight's armor was adorned with hawk feathers, and in this way the rider would change color along with his hawk, if the hawk permitted it. The knights were sometimes called the ghost assassins because of their ability to drop down on their enemies unnoticed and strike them dead in an instant. They could infiltrate enemy camps without so much as a sound. In battle they could rain hell from above.

The Shierdonians had such control over the great hawks because they had control over that which the hawks craved most, hawks bane. A purple flower that grows only in the northernmost regions of Shierdon, hawks bane is the favored treat of the great silver hawk. For that reason it had been made illegal many centuries past to export even the smallest amount of the plant to any other country. With an abundance of hawks bane, the Shierdonians had trained the birds to do a great many things. The most impressive by far was the ability of the master trainers and hawk knights to communicate with the birds through an intricate form of code tapped out on wooden blocks, the human with the knuckle, the birds its beak. A trainer needed hawks bane at his disposal to tame the beasts, but over time, once the bird learned the code and could virtually speak to its master, a great bond was forged, and the hawk served out of love and loyalty rather than simply for the flower it so desired.

Whill saw, as if out of thin air, and as silent as a mute's cry, five Hawk Knights swoop down to the courtyard. He stared in awe at the legendary sight and was not at all disappointed. They had arrived virtually unseen because they had been as blue as the sky, hawk and rider. Four of the birds had landed on the grass and instantly changed to dark green, as did their riders. The other bird had landed on the cobblestone path, however, and had turned many shades of grey and brown. Being done with the mission, they now all in turn changed to their natural color, a most brilliant silver. Their feathers shone in the morning sun with the brilliance of a cloud's lining. The great hawks folded their wings and settled to the ground as their riders dismounted.

Most of the hundreds of Eldalonian soldiers lining the courtyard took up clapping and cheering, only to receive a stern look from their respective generals.

Next in the entourage came a man on a brown steed, unmistakably adorned. This rider, at seventy-nine one of the oldest of his stature in the kingdoms, but riding like a man half his age, came King Ainamaf of Shierdon. Behind him followed his first general, three advisors, and fifty more soldiers.

"What's all the ruckus about, anyway?" came a familiar voice from the guest room door. Roakore strode towards Whill and Tarren with all seriousness. But as

he reached the window and his eyes caught the shining hawks of Shierdon, his voice failed him.

“King Ainamaf of Shierdon has arrived. The meeting will be this day at noon, as you know.”

“Why, yes, yes, o’ course, but—it’s just, do ye reckon—ye think them birds would become gold in me people’s halls—an’ like that o’ a diamond? I’ve heard o’ them plenty from me people. They can change color, ye know—never seen it, but it’s true, ye know. They been known to take on the ways of water if needed.”

Tarren was quick to concur. “Right, they can! They changed all kinds of colors they did, blue and green and grey and brown, it was amazing, and the knights too.” But Roakore seemed to not hear a word.

“I tell ye what lad, an’ mark me words—before my days are through, I aim to get me one o’ them hawks.” He suddenly lifted Tarren off his feet and began flying him across the room in his strong hands. “Can you imagine it, boy? Aside from a hell o’ a lot more muscle, I’m ’bout the same size as one o’ them riders. Them beasts’d carry me, no worries. Roakore the Silver Hawk Rider is what they’d call me, among other things.” He flew Tarren in circles and finally landed him upon the floor once again.

Whill smiled to hear Tarren laughing jubilantly, like he had before, like he would again. The lad can still find joy in this world, Whill thought. He will be alright after all. He would find despair in life, he would know grief again, but he had passed life’s cruelest of tests already, and he would be ready. He would survive.

The meeting of the kings commenced as scheduled at noon. It began with formal greetings and a feast fit for, well, kings. Whill was introduced to King Ainamaf by King Mathus. Ainamaf looked younger than his years, which rumors said was due to his dabbling in dark magic, but Whill knew better than to believe such things. A firm hand he had also, the grip of a swordsman, and a certain look about him when he met your eye, as if he knew something that remained a mystery to you. Whill was lost for a moment as he tried to discover just what that mystery might be, and was met with a laugh from Ainamaf.

“I have been told I have a knowing face, a...warlock’s grin, if you will.” He shook Whill’s hand. “I find it is quite handy in knowing what I wish. There are a numbered few who can lie to my face.”

Representatives from each of the ruling kingdoms of Agora were in attendance, aside from the war-stricken Isladon. With the feast and pleasantries over, King Mathus bid each in attendance to follow him to the meeting hall, a short distance from the dining room. The meeting hall was grand in scale and adorned with nothing but high ceilings and bare stone walls, so as not to distract

anyone. At its center was a grand circular oak table, able to seat more than fifty. Mathus' servants seated the many in attendance and then left the room immediately, closing behind them the great wooden doors.

King Mathus stood before his audience and spoke, his voice echoing loudly in the great room. "First I must thank you all for attending. I know the road was long, the notice short. I know you all have been introduced, but for the records, let me name one and all out who are here today. I myself, King Mathus of Eldalon. My most trusted advisor and general, Rhunis the Dragonslayer. King Ainamaf of Shierdon and his three advisors, General Sudden, the Fireblade, and the scholars Helliou and Bernoran. The Prince Zerafin and Princess Avriel of Elladrindellia. Roakore, soon-to-be king of the Ebony Mountains. Abram, former general, knight, and personal friend of the late king of Uthen-Arden."

Mathus looked at Whill for a moment, sharing the knowledge that this was the first official declaration of Whill's position. "And I give you Whill of Agora, son of the late king of Uthen-Arden, and rightful king of the Arden empire."

Ainamaf eyed Whill as his advisors whispered at his side. He only raised an eyebrow and smiled that knowing smile.

Mathus spoke once again. "Now that we have all been introduced, I expect you all have taken notice of the absence of the kings of both Shierdon and Uthen-Arden, which is why we are here today. As you also know, war has broken out between these two nations. This meeting has been called to decide what, if any, action we shall take in this matter. "King Ainamaf, we have all had time to discuss what we know about this war. Would you please tell us what words have reached the north?"

Ainamaf looked up at the ceiling and thought for a moment. "There are many rumors, of course. Word from Arden is that Isladon is in league with the Draggard, that King Addakon is at this moment fighting to ensure the freedom of all the good peoples of Agora. Strangely enough, there is no word from Isladon either to defend or deny this rumor. But the faint argument among the people is that Addakon is the one in league with the Draggard, and has begun his campaign to overtake this continent."

Whill was disturbed briefly by Ainamaf's complacency, his matter-of-fact speech. He could have been talking about the weather.

"Abram," King Mathus said, "would you please tell us what you believe to be the truth is in this matter?"

Abram rose to his feet and nodded to King Mathus. "My idea of the truth is this: Addakon is indeed in league with the Draggard. He made the first strike against all nations of this continent in his siege of the Ebony Mountains, and

now he has invaded Isladon. I believe if he is not stopped now, or at least met with strong resistance, he will succeed in his conquest.”

“What proof do you have of these accusations, Abram?” Ainamaf asked.

“Only a fair knowledge of Addakon’s personality. And the fact that upon journeying here, my party was attacked by a horde of Draggard led by a Dark elf. And that Whill, son of Aramonis, has been on the run with me for twenty years because Addakon killed his father. And that twenty years ago the Ebony Mountains were overrun by Draggard, who still grow in numbers within the great dwarf halls.”

Ainamaf sat as if waiting for more, his face emotionless. “A horde of Draggard led by an elf, you say?” Abram only nodded. Ainamaf chuckled. “I, for one, have never seen a Dark elf. As far as I know they are a strange tale told by a strange people. The fact that the elves led the horde of Draggard only suggests to me that you may wish to be more cautious in the company you keep. And as for young Whill here—well, how many stories are there of a fallen king, or betrayal for the sake of power? Addakon very well may have killed his brother for the throne, but that does not indicate that he wants domination of Agora.”

“I was there, good sir,” Abram said. “I was there when Addakon betrayed his brother, and I saw with my own eyes the Draggard army at his command.”

“Is that so? I had not heard of this before. Let me ask you this, Abram. If, as you say, Addakon has command of the Draggard, why would he not station them in the dwarf mountains within his own Kingdom?” He looked at Roakore. “Perhaps he saw the Ebony Mountains a weaker target.”

Roakore said nothing, but his nostrils flared and he shifted in his chair.

Ainamaf let the slightest smirk find his face. “Perhaps the reason the Draggard took the Ebony Mountains is because they are within Isladon, and the attack was ordered by the King of Isladon.”

Abram held out his hands. “I suspect you have more to say on the subject. By all means, go ahead.”

“To be blunt, sir, all of your so-called facts have no merit. Was this meeting called so that we may all assume the facts, that we may take the advice of a long-retired ex-personal guard who happened to become so only weeks before his king was slain? Should we be up in arms because Dark elves whom no one has ever seen are running amuck in Agora?

“I have a few ideas of the truth myself, if I may. The elves of Elladrindellia arrived here and took refuge. Then came the Draggard, whom the elves themselves admit to having created. The Draggard have inhabited the Ebony Mountains for twenty long years and Isladon has done nothing. Addakon has

taken the first step in eradicating this unholy scourge, and we debate sides? Gentlemen, this is painfully simple. The elves brought the Draggard to this land; the elves control the Draggard, you said it yourself, Abram. The elves, it appears, are in league with Isladon and the Draggard.”

Neither Zerafin nor Avriel said a word. Whill felt his blood boil, but Abram did not look surprised. Roakore, however, snapped. He rose to his feet and slammed his fist upon the table. “Lunacy! Ridiculous! Dragonshyte!”

Ainamaf did not rise, but his voice did, drowning out that of the furious dwarf. “Is that so, good dwarf, is that so? You, of all in attendance here, I would think, would listen to reason. You! Who have lost everything because of what the elves created, because of what they brought to your doors. The halls of your fathers stink with the putrid stench of dwarf corpses and Draggard slime! Yet you defend the elves. It is unbelievable, an outrage. May I ask you, Roakore, do your people know of your alliances, your allegiance?”

Roakore’s voice was calm now. “What me people know, Ainamaf, is that I am a dwarf who knows right from wrong, good from evil, and truth from lies. And you, my friend, have the eyes of a liar.”

Ainamaf glared back, ever with a smile. “Is that so?”

“Aye.”

Ainamaf waved his advisors away. “Leave us.”

With a confused look but no words, they did as they were told. Once the doors had closed, Zerafin spoke. “I must give them my condolences for the death of King Ainamaf.”

Whill suddenly understood.

Ainamaf rose to his feet. “If I am killed here today, you will have waged war with Isladon, good King Mathus. You wouldn’t want that, now would you? And as for you, Zerafin, I should have killed you upon the temple steps of Orkalendor.”

“Travvikonis. I am glad to see you still live, so that I may do as I should have done long ago.”

Travvikonis only smiled. “Addakon has but one order: forgo this futile effort and surrender at once, to me, now! For if you do not, you shall all die, your cities shall burn and your kingdoms shall crumble. There is no hope. Give up and spare many lives.”

King Mathus stood. “This is our response to your king, the betrayer. We will do as we have always done: we will fight till the death, and we will do it smiling. You my friend and your sad little band of reptiles have come to the wrong country. Now leave my halls before—”

“Before what?”

Rhunis rose beside his king. “Before your limp lifeless body is wheeled out of this city in a manure wagon.”

Travvikonis’s wicked guttural laugh turned into a snarl. He jerked his right hand forward, letting loose a red glowing sphere of flame. Rhunis whirled out of the way as the fireball hit the wall with a bang and shower of sparks. As he came around Rhunis had already produced a dagger and let it fly across the room. The dagger was passed by another ball of fire. Then the dagger and the fireball stopped inches short of their targets. Travvikonis had mentally stalled the dagger, and Zerafin had stopped the fireball. Everyone in the room waited.

“Do you wish to wage war on Isladon, Mathus?” said Travvikonis with a smirk.

King Mathus looked at Zerafin, whose outstretched hand held the fireball in place. The fireball disappeared with a poof, and the dagger fell to the table with a clank.

Zerafin turned to Travvikonis. “Leave this castle now!”

“Then I have your answers. I look forward to seeing you again, on the battlefield.” With that, he left the room.

The great doors shut and everyone inside said not a word for a long time. Finally Mathus broke the spell. “Rhunis. See to it that Dark elf posing as Ainamaf and all his people leave these castle walls. I want all of them accounted for.”

Without a word Rhunis exited the room. Then Roakore spoke up. “Damnit, ye two!” he bellowed at the elves. “Couldn’t you have used yer damned magic to see through his disguise?”

“No, good dwarf, we could not,” said Avriel. “It was a very powerful spell. It seems Travvikonis transformed his entire body—not only his outward appearance, but his aura as well, for when I looked upon him with my mind’s eye, he appeared to be Ainamaf.”

Roakore responded with only a “Bah!”

Abram spoke up, addressing the entire room. “One other thing disturbs me.”

“Ha! Only one?” said Roakore.

Abram ignored him. “Travvikonis did not attempt to kill Whill, though he knew who he was. Surely he would be greatly rewarded for such a deed. Unless...”

Zerafin finished the thought. “Unless he knew that Eadon would not approve.”

“Surely Addakon wants me dead?” Whill asked.

“Surely,” Avriel agreed.

“Aye,” said Roakore. “But Eadon may have different plans for ye than does his friend Addakon.”

“Precisely,” said Abram.

“Then soon Eadon will know where I am.”

“This is true,” Zerafin said.

“All the more reason to get you to Elladrindellia where you will be safe, and your training can commence,” said Avriel.

“She is right Whill,” said Abram. “There is too much at stake here. I suggest we leave for the elf kingdom as soon as possible. You are no help to Agora dead.”

Whill looked to everyone in the room in turn. “But I am no help to Agora if I hide either. I—we—have been on the run my whole life.”

“Whill.” Avriel’s voice was firm. “This is but one of many battles that shall befall this land in the coming months, perhaps years. The best way you can help now is to travel with us to Elladrindellia, learn the ways of the elves, and find the sword.”

“It is good counsel you keep, Whill,” Mathus said. “You would be wise to heed their words.”

Whill knew they were right, but his vision of battle from the previous night showed all too clearly in his mind. He wanted to be there, to help in some way. But he realized the truth in their words. He would most help by following the elves to their land and training as his father had done before him.

“Though it is not what my heart tells me, I see the wisdom in your advice and will heed your council.”

“Very well,” Zerafin said.

“Indeed it is the wisest choice,” agreed Mathus. “Now we have a choice before us. The truth of Ainamaf’s fate changes the issue at hand greatly.”

He went to the wall behind him. Upon it sat a single lever made of metal. The king pushed the lever down and a great many clanks and gears could be heard within the table. What had appeared to be a solid table was not so, for suddenly a square piece lifted from the middle only a few inches before it began to turn 180 degrees. The piece finished its rotation to reveal a huge map of Agora, elaborately detailed. The piece then lowered back in place.

Mathus opened a hidden compartment before his seat and began extracting small models of horseman and soldiers, which looked like a child’s army toys. He placed a set of red figures within the borders of Elladrindellia, of the dwarf kingdoms (aside from the Ebony Mountains), and of Eldalon and Isladon. He placed a set of black figures atop the Ebony Mountains, within the Uthen-Arden

borders, alongside the red forces within Isladon, and within Shierdon. He then addressed the room.

“As bleak as the battle before us seemed before, it appears that it is worse than we had thought.” He pointed at the black forces in Shierdon. “It appears we have lost an ally and gained an enemy. For as we speak, the lies that will lead Shierdon to wage war on my kingdom are already being spun, I assume. Eadon has successfully separated us from our allies. Zerafin, you are akin to Eadon; you said you have known him a great many years. What, in your opinion, will be his battle plan?”

Zerafin pondered the map before him a moment. “It seems that Eadon is one step ahead of us. Long he has had to plan this attack, and so far it is going exactly as he had hoped. I suspect that Shierdon will indeed wage war on Eldalon, by sea and through the Ky’Dren Pass. Eadon will send forces from Arden to bolster the force that will come through the pass. By sea he will attack the many coast towns within your country, cutting off trade and supplies. At the same time he will send a force to attack the Elladrindellia borders, once again by land and by sea. Also the Elgar mountain kingdom of the dwarves will become a target, though Eadon will assume the dwarves will dig in and defend. He will most likely attempt an invasion like the one you saw, Roakore, within your mountain. He will send in a host of Draggard. Not enough to take the mountain, I suspect, but enough to keep them busy for a long while.”

Everyone took in what had been said. Whill suddenly saw the scope of their dilemma. The scale of battle would be huge, with Eadon having all the advantages. Eadon had successfully cut off the allies and would bring war to each of their lands, making a collective effort virtually impossible.

Mathus gazed at the map as if in a trance. Finally he said, “Then what are we to do? We cannot send our troops to Isladon if invasion of our own lands is imminent.”

Avriel rose. “That is just what Eadon hopes we will think. He hopes that now that we see the grand scheme, we will lose heart and hunker down in a defensive stand, one that will not hold. Perhaps his grip on Isladon is not so strong.”

“I doubt that it is,” Mathus agreed. “Isladon has been under siege for not three weeks. They will not be taken so easily.”

“Then we send a force to help Isladon, to take up the fight and try to gain back those lands. Roakore, I suggest sending word to Elgar Mountain to fortify their doors and ready their army, the greatest army ever to gather within those great halls. Together, Elladrindellia and the Elgar should take and secure the eastern shore of Uthen-Arden. We will take Fendorf Island and its Arden navy ships there.”

“Aye!” said Roakore. “An’ the Ky’Dren forces, along with the Eldalon army, will gather a great force at the Ky’Dren Pass, as we’ve done many times before. Never before has an enemy taken the pass, not when dwarves and men stood side by side.”

Mathus smiled wide. “Very true, friend. At the same time, I will unleash the Eldalon navy and send reinforcements to Eldon Island.”

Avriel pointed to Elladrindellia. “From here we can send a force of at least two thousand by sea to aid in the battle for Isladon. We would send more, but we must secure our borders as well.”

“Aye, and Ky’Dren can send a land force of at least two thousand to meet with yer people in Isladon.”

“I will send fifty warships, and a force of five thousand soldiers to Isladon,” Mathus said.

Zerafin rose. “Then it is agreed. We have our plan. All of this must happen at the same time, and as soon as possible.”

Chapter 25

Preparations Begin

That night the companions shared a dinner with the king, it was the last time they would all be together. It was decided that Tarren would remain in Eldalon and begin the training he sought within the academy. Roakore was to leave the next day upon a naval vessel that would bring him to Sherna, and from there he would travel to Ky'Dren. It was determined that the road was too unsafe for Whill, Abram, and the elves to travel, so the discussion began on the safest way to get to Elladrindellia.

"I do not doubt that Travvikonis is watching the roads leading from Kell-Torey," said Abram. "It is certain the Hawk Riders are keeping an unseen eye upon them." The meal was done, and Abram's ever-present after-dinner pipe hung lazily from his mouth. If he was concerned with the events about to unfold, it was not evident. Roakore, on the other hand, appeared as tense as a bowstring.

"Gimme a pint o' Eldalonian brew, lass," he said to one of the many servants clearing the table. "Now, as ye all be knowing, I got over two thousand dwarves o' me own within Ky'Dren. Tougher than stone they are, an' eager as all hell to take back our mountain. I think that meself and me boys should lead the charge. With my two thousand, and the two thousand Ky'Dren, we should be able to rout the beasts from the tunnels."

"Hold, good dwarf!" said Mathus. "I admire your bravery, and that of your kin..."

"But?" asked Roakore.

"But we have discussed the liberation of Isladon. We cannot split our forces between the mountain and the battleground."

"Aye, but you have forgotten Whill's vision. He saw a vast black army o' Draggard emptying from within the mountain, a slaughter o' the forces we be set to gather. Whatever our strategy be, it cannot be one that allows that vision to become reality." He looked around the room. "Be I alone in me reckoning?"

“That is true,” Avriel said, “but neither can we hope to rout a hundred thousand Draggard from within the mountain.”

“Bah!” spat Roakore. “Speak fer yerself.”

“One thing we can count on,” Zerafin said, “is that the battle will take place at the foot of the mountain. Whill has seen it. Also, it makes strategic sense for Addakon and Eadon to make it so. Therefore we must devise a way to storm the beaches east of the mountain, perhaps Sentary. We should group up there within that coast town and make the march to Drindale, where I do not doubt the mass of Arden forces are stationed.”

Abram blew a smoke-ring and nodded. “But the problem still remains: how to avoid the imminent slaughter that will come from the very mountain we march on?”

Roakore slammed the table, startling Whill. “I got it! Ha-ha, we’ll blast the main entrance outta the tunnel! The eastern door is the route they will likely be takin—there ain’t another one for fifteen miles north er south. They’ll have to make a roundabout trip to get to the battle; that’ll take ’em hours. All we’ll need is ’bout two thousand pounds o’ blastin’ powder. The eastern door has a huge overhang above it, a slab o’ rock big as one o’ these castle towers. If we can drop that on ’em, they won’t be fer comin’ out too soon.”

Whill spoke up excitedly. “Yes, and if Eadon and Addakon have been waiting to unleash the Draggard during the battle, they will not have bolstered the Arden forces stationed at the foot of the mountain. They will be weaker than we may have thought.”

“Or,” Avriel said, and waited a moment for the excitement to pass. “They have prepared for such a thing and have built other exit tunnels.”

“Bah!” Roakore spat once again. “I seen the tunnel I speak o’, me lady. That pass is tunneled through a mile and a half o’ hard rock. It took me ancestors two years to build it.”

“Yes, good dwarf, but the Draggard have had twenty years.”

“Aye, but they ain’t dwarves, is they, good elf?”

“It is no matter,” Mathus said. “They would have had to plan the creation of another exit tunnel years ago, and you are correct, Roakore, they are not dwarves. The Draggard are animals and nothing more. They could not accomplish such a task.”

“No, they could not,” Zerafin agreed. “But a very powerful Dark elf could create such a tunnel in a short amount of time.”

Roakore scoffed at that. “Yer saying that elves are better diggers then me kin—that such a task is but a small thing to accomplish?”

“No, no, that is not it at all. I speak only the truth. The Dark elves have power beyond reckoning, and they have no morals to stop them from attaining their power. To them, all is there for the taking. Nothing is safe; nothing is sacred. Imagine, if you will, a Dark elf with no respect for any other living thing. His only purpose in life is to gain power beyond comprehension. Now imagine that he has a vessel to store that gained power, and a hundred years to collect it. He has the power to melt the very stone you speak of with only a thought, and the resources to see it through. I do not boast of the Dark elves’ power, Roakore. I only speak the truth so we may all realize what we face.”

Roakore looked as though he would speak but then lowered his head, eyes fixed up his calloused hands.

“But if they have not built another tunnel, then Roakore’s plan would work, would it not?” Whill asked.

Avriel smiled at him. “It would.”

“So are we to assume that they have not built a second tunnel?” asked Abram.

Rhunis began to pace around the table. “Whether they have or not, we are set to storm the beaches in what?—One week?” King Mathus nodded. “Then we must go with Roakore’s plan. If we are wrong, then we are back where we were at the beginning. So we will leave it to Roakore and his men to destroy the tunnel. We will engage the Arden forces at the foot of the mountain and do our best to push them back to their borders. If any of the Isladon forces remain there, they will welcome our arrival and bolster our numbers.

“I have sent five different spies to infiltrate Isladon and learn what they may. They shall return within three days. Until then we must go with what we know of the situation and prepare our troops.”

“True enough,” said Mathus. “Then let us put the gears of war in motion, and may the gods smile upon us.”

The following morning Whill and Tarren met Roakore at the docks, where a warship awaited the dwarf for departure to Sherna.

“Aye there!” Roakore called to them. Tarren ran up and gave him a hug. “Alright, alright then, lad.” He patted the boy’s back. “Ye work hard in yer studies o’ the blade, boy. If ye learn fast enough, there may be a Draggard left for ye to kill. An’ take care o’ Whill,” he added with a wink.

Tarren laughed. “I will, Roakore. Good luck getting your mountain back, too.”

“Bah! Luck be havin’ nothin’ to do with it, lad.”

Whill shook his hand. “It has been a pleasure fighting alongside you, friend.”

“And with you. An’ if this war is anything like them elves think it’ll be, there’ll be much more fighting to take pleasure in, me boy.”

“I wish I could be there with you when you retake the mountain. It will be a glorious day.”

“Aye, that it will, lad, that it will.” And with that, Roakore turned and walked the ramp to the ship.

In the following days, the castle was alive with activity in preparation for the battle. Hundreds of warships had arrived in great numbers and could be seen on the horizon. Whill wondered if Freston was among them. He had sent word to Whill that the ship was complete, and would be delivered personally by him and his sons. When the great armada shipped out for war, Whill, Abram, and the elves would leave with it on Whill’s ship. They would sail south with the armada until they reached the coast of Isladon. There they would break off from the pack and continue south one hundred miles clear of the coast of Uthen-Arden, then head east, and then finally north to the shores of Elladrindellia.

Recruitment had already begun for more soldiers into the Eldalon army. Property and gold were promised to any man who agreed to serve four years. This, Whill knew, was a precautionary and perhaps necessary measure taken by the king. Thousands signed up within the first day alone. Rumors had begun to spread like wildfire about the coming war—fragmented tales, mostly ill-informed. But the king and his council knew well enough the dangers of the misinformed masses, and so, one week after Roakore had set sail for Sherna, and two days after word had come that the dwarf armies were already moving out, the king made public the truth of the situation.

Whill stood with Abram at the gates of the castle, where it had been announced that the king himself would be speaking at high noon. Thousands crowded the streets, sat upon rooftops, and hung out of nearby windows to hear. A podium had been erected near the entrance, and all fell silent as King Mathus ascended the steps. Standing five feet above the heads of his people, with the spring sun shining down upon him and a quiet breeze crawling in from the ocean, he addressed the crowd.

“My good people of Eldalon, it is with stubbornly open eyes and a quickened heart that I have pondered the gravity of what I say to you now. Not a day of peaceful sleep have I seen in the last week, and I expect not to know one for

some weeks to come. As you all know, or have heard through whispered rumors, King Addakon of Uthen-Arden has waged war upon Isladon. Perhaps not officially, but through his actions he has done so. Word has come from our neighbors in Isladon, over many miles and by the blood of many brave men, of the fate of the kingdom. My friends, the king of Isladon has been killed in battle.”

A gasp swept through the crowd. People cursed Addakon and Uthen-Arden, fists pumped the air, and men spat upon the ground.

“That is not the worst of it. It seems that King Ainamaf has declared allegiance with Uthen-Arden. I have heard it from his own lips.”

Abram turned to Whill and whispered, “He is wise to not mention that Ainamaf is also dead or imprisoned, and is being impersonated by a Dark elf.”

“You think so?” Whill asked dryly.

“With the drums of war beating to the south; with a centuries-old ally being invaded on false grounds and twisted reasoning; with a king who, so out of character, has made allegiance with a tyrant—What, my good people, are we to do?”

Already the crowd was yelling words of war. King Mathus let his voice ring out once again, with even more passion than before.

“The terrible truth of it is that we are now cornered. We are the only human kingdom left within Agora that stands between its certain destruction and liberation! I hereby declare and rectify that which already has come to pass. As in the days of old, when barbarians thought to overtake this land—and before that, when the kingdoms were young and Eldalon fought countless enemies to become the beacon of freedom and prosperity that it is now—I have renewed our alliance with not only the dwarves of Ky’Dren, but all the dwarf kingdoms of Agora. Like us, they have been swept up in this mad pursuit of power by King Addakon and the Dark elves of Drindellia.”

The crowd hushed slightly at the mention of the Dark elves.

“Yes, my friends, the legends are true. The Dark elves wish to do to all of Agora that which they have done to the good elves of Drindellia. For years they have been attacking our shores, using the Draggard abominations as their puppets. And now it seems they have a new puppet, seduced with the promise of great power: King Addakon. It was he, along with the Dark elves and their Draggard horde, who invaded the Ebony Mountains twenty years ago. And it is he who now, with that same horde and an army of misguided soldiers, that has waged war upon Isladon. And he has all the while named Isladon in league with the Draggard.”

The people were speechless in the face of so many revelations. The king allowed a moment for it all to sink in. In the faces of those nearby, Whill saw many reactions— anger, fear, sorrow—but not doubt.

“I regret now dearly our inaction those years ago when the Ebony Mountains were invaded. I will bring this regret to the grave, I assure you. What kind of nation are we if we stand idly by while our neighbors—human, dwarf, or elf—are slaughtered by the thousands—their homes taken, their lives destroyed, their freedom stripped? What kind of neighbors, indeed. With these thoughts in mind, I have taken the following actions: I have renewed our allegiances with the dwarves and elves, and welcome any human in Agora who believes and acts for our cause. But I leave the final choice to you, the people, for I cannot and should not make such decisions for you.

“So what shall it be? Shall we do nothing and hope that we can ride out this storm of tyranny in the comfort of our homes and daily lives? Shall we wish, like children, that the monsters will just go away? Should we simply give in to Addakon without a fight, and save much blood from being spilled? Or shall we stand united with the great armies of the dwarves and Elladrindellia? Shall we speak as one united voice against the powers of darkness that have made nest upon our doorstep?” The crowd erupted with cheers and applause. “Shall we fight against all odds—against all hope, against all reason—outnumbered and surrounded by monsters and murderous Dark elves? Or shall we do what we have always done when faced with such decisions—wage war against those who would see us dead?”

The crowd erupted once again in an ocean of fists, with swords, knives, pitchforks, and clubs held high.

Whill and Abram walked the streets alone. The excitement was palpable. Songs of Eldalon rang out, and all talk was of the king’s proclamation.

“You would do well to watch closely and learn the ways of your grandfather, King Mathus,” Abram said to Whill. “I have met many a man of great power in my years, but none have had the natural mind for what is right and just like King Mathus. Aside from your father, of course.”

“Yes, King Mathus is a great public speaker. And you are correct, it is his passion that gives his words power. Not to mention he says that which is most closely in the hearts of his audience.”

Abram chuckled slightly. “That, my friend, is one thing that has been passed down from Mathus’s blood into yours.”

Whill stopped mid-stride. “Am I vain to have the same sentiment?”

“No, sir! It is not vanity to recognize that you have a talent for leading men. It is only vanity to lead men to their deaths for your own gain, and not their own. That, thankfully, is something you did not inherit from your uncle.”

“I know exactly what the elders and the monks will say, sister,” said Zerafin as he gently polished his blade Nifarez. “They will say what they have always said and what needs saying: peace is the way of the free mind; harmony is the very essence that unites all life.”

“But what they do not consider is that the Draggard are not natural manifestations of the earth. Nor do the Dark elves abide by or hold sacred any of nature’s laws.” Avriel was buttoning Tarren into his newly issued uniform. “I know and support your position in the matter, brother. Was it not I who produced such an argument with the Elders not a year ago? But I suppose you are simply honing your argument for soldiers, and will address it to the Elders hence.”

Zerafin sheathed the finely polished blade. “I think they will agree with me.”

Tarren, in his new hat and uniform, turned to him for approval.

“I must say, young man, you do look as though you are ready for the vigorous duties before you in the Eldalon army. What is your opinion of that of which we have been speaking?”

Tarren’s mouth twisted up in thought. “I know that the Elders you speak of are older than dirt—well, so Roakore said—and they must be very smart, being so old. So if they are so smart, they can only agree with what you say about the need for war.”

Zerafin laughed. “You see, sister? The purest of truths can be found in the young.”

Roakore climbed the mountain pass he had traversed so many times before. The memory of his many weeks alone, patrolling this very face, flashed through his mind. He had time alone to ponder, to relive that last battle over and over again—the fall of his brothers, of his father; the words upon his father’s bloody lips sang to him now in the spring wind. Finally, after twenty long years, the time had come for him and his dwarves to take back what was rightfully theirs. The spirit of his father would be released and take its place within the Hall of Kings.

He came to the same door he had entered with Whill and Abram not a month ago—now to bring word to his people that the time had come. The time for

redemption was upon them. The time for war was near.

Zerafin sat opposite Whill in the garden, in silence for a time unknown. Whill used the time to do as he'd been instructed, to meditate. But he also used his new mind-sight to look for the gem that lay within the elf. He saw the many rings teeming with energy upon the elf—the bracelets of power, the belt with its many gemstones of energy, the very studs upon his ears—but he could not detect any gemstone embedded beneath the flesh.

“I know what you seek,” said Zerafin. Whill opened his eyes to find the elf staring at him, and feared he had been offended.

“Relax,” said Zerafin. “I would be more insulted if you hadn't been using your new abilities. The truth is that you cannot find my gem because of the enchantments I have put upon it. You will learn such enchantments when it is time. Each elf, upon coming of age, has his gemstone embedded in a place of his choosing, a place that only he or she knows of. But first a month must be spent enchanting the object with an energy command to hide it from prying eyes. It should weaken your opponent to the brink of exhaustion to find your inner gemstone, therefore ensuring your own victory.”

He rose. “As is the way of our Elders, so is our way. One should not have a single teacher but many. Avriel will continue where I have left off while we are in Eldalon.” He gave a small bow and quietly left the gardens.

Whill did not know what to do or what Zerafin meant. Was Avriel coming now to continue his teachings? He did not move, but meditated as he had been taught. He let his mind be at ease and his body still as he focused upon himself and all around him.

Some time had passed when he came back to the world, revitalized and alert. He could sense something—a presence. He recognized it at once, though he knew not how. It was Avriel. He stood and surveyed the garden but saw nothing.

Suddenly a stone came hurtling out of nowhere and struck him in the forehead, drawing blood. Then came a voice he knew, but not in any form he had thus heard. She laughed like a child playing a prank, and then another stone stuck him in the hand. Whill looked wildly from one end of the garden to the other, rubbing his forehead. Another stone came, too fast to duck, and struck him in the shoulder, then another in the chest, and yet another in the back of his head. Whill drew his sword, fuming. This time five stones stuck him hard enough to break his arm. He dropped his sword and spun about. “What is the meaning of this?”

Avriel chuckled. “Do you wish for the rocks not to strike you?”

Another stone hit Whill right between the eyes and he fell to the ground. “Of course I wish the bloody stones not to hit me!”

“Then use what you have learned from my brother and stop them, Whill of Agora!”

Two more rocks came hurtling at Whill as he stood. Instantly he used his mind-sight. The world before him fell like a curtain as the world of energy rushed forth. He saw the stones coming at him clearly, shimmering like diamonds with the residual energy of that which Avriel used to propel them. Whill lifted his hand and produced a globe of energy that—to his astonishment—surrounded him. He did not know how nor why, but he did not care; he simply wanted the rocks to stop striking him. The stones struck the energy wall and fell to the ground. Two more followed, then four more, and finally a volley of more than a dozen stones. Each one weakened his feeble shield slightly. Then the barrage stopped and Avriel appeared.

Whill had never before seen her with his mind-sight. She came forward slowly from behind a magnificent rose bush. Her energy form was similar to Zerafin’s, yet still very different. As soon as his mind’s eye fell upon her, his own energy shield faltered and diminished. It was unlike anything he had ever seen. Radiant pulses of pristine white and silver light pulsed and danced about and from her. She glowed from within like a sun, at her center was the purest and most radiant light Whill had ever witnessed.

A rock stuck his forehead.

He was knocked unconscious for a moment. The next thing he knew, Avriel’s sweet breath was lightly teasing his neck. A blue light surrounded him and healed his many minor wounds. Her breath moved to his ear as his vision came into focus. “You have just seen me as no one ever has. What you have witnessed is reserved solely for the one who is loved by the observer.”

They locked eyes, their lips as close as could be without touching, and there she lingered. Whill was paralyzed. His heart screamed for action yet his mind bade him wait, for he had a feeling that what was being shared at this moment could not be enhanced by anything, not even a kiss.

Avriel retreated and sat across from Whill as Zerafin had done. He shook his head and breathed deeply. What spell had come over him? He took up the meditation pose. For many minutes they did not speak, but simply stared at each other—unblinking, unyielding. Finally that sweet melodic voice, so much like a symphony, spoke within his mind.

You have learned well the ways of Orna Catorna. You have shown an aptitude for not only that which you have learned, but that which you have yet to

learn. This, I must say, is unheard of within the world of my people. My brother suspects that this alone is the reason for my love for you. But I do not know and do not care for the reasons, for when it comes to love it seems there are none.

Whill listened intently and exuberantly, exhilarated by the sudden admission of Avriel's love.

You must understand, Whill, that the feelings I have for you, and those which I know you hold for me, are dangerous ones. I have been so warned; history teaches about such matters. We have a pressing duty before us, one that eclipses what we feel and want and need. We have a duty to do what we can for this cause—first and foremost, and to the death. We must not be hasty in our pursuit of love, but mindful and steady in pursuit of the cause we serve.

A smile crept onto her face, and a single tear hung from her eye. *Blessed will be the day when we can rightfully declare our love aloud. Until that day, when the curses of the Dark elves are but a distant memory, we shall remain silent in our hearts' desire and strong in our resolve.*

Then until that day, Whill told her, know what I feel now. That since the first time I saw you in that feverish dream, since the first hint of your scent left my mind, since the first sounds of your beautiful voice filled my ears, I have loved you.

Avriel smiled in such a girlish way that Whill, for a moment, doubted her centuries of life.

And I you, Whill. And I you.

She held her head high and looked to the heavens. Whatever mental bond there had been was broken.

"It is for those reasons, my duty included, that I present you with this. I know you will object, but it must be done for the good of the cause. This I foresee."

Avriel then untied her blouse and let it fall upon her arms. Her naked breasts heaved with her every breath as they shone in the sunlight. Whill watched in dumbfounded awe as the skin above her right breast swelled until it finally split open, and a radiant red gem floated from the wound. This, he knew to his sudden horror, was her inner gem. The gem floated between them as her wound healed and she fastened her blouse. A bubble of water floated from the nearby garden stream and encapsulated the gem, washing it of her blood. Before Whill could protest, Avriel spoke.

"This gem was presented to me by my seventh-great-grandmother, who was a member of Elladrindellia's Elder Council before the fall. She and my other grandmothers stored their energy in it for twenty years after my birth. Such a gift is bestowed upon all elf children when they come of age. And I now present it to you."

Whill was about to protest once again, but was silenced by Avriel's mind. *If you love me—if what you feel is true—then do not argue this. It would be seen as the greatest insult.*

He nodded his reluctant agreement. Then she produced a dagger. "Choose the placement," she said.

Whill pondered the situation for a moment and, realizing he would not win the fight, obliged. He opened his shirt to expose his chest and pointed above his heart.

Avriel raised the dagger to his skin. Deep the blade went, but it was followed by a constant blue light that swallowed any pain Whill would have felt. The gem floated to the wound and found its new home within his chest.

"The same enchantments I once put on it will keep it hidden from your enemies," she explained. "I only ask that you never use it but in the most dire of situations, and be wary of its power."

"I promise."

High above, Zerafin turned from the window where he watched.

Avriel, my dear sister, what have you done?

Whill was surprised to enter his room and find Tarren and Abram there. The boy wore his blue and purple cadet uniform, which was clean and well pressed.

"Well!" said Whill. "You look as ready as I imagine any new recruit has ever been."

Tarren beamed. "I am, sir."

"I do not doubt that you will make a fine soldier when your time comes. Though I hope you will never be needed in the war we face this day." Tarren's shoulders drooped and he scowled. "Do not misunderstand me, son. I only hope that this terrible business is done by the time you are ready for combat."

"I am ready now!" he said, puffing out his chest.

Whill knelt and said, "Tarren, do not hasten into battle with revenge in your heart, for it has been shown through the ages that this is surely the way to one's own defeat. Be ready, be prepared, train hard, but do so with the intention of protecting the innocent, not exacting your own vengeance. Those who did you wrong are dead. That business is done."

The young lad managed a half-smile. "Yes, sir."

Tarren had already gone to his first day of training, and though that was a brutal and dangerous affair within the Eldalon Army, Whill was glad nonetheless.

“I have informed the king that I wish Tarren to be schooled intensively throughout his years in the academy. His thirst for knowledge will go beyond the sword, I do not doubt, as will his compulsion to right the wrongs of this world.”

“Hmm. I wish him good luck in that endeavor.” Abram lit his pipe and looked out onto the sunset upon the horizon. “I wonder, Whill, did your own words spark any familiarity with you this day?”

“What words?”

“Your words to Tarren.”

Whill sat upon a heavily cushioned chair. “Ah, that. Well, Abram, my father’s killer remains at large at the moment and, being that he is the one who must be slain to ensure victory, it seems that I am left with a most monumental situation. For that which my sense of vengeance deems necessary, is that which the cause requires as well.”

Abram chuckled at Whill’s cleverness. “Yes, my friend.” Smoke from his pipe encircled his body, causing a strange effect in the light of the sunset. “You know well the difference between the compulsion of emotions and that of duty. I beg you forget them not in this matter, nor, I must say, in that of Avriel.”

“I shall not soon forget, sir,” Whill said.

Roakore burst into his soldiers’ training room, sweat dripping from his brow and a wild look in his eye. At his entrance the shout went out: “Roakore has returned!”

The proclamation echoed throughout the hall, and the more than two thousand sparring soldiers all came to a sudden halt. Roakore gasped and put his hand upon the nearest dwarf for support as he caught his breath. After a moment passed he spoke.

“Me friends, me sons, me brothers, me great warriors: the time has come. I travel from Eldalon with the word o’ King Mathus. We and the humans—and even the elves—shall fall upon the shores o’ Isladon. There we shall liberate the people and fight the Draggard scourge. We’ll be takin back the mountains o’ our fathers. We shall finally be knowin’ redemption!”

The hall erupted into a frenzy of cheers that seemed to test the very structural integrity of the mountain itself. Roakore raised his arms for silence.

“Yer training is done. Go home, love yer wives, spend time with yer children—do what ye will—fer the next time ye raise yer weapons in combat, it’ll be against the hell-born Draggard bastards. We leave for battle within the week!”

Chapter 26

The Drums of War

The time had come. Word had arrived from Ky'Dren: the dwarf armies of both Ky'Dren and Elgar would be poised to strike at sunrise two days hence. The army of Elladrindellia had set sail a week prior and were already among those ships that waited within the Eldalon harbor.

As promised, Freston and his sons were at the docks at sunrise with Whill's ship. He greeted Whill and gestured to the vessel with pride. "It is my pleasure to give to you *Celestra*," he said.

Whill was in awe, as many men who looked upon the ship that morning had been. She was beautiful. Abram patted Whill on the shoulder and simply laughed, at a loss for words.

The day was mild, the sun shone through thin clouds, and on the air floated the Eldalon farewell song. The elves had arrived, as had Rhunis. It was time to depart.

With goodbyes said, and Whill's great ship turning from the harbor to face the endless ocean, he finally got a look at the full scope of the fleet that would carry the army to foreign shores. Though the sight of his allied ships should have given him solace, there had been a foreboding in his heart since his vision of the coming battle. So vivid had it been that he could still remember the smell of burnt earth and flesh. He knew logic dictated that he should have no part of such a war, so important was he to the grand scheme. But another part of his mind urged him to go.

He looked at Avriel. The sight of her, with the sunlight upon her beautiful face, for a moment made his stomach fall like the first time he had ever sailed. Then she came into his mind. He had noticed a difference in sensation when Avriel, as opposed to Zerafin, spoke to him in this way. His stomach fell again as he seemed to fly like smoke through an open window into her mind. For a brief moment he could access every memory, explore every feeling and fantasy, and hear every thought—and the thoughts behind every thought as well. He might

have plumbed the depths forever, but did not have time to—so brief was the experience—for as soon as his mind had gone to hers, it became filled with fear.

He blinked and was himself again—the sea breeze on his face, the sun at the bow, and everyone staring at him.

“What’d you do this time, Whill?” asked Abram with a smirk.

“It seems Whill has just had his first attempt at mind-sharing,” said Avriel.

“It was an accident, I wasn’t trying to. It just happened...”

“We find that these things first happen when one is not trying,” Zerafin said. “Which is why much of the training can have disastrous results.”

Avriel chuckled. “You mean like when you were first training, brother, and you were first learning to move things with your mind?”

Zerafin looked to the heavens with a laugh. “Not that story.”

Rhunis egged her on. “Ha! Tell it m’lady, what did he do?”

“When Zerafin was first learning to move objects with his mind, he couldn’t get the image of tomatoes pelting monks out of his head. No monk within my brother’s sight was safe for a month. One would come walking through the village pondering the song of the birds and splat, out of the nearest home or garden would come a tomato.”

The men bent over with laughter. “I had to have a trainer near me at all times for a month to counter my skills,” he admitted.

Whill was relieved that the subject had been diverted. Even as he laughed with the others, he enjoyed a private happiness, for he had seen what he could never otherwise have known for certain or fully. He knew how Avriel really felt about him.

Roakore couldn’t help but smile. Before him, though still many miles away, lay his mountain home—and his father’s spirit as well. Behind him marched two thousand of the finest dwarf soldiers this land had ever seen, their sole purpose for living these last twenty years had been preparation for this moment. And their sole purpose in dying would be victory. Each and every one was a master of his weapon. Muscles bulged from years of mining; hands were strong on their hilts from years of training; minds were bent, and eyes set, on one thing.

And behind them marched the forces of the Ky’Dren and Elgar mountains—thousands of loyal dwarves, every one honored by the chance to avenge such a travesty, and willing to die fighting for the greatest good. In dwarf society, one could only hope to die such a death. Not a dwarf lived who would turn down such a chance at glory as this, Roakore knew.

“We will stay with the fleet until we are near the coast of Isladon, then we head south,” Whill confirmed to Abram.

“Yes. We should have no troubles. No ship can outrun this one, I would bank on it.”

The fleet had been sailing all morning and into the afternoon. They would reach the beaches of Isladon by the next morning, after the dwarves had closed the great doors of the Ebony Mountains. From there, Whill and his comrades would separate from the fleet, and start their journey to Elladrindellia.

Roakore stopped and grunted low in his throat, and those immediately behind him did the same—and so on until every dwarf had stopped. It was a few hours past midnight; they were right on time. Roakore crouched at the foot of a small hill and then crawled to the top with two of his generals. By the faint light of the moon he could make out every detail of the world around him—a few minutes in the dark and a dwarf could see as well as any cat. Before him was the northern entrance to the Ebony Mountains. He turned and signaled behind. At once, two dwarves broke rank and went about infiltrating the entrance. They had seen no scouts, but if they were any good at what they did, Roakore counted on not seeing them. No word had come from the dozens of their own scouts.

Within minutes the two dwarves returned. They had seen no sentries on duty but the entrance remained closed. Roakore silently selected six stout dwarves, brought his fist into the air, and proceeded with them to the entrance. Slow and quiet they crept, and he was alert to every movement in the world around. The light wind carried only the scent of spring foliage and earth, and a faint scent of deer urine. There was no sound but the wind in the grass.

Once confident that no one was on guard, he settled on the door. Like many others of dwarven make, it was mostly concealed to look like its surroundings. It was not adorned with writing or runes, or any of the like. It was simply a giant slab of rock, made to appear no more conspicuous than the rest of the mountainside. Roakore did not like the idea that they had not seen any Draggard about. But they had a schedule to keep, and he had thousands of dwarves at his back. The time was now.

The wind had picked up, blowing in from the west with force. It had been clear sailing all day, but now, with the sun down, the clouds came and masked the stars in their heavenly lair. Whill thought of Eadon and the Dark elves as he watched Zerafin study the sky.

The elf turned and read the concern on his face. “I doubt this is the work of the Dark elves. They would not expend so much energy on weather. No, they would save it for the battlefield.”

Whill was about to visit Abram at the wheel when the elf spoke again. “But we do have visitors.”

He looked up at the sky and listened, but found nothing. Zerafin’s voice came to him. *Use your mind-sight, Whill, and ready your blade.*

As his hand found the hilt, he relaxed to achieve the meditative state. At first he could not, due to his inexperience and the suddenness of the command. But within a minute he was there, and gasped at the sight of the ocean. The ship, which was faint due to its lifelessness, seemed to float on a cloud of greenish blue light. It pulsed and throbbed—colors and life-energy patterns teeming and swirling in a strange and hypnotic dance. When he finally looked away and to the deck, he saw for the first time the life-energy patterns of Abram and Rhunis. He could not see the elves’, however. They were, he assumed, hiding it somehow.

With that thought, he snapped out of his amazement and remembered Zerafin’s warning. He looked at the sky. Though it was overcast, he could clearly see the stars, which were now more brilliant than ever they had been before. Again came Zerafin’s voice: *Just below the Star of the Kings.*

Whill looked, and there he could make out faintly the life energy of something. At first it appeared to be a bird, but then he saw it for what it was. Glowing like hot lava and moving among the stars was a dragon.

With the power bestowed upon his bloodline by the gods, Roakore moved the large slab of rock from its place in the mountain. The dwarves with him might have helped by pulling on the ropes disguised as tree roots along the seam, but they were in awe of their king’s great power. It taxed Roakore more than he showed, but he hardly cared; he had twenty years of vengeance fueling his muscles as well. Once the door was opened fully, he again threw his fist in the air and, with his comrades, entered their mountain home for the first time in too many years.

They carefully stalked the tunnel, alert to any noise. It had been used in his father's day mostly for trade, and therefore the floor was flat and wide enough to accommodate two wagons abreast. The ceiling was high, and its stone walls embedded with millions of shining minerals.

On they walked until Roakore signaled to one of the dwarves, who nodded and turned back to get the others. They walked for another five minutes, and again Roakore sent a soldier back to advance the troops thus far. Soon they neared what he knew was the first big chamber. It had been used as a loading place for dwarf traders. More than twenty tunnels led to it, which meant they would have to be careful of an ambush. He signaled a third dwarf to go back and return with forty more, which he intended to have search the many tunnels in pairs.

Just as the dwarf was heading on his way, the draft in the tunnel shifted. It had been blowing into the mountain since Roakore had opened the door, but now reversed direction and blew faintly on his beard—with the scent of a dragon.

An hour had passed and Whill had long ago become weary using mind-sight. He looked again every few minutes but nothing had changed. The dragon still flew directly above them, thousands of feet in the air. Abram and the others, learning of the dragon's presence, had discussed the implications and relayed the information to the other ships. At least this would not be a surprise attack, but it seemed there was no way of stopping it. The elves were powerful, but even an arrow shot with perfection and elven power behind it would not be able to take down the beast.

Roakore's blood began to boil. The thought of a dragon slumbering within the mountain of his people—the mountain of his father—was too much to bear. His breathing became heavy, and his axe was in his hand without his realizing he'd gone for it. He was no longer aware of the three dwarves remaining with him. He knew only that he was running into the chamber of the dragon.

A sound that at first had been faint now grew into a primal scream. The guttural war cry, he knew, would carry to the many thousands of dwarves still outside the tunnel. It was a sound, he also knew, that would be recalled by all the surviving dwarves when they sat and told the story of this great day. If there were any survivors.

Whill continued to watch the night, as the elves did, with his mind's eye. He was no longer tired from it, for he had begun calling upon the stored energy of his father's blade. He was so intent on the dragon above that he was startled when Avriel suddenly pushed him to the ground with a mental energy blast. As he hit, Zerafin was already firing his bow at a phantom that swooped down where he had stood. Whill looked desperately in the direction the elf's arrows flew, but saw nothing. The sudden drop to the floor had broken his mind-sight. He slowly regained it, but in his panic it was not easy to maintain. Then he saw more clearly as Avriel came to his side and whispered, "Stay down."

It was a Hawk Rider.

Roakore barreled down the tunnel and into the trading chamber. He was met by a wall of heat and flame as the dragon belched fire from its maw. He dove to the left behind a pile of treasures, at the same time releasing his stone bird. It whirled through the air, directed with all his mental might to where he thought the dragon to be. The weapon hit with a loud thud, followed by an angry groan. Again the beast groaned in pain as three hatchets thrown by Roakore's comrades, found their marks. Only the dwarves' strength and excellent craftsmanship could have gotten the blades through the thick scales. Roakore fired his own hatchet at the beast as it reared its head to strike yet again with its deadly breath.

As the weapon flew, he got a good look at the monster. It was the biggest he had ever seen, and he had seen a few in his day. It had no front legs, like some did, but rather two huge outstretched wings and huge, powerful hind legs. Its scales shone green in the firelight; its eyes dead black. Upon its head like a crown were a series of small horns, starting above its eyes and growing bigger as they ascended toward the main horn. Like a knight's lance it was, but not as long as the many sharp horns upon its back. Roakore knew this species: it was a spear-horn.

He ducked again behind his makeshift shelter as another wall of searing flame spewed across the chamber. Two of his men dove for cover among similar piles of gold and jewels, but one was not so lucky—a young soldier named Ro'Quon, who was consumed by the fire as Roakore screamed his name. The dwarf did not fall; he did not stumble. Engulfed in flames and his armor glowing red, he charged forth crazed. Blinded but for the tears of rage that quenched the fire in his eyes, he took ten running steps up a pile of gold and leapt at the

dragon with his axe pulled back high over his head,, his entire body arched in the great strike. His huge axe found its mark, breaking through scales and muscle and bone, as both blade, and dwarf disappeared into the beast's fiery mouth. To Roakore's amazement, the dragon reared its head and let out an earthshaking scream. Fire sprayed forth onto the ceiling and descended upon the chamber. Roakore's cloak was consumed and half his beard burned off. It was not until the dragon suddenly lurched forward that he saw the wound. The dragon's snout had been split from mouth to forehead by Ro'Quon's great axe. The spear-horn lurched again and finally fell dead, black smoke issuing from its split head. Roakore and his men stood from their cover and looked on in awe until finally Roakore spoke.

"Now that, me boys, is how it's done."

Zerafin's initial shots had missed, and now the Hawk Rider swooped low beyond view over the deck. Because of the ocean's great aura, it was impossible to see it against the water.

"What's going on?" Rhunis yelled as he hurried up from below deck.

"A Hawk Rider," Zerafin answered as he scoured the night.

"There is more than one," Avriel added

"This is no good; they know where you are, Whill," Abram said. "We will never get to Elladrindellia this way."

"We must," Rhunis argued. "This is exactly what they would want, for Whill to be present at the battle. Or perhaps they simply have orders to kill us all."

Avriel shook her head. "No, Eadon knows well enough that the Hawk Riders stand no chance against us, not with the power we possess. He was likely a scout. The others will be attacking shortly; they mean to capture Whill alive."

Whill had been watching the dragon during the conversation. It had changed course and suddenly swooped down with great speed, parting the clouds as it came, revealing the moon behind it. He readied his bow.

"The dragon is attacking!"

Zerafin had already seen it. He shot one two three arrows in procession, each one glowing with a strange red hue. Avriel let loose three more such arrows, and though Whill felt quite foolish without their power, he fired two of his own. His disappeared into the nothingness of night, but the elves' could be seen ascending higher and higher, headed straight for the dragon. The beast changed course and twirled in the air with astonishing speed and agility, easily dodging the arrows. But it did come close to a few, and Whill saw with amazement that when the

arrows suddenly exploded, the dragon was blown to the side and lost in the fiery show.

It gave a great growl as it emerged from the green fire and changed course again. With a splash big enough to douse the companions with a wave of seawater, it hit the ocean and disappeared. Suddenly Zerafin turned and shot an arrow directly over Whill's head. They watched its flight and saw it disappear into the night twenty feet behind him. Before Whill could ponder where it had gone, there was another explosion. From the blast fell a dead hawk and its rider into the cold sea below.

The ship was rocked once again as the dragon emerged, with great power, from the ocean off the starboard side of the ship. Avriel was ready to let her arrow fly when they saw yet another hawk and rider. These, however, were suddenly in the clutches of the dragon's mouth.

Roakore and his men stood with bowed heads, praying over the body of Ro'Quon, as backup came pouring into the chamber. He turned to the dwarves with tears of in his eyes.

"Our friend be gone from this world. Let it be known that on this day, the great Ro'Quon, engulfed in flames and nearing death, charged a green spear-horned dragon and killed it with one blow from the great axe o' his father. He now dines in the Mountain o' the Kings." He slammed his fist to his chest. "Ro'Quon!"

"Ro'Quon!" answered the others.

The body was lifted from the chamber floor and carried on the hands of every dwarf in the tunnel, and with his body went the telling of his great feat.

Roakore then sent scouts into the other twenty tunnels to give warning. The battle with the dragon had surely been heard, and they would be coming, in numbers.

"The dragon fights for us!" said Abram in amazement as the group watched it violently shake its head, tearing the flesh of its prey before dropping it to the ocean.

Rhunis looked doubtful. "Or it wants us for itself."

A great commotion had erupted from a nearby ship of the Eldalon navy. They too had seen the dragon, but they knew not that it might be friendly. Volleys of flaming arrows poured out from it and four others. Most of them

missed, and those that found their mark bounced harmlessly off the dragon's scaly armor. The creature ignored the arrows and blew fire at the ocean off the starboard side. There was a screech as a hawk and rider suddenly appeared consumed in flames. Zerafin hit the rider in the neck, sending him falling from his winged steed, but it was Whill's arrow that put down the flaming hawk.

"Everyone to Abram, bows ready, circular formation!" Rhunis shouted. Everyone did as he had commanded, and the four took kneeling stances at the wheel.

The dragon had not attacked the ship, and Whill felt sure it wouldn't. To the other ships he yelled as loud as he could, "Do not fight the dragon! Fire upon the Hawk Riders!"

If there was any question about whether they understood, it was answered as the dragon again sent fire toward the ocean and a rider appeared—only to be riddled with twenty arrows from the surrounding ships.

The tunnel was like a tomb. The faint breeze had shifted, to Roakore's dislike. The scouts had returned with nothing; at least twenty minutes had passed. They must have been heard, but no one came. Roakore puzzled for a moment then called back the scouts. He motioned the generals of the many armies to attention.

"They've laid a trap fer us, no doubt, but we don't have time to play their game. We are gonna walk into the tunnel like we own the place, 'cause by the damned gods, we do!"

He unfolded a map of the mountain kingdom. Their location was easily discernable on the map, though the many tunnels spread out like an intricate spider's web. There were tunnels and sub tunnels, chambers and halls, vaults and living quarters mapped out here. The map was of Roakore's own design, one with which many dwarves had helped to create an almost perfect representation. There were more than fifty X's marked in red. Each of them represented the exact spot where explosives would be placed. The explosives were made from dragon's breath—taken from the glands of dragons, and therefore very rare. An ample supply had been provided for the mission at great cost. One of the most profitable professions in Agora was a dragon's-breath harvester; it was also the most dangerous. Roakore thought it ironic that dragon's breath would be fundamental in the elimination of the half-breed Draggard.

The X's were strategically placed within tunnels or chambers that would cut off the enemy troops most effectively from each other. The result would be

thousands of trapped Draggard that could be dealt with later, and a main group that, with the grace of the dwarf gods, would be dealt with tonight.

Though the moon gave its light to the battle below, it was overwhelmed by the fire. The dragon, which Whill knew now to be the same that had aided in the fight with Cirrosa, circled his ship and set aflame any Hawk Rider that dared come into view. How the dragon could see them, he could only guess, but the fact that the beast stayed near to the ship instead of attacking them told Whill that many, many more were about. The ship was under full-out attack.

Using his mind-sight once again, his deduction of the situation was confirmed when he saw dozens of Hawk Riders above and all around the surrounding ships.

“There are at least fifty,” Zerafin said.

Abram and Rhunis did not wonder how he knew this. “What can I do?” Rhunis asked. “I cannot see them as you can.”

Avriel shot an arrow into the night and turned to him. “We cannot see them against the great aura of the ocean, Rhunis; those we can see are far off, out of the reach of an arrow.”

“Surely not the arrows of the elves.”

“Surely not, no, but we will not expend that kind of energy. We will wait them out. If they wish to try and overpower the dragon, it is their funeral.”

“Heh, the dragon, indeed. Why is he helping, anyway? Never in our history has a man ever befriended a dragon. Whill, do you know him?”

“Yes... I have seen him before.”

“Why did you never tell us of this before?” asked Zerafin.

Whill was surprised. “I don’t know. It was when I had first used my powers. It didn’t seem important.”

“Not important! And when we told you that the sword had been given to a dragon to be kept safe—did it seem important then?”

Whill was dumbstruck. “Do you think he could be the one?”

Avriel put her hand to Whill’s cheek. “Either this dragon is the first in history to meddle with the affairs of men, or this is the dragon of elven bedtime tales.”

It had been an hour since the battle in the chamber of trading, and Roakore and his unit were making good time. Over fifty such units, most of them a hundredth of this size, now waited for the appointed minute to blow the many tunnels. That

minute would soon be at hand, thought the dwarf as he stopped at the tunnel to the exit chamber—the one that needed to be destroyed if they were to ensure that Whill’s dream did not come to be. He motioned for the five explosives carriers, and together they started down the tunnel. Scouts had reported it deserted, and Roakore believed them. There was not a dwarf in the unit who could not hear the snarls, pounding feet, and shouts of the Draggard. Murmured and inaudible the sounds might be to men, but a dwarf with his ear to a rock could hear the heartbeat of a nearby rat. The Draggard were in the main chamber, the cavern that had first been settled by Ro’Sar. It acted as the kingdom’s largest city, housing over twenty thousand dwarves in Roakore’s youth. It was the biggest natural cavern of all the mountain kingdoms. Menacing stalactites hung from the ceiling, so mammoth that it would take fifty dwarves to reach around it. The massive stalagmites had been incorporated into the city, hollowed and polished, adding to the unique dwarven architecture.

Within that cavern, Roakore knew, Draggard awaited the order to charge out from the mountain and destroy every form of life that opposed them. Their mouths drooled in anticipation of flesh; their claws ached with the want to tear, to gouge, to crush. They lived for one purpose: destruction. And for that reason, Roakore knew, they would never win—never be victorious. Life and love and light would always hold death and hate and darkness at a stalemate. The battle would rage on forever, but neither could ever dominate, for they were one. That was what Roakore’s father had told him at an early age, and that is what he had told all of his children since before they could understand. The idea of good and evil was a stone in their religious foundation. They believed that—like love and hate—the world, the moon, the animals, and even they themselves possessed two battling spirits.

Roakore came to the exit chamber, and as he had been told, not a Draggard could be seen. He thought of Ro’Quon’s heroic flight and how the kings of old were cheering him now.

The small battle raged on for almost an hour, but the ship did not stop nor change course. Relentlessly the riders came, swooping down out of the night, trying to capture their prize. Then suddenly, and to Whill’s surprise, they stopped, and every hawk he could see with his mind-sight turned and headed east. As they flew out of view, the dragon circled and sent rings of smoke from its nose every so often as if scoffing.

“What do you make of their retreat?” Whill asked.

“The dragon does not follow,” Rhunis said.

“And it is focused on the west. The opposite direction of the Hawk Riders,” Avriel said through closed eyes.

“Whatever it is, I doubt it is an ally,” added Abram from the wheel.

The *Celestra* was literally at the center of the great fleet of many hundreds of ships. Looking west with his mind-sight, Whill began to see something, not an object, but a disturbance along the water. He began to relay this information when Avriel spoke.

“I see it also. What do you make of it, brother?”

Zerafin moved closer to the side of the ship and put his hand to the hilt of his sword. After a moment he spoke, unsheathing it. “Whatever it is, it is big, and moving with great speed.”

Like the elves, Whill could see through the surrounding ships, and looked on as the ones far off were bombarded with great waves; the disturbance in the ocean’s aura was moving closer. Arrows were strung and feet planted as it came closer and closer still. When it was within two hundred yards, it disappeared. The silence that followed was disturbed only by the faint shouting of the crew on nearby ships. Suddenly off the starboard side came a huge wave as something of great size came out of the ocean. There was an ear-piercing shriek, and Whill could make out the water-covered silhouette of another huge dragon and, to his surprise, a rider. Instantly he, Avriel, and Zerafin each shot an arrow almost in unison. The circling red dragon also had attacked at that very moment, sending a huge sheet of flame at its fellow. The arrows flew true, as did the flame, but instead of hitting their target, each turned in flight and rocketed back towards them. Before Whill could take in what had happened, his arrow came at him with blinding speed, only to be stopped by the elves. It and the others were diverted to the ocean, but the flame found its mark even as the red dragon breathed it, turning on the creature and, enveloping its face in flames.

It immediately dove into the ocean, the fires going out with a hiss. The attacking dragon was invisible to the naked eye, but with mind-sight Whill could still see its steadily fading outline as the seawater receded and fell from it.

“There has never been a dragon in the known history of this world that can become camouflaged as this one does,” Zerafin said.

“What!” Rhunis cried. “Another dragon—is that what that thing was? How in the name of the gods did it send back your arrows and the fire?”

“It was not the dragon who did it,” said Abram, turning the wheel into a wave. “Its rider is a Dark elf.”

Roakore looked to his timepiece: less than five minutes until the explosives would go off. The explosives carriers had set the bombs in place and given the signal that they were ready. He motioned for the remaining force to enter the cavern. The troops filed in with a silent stealth one wouldn't expect from thousands of dwarves.

Two minutes later his army was still filing into the room. Mostly young dwarves they were, under a hundred years. They were hardly old enough to be parents; though it might seem that dwarves who could live to see a thousand years would have a hundred children by their middle age, in dwarf society one did not reproduce until he has proven that he has contributed his share to the kingdom—lest overpopulation plague the mountains. The dwarves could not have a child without the blessing of a dwarven monk. This was where the epic dwarven folk song “Leranna’s Curse” came from. It told the story of a young dwarf wife who went to a monk with her husband and asked to be blessed with a birth. As the monk gazed on her radiantly beautiful face, he was stricken on the spot. If he lived to be two thousand years old, he knew he would not see such beauty again. He was a good dwarf, but he could not bring himself to allow the birth, and turned them away. A year passed and they returned with the same request. Again his heart stopped as he looked upon her; again he could not allow it. As long as he refused the birth, she would have to come back, and then he could gaze on her again. For one hundred years this went on, until finally, when all the male dwarves in her husband’s family had died, he was faced the end of his line. So in love with Leranna was he, that he refused the advice to take another wife. That year, on the day when the couple always visited the monk, only Leranna arrived. Without a word she stabbed him through the heart. The last thing he saw was her golden face, not weeping but smiling the most beautiful smile. It was then put into law that if a birth was repeatedly denied by the monks, the couple could go to the king, and if the king also denied it, they would ask the dwarves in a gathering of at least a hundred. The one day a year when they voted on this affair was called Leranna’s Day.

Though most dwarves Roakore’s age would not have had any children yet, he had two hundred. His clan having been diminished so, the monks, the king, and the people had ordained that any couple could have as many children as they wished until the clans were strong again. This included allowing every male dwarf of the clan to take as many wives as would have him from the other two clans. All marriages were blessed by the monks, of course—and even the other wives—for every dwarf, male and female, lived by the same code: live for love, family, kingdom, and self, and die for them as well.

Roakore and each of his soldiers were ready for victory, and if that meant that death would be required, so be it.

At the appointed time there came a great rumble as the hundreds of explosives went off within the mountain. Behind him, the team had just imploded the door of the mountain. They had succeeded in the first mission. Each now rose and faced the second task: the thousands of hissing Draggard just beyond the great door.

From the port side of the ship, the red dragon exploded from the sea. Fire belched from its maw as it collided with the other dragon and its rider, both of whom now became visible.

“By the gods!” shouted Rhunis as he saw them for the first time. “My eyes behold black elf witchcraft!”

The red dragon’s fire circled the other and its Dark elf rider. Protected by some invisible force, they both were untouched by the flames. The red dragon tried in vain to bite and claw the other, a four-legged, thick-winged species that was covered in scales and feathers of the most radiant silver. The elf rider drew his sword, and in one fell swoop, sliced the red dragon across the chest. Blood fell like rain on the deck below. The red dragon recoiled in howling pain and once again belched flames that did not harm its opponents. The rider, to everyone’s surprise, leaped from his dragon and fell more than one hundred feet to land on the deck of *Celestra*.

Whill, Abram, Rhunis, and the elves all shot arrows in unison as the Dark elf landed. Falling to one knee on impact, he lifted an arm and, with outstretched fingers, stopped the arrows in midair.

Even as he let loose his first arrow, Whill knew they were all doomed, for as the Dark elf landed, Avriel gasped, and Zerafin uttered one word before firing:

“Eadon!”

All of the arrows flew true but then burst into flame, and only ashes blew into the wind. Eadon was an imposing figure. He stood over six feet—not a giant—but possessed an air that made him seem like a god. His armor was as black as the starless sky but reflected like ice. Upon his shoulders he wore a long cloak of long thick dragon feathers with look of polished silver. His long hair was a brilliant silver grey, turning black at the temples. Two elven blades hung at his sides, but he did not draw them. He leered at Whill.

“When the day comes that I have to draw my blades, Whill, you will then be strong indeed.”

Everyone knew they could not defeat Eadon; no one seemed to care. As he finished speaking, Zerafin flung an arm in Whill's direction. He was instantly thrown through the air, high and fast, and suddenly stopped as Eadon lifted his own hand. He floated, frozen, two hundred feet above the ship, helpless as he watched the battle below. He could feel a strong pressure on his entire body and feared he would be crushed. Zerafin pushed while Eadon pulled as they battled over him.

Whill was on the verge of passing out when finally he felt a release. One of them had ceased. Zerafin lunged forward in a flash, his sword cutting through the air as Avriel screamed a spell. White light jumped from her hand and was absorbed by Zerafin's passing blade. The glowing Nifarez came straight down at Eadon's head, but in an instant he produced his twin blades in a crossed block. They glowed black against Zerafin's white-hot sword. Then Rhunis foolishly lunged forward with his blade. Eadon did not make a move, but yelled so loudly that it was deafening to Whill, who remained in the invisible grasp. The power of that yell was like an explosion in the air around him. Rhunis was blown off his feet and over the side of the ship, as was Abram. Avriel held strong the white energy that flowed into her brother's blade, Zerafin held fast his sword, and Eadon held Whill in place while still keeping the two elves at bay.

Avriel's and Zerafin's faces were twisted in concentration, but Eadon wore a grin. He closed his eyes and began to shudder. Avriel screamed. The white light that emanated from her grew brighter and more intense. Zerafin growled as he tried to pull his blade away from Eadon. Whill did not want to believe what he was seeing, but he knew that Eadon was somehow absorbing all of their power.

I love you, Whill. The words came into his mind as tears came to his eyes.

The deafening spell that ripped through the night, and through Whill's very being, was the same spell his father had used to save him twenty years before. Avriel had brought down her blade into Whill's ship, and the resounding explosion was blinding. A flash of the purest white light was followed by a fireball of flame that had been the *Celestra*.

Throughout the destruction, Whill felt a shift in the energy that gripped him. As the flames receded and the waters took their place, whatever had held him let go. He fell through the air, screaming in despair—not at his own fate, but Avriel's.

Suddenly he was caught by a huge claw.

The rumbling that shook the mountain subsided and every dwarf stood at attention. A horn blew from within the old ghost city of the dwarves, and the great doors opened. Before them waited a group of no more than ten thousand; they had expected ten times that many. No one waited for an explanation. As one they charged into the ranks of the Draggard army. Axes met spears, hammers met scales. The two armies came together, but the dwarves would not be slowed. The front line did not falter. A dwarf force the likes of which no army had ever fought plowed through the Draggard like a scythe through wheat. The Draggard lost their momentum altogether as their forces began to unravel. Those close to the back caves tried to run in retreat, while those unfortunate beasts at the front fell one after another. Hatchets rained down into the ranks, four for every dwarf not in direct battle. Draggard groans and screams of anguish echoed sickeningly throughout the cavern. Within a half an hour the army had been routed, and dwarf troops had already begun flushing the tunnels.

Roakore raised his arm and, with a triumphant roar, shouted the name of his father. The victory cry was taken up by the thousands of dwarves around him. He yelled the name again, his arm pumping the air.

“Hail, King Roakore!” shouted someone from the crowd, and the cry was taken up by all.

He waited until the cheering had subsided, and then lifted his hands. “My good dwarves, the fight has just begun. He who brings me the head of the Draggard queen will be a dwarf of legend.”

A cheer rose up in response. But it died and all heads turned as a slow but powerful clapping echoed throughout the chamber. Roakore turned with the others toward the destroyed mountain door. There, sitting upon a boulder, was a smiling, armor-clad Dark elf.

Whill let out a scream of anguish as he was carried into the dawn sky. The red dragon’s grip was firm, but not crushing. He looked down upon the sight of his destroyed ship, and the dark waters now home to his dead friends.

“Let me down, damn you, I have to go back! They need me!” Whill beat pointlessly upon the thick scales. “Goddamn you, beast, let me go!”

The dragon responded with a growl, low and guttural, and continued to fly higher.

Below him he could see that both the human and elven armies had begun storming the beaches, and beyond them, shadowed by the Ebony Mountains, burned the town of Drindale. The landscape was that of his dream—in vivid,

terrifying clarity. What remained of the Isladon army fought hopelessly against the tides of Draggard that had emptied from the mountain. Thousands upon thousands stormed the beaches, but thousands more Draggard waited.

“Roakore, is it not?” the Dark elf inquired as his clapping ended and finished echoing throughout the great chamber. “This is the part where I tell you to surrender peacefully, you spit in my face and say something valiant, and then we fight. Am I right?”

Roakore remembered the Dark elf they had encountered in the forest, how he had sent his own weapon flying back at him with only a thought.

Many o’ me dwarves’ll fall to this one.

“I am Roakore, son o’ the fallen king o’ the Ro’Sar Mountains. I reclaim these halls, as is my birthright. And you, Dark elf, are trespassing.”

“Ha! You do not—”

“I ain’t done speaking, boy! Yer people have brought this scourge upon me doors, murdered our families, and taken our home. I wage war this day, and I speak fer every dwarf who ever lived when I say that from this time forth, ye shall be hunted, and ye shall be exterminated from this world. The Dark elves have wronged the wrong people. And it starts with yer death!”

With these last words a dwarf broke from the ranks and charged the Dark elf. Raising his war hammer with a great howl, he charged in only to be lifted by an invisible force and slammed into the ceiling with a loud thud. As he fell, many more charged at once. The elf did not flinch, he did not move. Still they came, barreling at him, weapons held high: more than thirty dwarves. They were not more than ten feet away, and still the Dark elf did not move—not until the last second. Then Roakore watched in horror as the elf brought back his hand and then thrust it out before him with an open palm. A wave of energy blasted from him, engulfing the charging dwarves and sending them flying backwards. Roakore’s army watched in awestruck horror as the bodies of the dwarves disintegrated into dust before their eyes, their very life force ripped from their bodies and mingling with that of the force field. The Dark elf dropped his hand and the energy field retracted into it. He bent in ecstasy, his eyes rolled back, and his body shuddered as he gave out the kind of moan usually only heard by a lover. The armor and weapons of thirty dwarves fell to the floor.

Whill was overcome with grief. He pounded the dragon's leg in a rage. Then behind him he glimpsed a flash of silver. It was Eadon and his dragon. His mind filled with rage; he saw the faces of the many who had fallen because of this Dark elf—his parents, the dwarves of the Ebony Mountain, the people of Sherna, men, women, children, Abram, Rhunis, Zerafin...and Avriel. He thought his head might explode from the pressure, the agony and torment. Pain wracked his mind and body; his very soul was aflame. All sense left his mind, and only one thought remained within that ocean of misery it had become. Revenge.

The red dragon had noticed Eadon and dove swiftly as a ball of fire flew past, barely missing them. Eadon's mount easily maneuvered to keep up and even gain on them. There was a terrible shout that cracked the sky like thunder, and the red dragon was hit with a shockwave of energy that blew it with great force to the side. It rolled and tumbled through the air, and dropped Whill. As he fell, he did not feel fear—only rage that he would die this way without a chance to exact his revenge. But then his chance came. Eadon's mount dove after his, its great silver wings tucked in tightly. It ripped through the air unnaturally fast—or was Whill being pulled up towards it? He reached for his father's sword. The red dragon, apparently forgotten, slammed into the other. The two great beasts tumbled through the air, claws ripping, teeth biting, as they each tried to get a hold of the other's neck.

A sudden blast of fire separated the two. The ground was almost upon him as Whill watched the battle above. The red dragon dove like a rock, smoke and blood trailing behind him like a comet's tail as he descended. As Whill rocketed toward the ground, he knew he had only seconds to live. In his mind burned the faces of the dead, and he gave in to the darkness, sweet, silent, endless darkness.

The red dragon dove fast and was soon slightly below him, coming in with great speed. Below him the ground rose quickly as the red dragon snatched him up with its claws and pulled him in tight. It spun over and crashed to the ground. Dust flew up into the morning sky as it hit like a rock and tumbled for more than three hundred yards before coming to rest in the shadow of the Ebony Mountains.

“I see you have none powerful enough to defeat me. Shall we try the blade, then? It is so much more satisfying.” The Dark elf unsheathed his sword. “And when you reach your beloved halls, tell your gods that your army was laid waste by Farandelizon.”

“Charge!” roared Roakore. The entire army descended upon the Dark elf. In a blur of motion Farandelizon cut through their weapons, armor, and bodies. Dozens fell in seconds. Roakore’s face hardened. The roar of his army filled his ears, accompanied by the screams of the dying. How could they fight such unnatural power? They were so close; they had reclaimed the halls, and for what? To be done in by a single Dark elf.

No! Thought Roakore. He stopped in his charge and raised his hands above him. Drawing strength from those around him—how, he did not know or care—he focused his mind on a stalagmite above. So large was it that forty dwarves could have circled it. With a great scream he watched as it broke from its base and fell. Those closest to Roakore felt their strength drained from them for a moment as he guided the missile towards the elf.

Farandelizon saw it coming as he fought the oncoming tide of dwarves, but he did not believe it. Unable to stop in his fight he could only watch as the great rock came hurtling at him, one word filling his mind as it crashed into him: *How?*

Whill struggled out from under the dragon’s great claws. As the dust settled he looked around, trying to spot the damned Dark elf. He saw thousands of Draggard and knew Roakore and his dwarves had been too late—the mountain had emptied already. From the coast came the blaring of the war horn of Eldalon. It was followed by the trumpets of the elves. Both were answered by the hisses and growls of the thousands of Draggard.

The red dragon’s huge chest heaved as it choked on the dust. Blood stained the ground as it coughed. It had broken a wing and had many bloody injuries upon its body, including a bone that had broken through the scales of its right front leg.

“Eadon comes,” the red dragon growled. “He will kill us both. I have failed.”

Whill unsheathed his father’s sword. “Let him come.”

The red dragon lifted himself to his hind legs, breathed heavily and roared, belching flame above Whill’s head. “Fool! You face your death and care not. You, the great Whill spoken of in Adimorda’s prophecy! You are a sniveling weakling. Already your emotions consume you; already you walk in the darkness. You are not worthy of the knowledge of the sword of Adromida. Better it never be found.”

“The sword!” Whill exclaimed. “You know where it is?”

“I know, and no other ever will. The knowledge will go with my death.”

“Tell me where it is! You must, it is the only way I might stop Eadon!”

A puff of smoke issued from the great dragon. “Stop Eadon, you? You cannot even stop yourself! You are but a child, a mortal child wrapped up too much in your own ego. You think you have seen pain? You think you know suffering? No, child, you know nothing. I had hope for you. I had dreamed.” The dragon lifted its head as Eadon landed less than a hundred yards away. Swarms of Draggard had come to join their master and now circled them.

“I see now my own folly,” the dragon went on. “Adimorda was mistaken. You are not worthy. And now I face my death. I will not live to see the darkness that will spread across this land, but you..”

Eadon approached without sword drawn, a victorious smirk upon his face. Whill did not even bother to take up a battle stance.

“Let us end this,” he said in a resigned voice.

The Dark elf stopped ten feet away, and the red dragon rose proudly to his full height behind Whill.

Eadon smiled brightly. “End? Now why on earth would I want to kill you, Whill? I have waited so very long to meet you. No, I think not, my apprentice. This is but the beginning.”

Chapter 27

The Dark Master

Whill's blood went cold. Everything had gone horribly wrong. He was supposed to be on his way to Elladrindellia to train with the elves. Now his friends were all dead and he was cornered. Apprentice, Eadon had said. Apprentice... Death seemed a sweet refuge to what would await him at the hands of this maniac. How could this be happening? He had to think of something, but there was nothing he could do. No one was coming to his rescue this time. No elf warriors, no burly dwarves, no mysterious dragon. He was alone.

"You are speechless," Eadon mused. "I understand. It is a great honor I offer you. I will forgive your rude behavior."

"Honor? You know nothing of honor!" The red dragon let out a roar as he descended upon Whill, huge teeth meant to engulf him. With a quick thrust of his arm Eadon sent a shockwave of energy at the beast, sending them both flying backwards more than twenty feet. Before Whill realized what had happened, Eadon stood before them once again.

"No, my old friend, I will not let you kill my young apprentice. He has many great things to do before his life is through."

The red dragon tried to kill me, Whill realized as he looked into the ancient dragon's eyes. They were filled with fear, pain, and pity, but not for itself. The dragon had tried to end his life in an attempt to spare him. Now Whill knew fear; now he truly knew despair.

"I will heal you, dragon, and you will accompany me and our young friend here," said Eadon.

Now the dragon's look of fear and pity were for himself. Flames erupted from its maw and deflected harmlessly to each side of Eadon, who looked truly amused. "Kill me and be done with it!" The dragon roared in Elvish

"No, old friend, I know your secret. I know who you are. You alone have knowledge of a certain artifact that I have waited many, many years to acquire.

You will come with us.” Eadon raised his palm to the dragon and blue tendrils of healing energy shot out and engulfed it.

The dragon roared as its bone snapped back into place and its wing healed. Just as quickly as it had started, the healing was through, and Eadon showed no sign that it had taxed his power. The dragon roared and thrashed, and flames shot forth from its mouth. They were harmlessly deflected from Whill and Eadon’s path.

“Enough from you, beast! You have lost! You will only achieve greater pain should you choose to defy me!”

Rhunis drifted into darkness—sweet, silent, engulfing darkness. His pain and worry were no more; he could rest now. He had been here before, in the cold embrace of this lover, death. From the distance came the sounds of battle, the ocean waves and screams of the dying. No more were these things his concern. No more...

Something slammed into his chest, and again, and he heard a voice. Why couldn’t they leave him in peace? “Rhunis!” Again there came a slam to his chest; the bliss was replaced by pain, the silence with screams. “Rhunis!”

Rhunis coughed up seawater as someone turned him onto his side and patted his back. The sights and sounds came rushing back to assault his senses.

“Rhunis!”

He swatted at his rescuer and struggled to sit up. A strong hand helped him. “Rhunis, my friend, I thought you for dead.”

He caught his breath and spat. Shaking his head he looked toward Abram’s voice. They were on the beach. Water lapped up at their feet as an army of both elf and human soldiers stormed the beaches around them.

“You woke me from the most wonderful dream,” grumbled Rhunis as he strove to stand. Abram helped him to his feet.

“You will find it again someday, but perhaps not this day.” Abram did not smile as he looked out at the ocean. And then Rhunis remembered.

“Whill, Avriel, Zerafin—where are they? I remember being blasted into the ocean and then...and then a great explosion.”

“Yes, an explosion,” Abram repeated solemnly. “And the end of the maiden of Elladrindellia. She did what she had to do—the only thing she could to give Whill a chance at escape.

“What of Whill, of Zerafin?”

Just then a figure emerged from the sea, his armor blackened, and his cloak in pieces. Yet he walked with strength and purpose. Abram had never seen such pain, such sorrow etched into the face of any elf in all of his days. Zerafin's usual stoic expression had been replaced by one of misery and rage. In his strong arms lay the limp and lifeless body of his sister.

He did not speak, he did not even regard the two. He simply stopped upon the sand, dropped to his knees, and laid her down. A cry of anguish and tortured anger erupted from him, and anyone nearby would have stopped cold at the sound. One name escaped his lips and rang out into the heavens, a name embedded in the memory of every man and elf who lived to recall that dark day upon the beaches of Isladon: Avriel.

As the dust cleared and the cheers of the many dwarves transformed into a battle charge, a lone figure stood among the rubble. Farandelizon raised his arms, and with them dozens of boulders and broken rock rose into the air. With a flick he sent it all flying into the charging mob of dwarves. Roakore was at the head of the charge. Seeing the stone flying towards him and his men, he raised his hands and summoned the strength of his fellows. The boulders stopped in their flight, suspended in midair.

Beyond the Dark elf, the dwarves saw the great red dragon and the Eadon's Dragon-hawk. Rage filled every last one of the battle-crazed dwarves. Here at the door of their mountain home stood not one but two dragons, and between the mighty warriors and their quarry stood one obstacle, the Dark elf. With a renewed battle cry they charged. A seat among the gods was the reward, they knew; to die even fighting a dragon without killing it meant the gods' favor.

Eadon saw the charge and knew the minds of the dwarves; he turned to his Draggard army. "Kill them all!"

Farandelizon could not understand the strength of this mere dwarf. He could not move the stone. It hung midair even as the crazed dwarves charged his way. He had spent a large amount of stored energy shielding himself from the giant rock that had crashed him through the mountain wall. He had steadily applied pressure to the boulders he sent flying, but the dwarf had met that strength. Indeed, even as the dwarves, the stubborn dwarf king began to win the contest of wills. Farandelizon released a massive surge of energy, and still the rock did not move. Unable to withstand the great force, it exploded into a million pieces in all directions. The Dark elf released his hold on them as he drew his sword to face the onslaught of furious dwarves. Roakore, however, did not release the stones.

They changed course, bent by his will alone. As Farandelizon cut through the charging dwarves, he set his sights on the blasted dwarf King. Summoning the energy stored within his heart stone, he began to charge straight at him. Suddenly a shadow covered him. Fighting through the dwarf army, he had not the time to stop the millions of descending stone fragments as they ripped through his body.

Abram saw Zerafin come to his feet shuddering in grief, face twisted in rage. Then he looked at the too-still figure of Avriel—saw her take breath. He rushed to her and lifted her head. “She lives, she breathes! Zerafin!”

The elf did not act as he should have at such news. He simply nodded. “Yes, she breathes, her body is alive, but she is not whole.” He swallowed hard and clenched his jaw. Abram feared what he meant. “Eadon, somehow, the monster...”

Rhunis looked on, horrified. “What is wrong with her? What has he done?”

Zerafin looked to his beloved youngest sister through tear-blurred eyes. “He has taken her soul.”

He stood before a group of mounted elves that had just come off their boat. “I am taking this regimen under my command,” Zerafin announced. “I will need three horses.” He grabbed a hold of a nearby elf commander’s armor and pulled him close. “Take my sister to the nearest boat. Keep her safe until I return.”

The two seemed to communicate for a moment silently. Then the commander scooped Avriel up and turned back to the waters.

“What’s your plan?” Abram asked.

He pointed toward the mountain. “Eadon has caught up with Whill.”

Abram could hardly make out movement in the sky. Horses were brought, and they mounted. With more than four dozen mounted elf warriors and twice as many humans following, they headed in the direction of the mountain door.

Roakore’s men poured out of the mountain to meet the charge of the Draggard. Whill watched helplessly, knowing that the dwarf army would cut through the nearby Draggard with ease. They would try to kill the red dragon; they would not understand that he was not an enemy, nor would they ever accept it as truth. He knew also that Eadon would kill every last one of them, of this fact he was sure. The Dark elf’s power was far too great.

He could not let this happen. He thought about the greater good, and realized that the best way to help in this battle would be to get Eadon out of it. And that meant full surrender.

Zerafin led the charge with Abram, Rhunis, and the might of the Eldalonian and elven armies at his back. They rode in a V-formation, creating a wedge that sliced through the Draggard army like a hot blade through butter.

A few miles away, at the door of the reclaimed mountain, Roakore's army clashed with the Draggard. The war for Isladon had begun.

The red dragon Zhola saw the two armies meet, and he knew that he would die. If Eadon did not kill him, the dwarves certainly would. Because of their insane religious beliefs, dwarves were the only opponents dragons truly feared. The crazy little killers would fight viciously till the death, laughing all the while.

He thought of Adimorda, his old friend, and the many years he had spent with the elf. Adimorda had been a true seer; he had never been wrong. This meant, Zhola knew, that his last prediction would come to pass. Whill would use the sword to defeat the Dark elves and extinguish the Draggard from the face of the world. He believed it; he had to believe. He had lived the last five thousand of his six thousand years waiting to pass on the location of the blade to this mysterious Whill.

No, he thought. *I will not die today, not until I have passed on the information to Whill.* Zhola shuddered at the thought of the many ways the evil elf would try to get the information. He knew that he would soon know pain beyond what he thought possible. He also knew that aside from death, he was equipped to survive such torture. He must surrender and let destiny run its course. He truly had no choice.

Roakore's men crashed into the Draggard army, which consisted of legions stretching all the way back to the beaches. The mountain had been emptied. They had been too late, Roakore realized. Hundreds of thousands of Draggard had spread out into the world. Many stayed and fought, but many more had gone off in all directions—a dark plague let loose into the world.

My grandchildren may not see the end of this war, Roakore thought.

Zerafin, Rhunis, and Abram led the charge through the thousands of Draggard. They were less than two miles from the mountain. The elf held his sword high,

and from it emanated the purest, brightest light in all directions. The Draggard cringed and yelped as the beams fell upon them. None could withstand the awesome, piercing light.

Eadon strode up to Whill and looked him dead in the eye. Whill saw that around the black pools of his eyes was a brilliant green, as if they were emerald specks. Within those orbs he also saw many millennia of life, knowledge, and power. If Whill could have made a sound he would have whimpered, so humbled was he in the presence of the ancient Dark elf. He felt a searing pain shoot through his head, as if ice-cold fingernails were scratching at his very brain. Depression, despair, and darkness filled his soul. Eadon leaned forward and whispered in his ear.

“The battle you wage with me, child, will not be fought with muscle nor blade. You see, your mind is the battlefield. I can take your very sanity if I choose—if *you* choose. Resist me and I will show you pain beyond measure, beyond reason, beyond sanity. Follow me and you may find enlightenment.”

With the last word, the pain vanished and was replaced with a mental pleasure just as intense. His body shook with spasms as it jolted in rapture. His mind was filled with pleasure, hope, and willpower. Then Eadon released him. Whill caught his breath and raised his head. The elf lifted his hand, and in his palm sat a beautiful, swirling ball of light. Whill was mesmerized as he watched.

“Did you think her dead?”

Her? Whom does he speak of, what riddle was this? Then his breath shuddered. “What have you done?”

Eadon pocketed the swirling ball. “I have simply evened the scales. You have something I want, and now I have something—or should I say... someone—you want.”

“Avriel? It isn’t possible! What have you done?”

“Her body is alive, though it is but an empty shell. You really should thank me, Whill. She meant to die with that spell. A waste, really. She did have such a way about her walk, did she not?”

Whill seethed, He wanted nothing more than to bathe in the blood of his enemy. His helplessness only fueled his rage. “I don’t believe you!”

Eadon laughed. “You will soon enough—that is, if I allow you to see within the orb. But if you defy me you will see firsthand as I transfer your beloved’s soul into a Draggard, or better yet, a Draggard queen. Tell me, how do you think Avriel would like that existence? She, an elf princess, birthing my army.”

What the Dark elf said was repulsive—unimaginable—but, Whill knew, possible for this sick being to accomplish. Knowing he had to do what he must to save Avriel's soul, he hung his head in defeat.

"I will do what you ask of me."

"Fret not, my friend, I repay loyalty and service. I am not such a monster as you think. Say the word and your parents' murderer will die this day."

Looking through his elf sight, Zerafin told Abram and Rhunis of the battle at the mouth of the mountain. Whill and Eadon had mounted the dragons and flew into the sky, but the dwarves were still fighting through the mass of Draggard.

"The boy cannot resist one such as he—few can. He is lost to us."

Abram's heart stopped cold as he registered the elf's words. This was all wrong—this was not part of the plan. Surely, this hadn't been foreseen by Adimorda.

"I'm sorry" was all he could say and think.

As they came to the mountain they spotted Roakore's ranks fighting the mass of Draggard. Zerafin steered them towards the dwarves. Whill was gone, Avriel was lost to them, but a war still needed warriors. It was time to fight.

Roakore saw too as Eadon and Whill mounted the dragons and flew off into the morning sky. The old dwarf knew better than to think him a traitor; he knew all too well the great power of the Dark elves, and he knew Whill's peril.

"May the gods be with you lad," he said with a tear in his eye.

His heart quickened as he saw the approach of his friends and the many skilled elf warriors. "Allies arrive, elves and men. Treat them as brethren, me boys! They fight with us against the Draggard."

A cheer erupted around Roakore. This would be a day to remember, he thought.

Whill flew on the back of the red dragon as it followed Eadon and the Dragonhawk through the sky, to what destination he did not know. *Say the word and your parents' murderer will die by your sword this day.* Eadon's words echoed in Whill's mind. He was doomed and he knew it. The journey to Elladrindellia had turned into a nightmare. Rather than traveling to the elven land with Avriel and the others, he had been caught, and they killed. He lost a bit of sanity when he

thought about it. One good thing would come of this: he would kill his uncle the traitor. That was all that Whill let himself think about, for the other thoughts haunting the dark corners of his mind were much too painful.

They flew well into the afternoon. Whill knew now their destination: they were headed in the direction of his family's castle, the center of the Uthen-Arden Kingdom. The home he had never seen. Home—that word had little meaning for Whill. His home had been taken from him, his family, his kingdom—all of it taken. Addakon would pay.

The Dragon-hawk led them to the northern tower of a great castle. So immense was it that the dragons themselves were dwarfed in its presence. They landed in the tower with ample room. Eadon dismounted as two robed figures approached.

“See to it that the red dragon—Zhola, is it not?—see to it that Zhola is given proper lodging befitting a guest. Great dragon, I trust that you will find everything as comfortable as can be managed. You shall have a bull to eat; you must be famished after such a long flight.” Zhola growled and Eadon smirked. “I trust that was your stomach, my friend, because you would be ill-advised to refuse my will.”

Whill dismounted, and Zhola and the Dragon-hawk were led down a great winding ramp. Without a word Eadon turned and exited down a hall to his right. Whill followed.

The Dark elf stopped to face him. “You seek the blood of your parents' murderer, do you not? What have you imagined doing to him?” He closed his eyes and shuddered. “Your rage is that which even one as old as I rarely see. It pulses from you. To my mind-sight it is a supernova of energy. Dark energy.” They went on to a torch-lit room.

Whill had barely heard him, so focused was he on the face of his uncle—the face of his father. But he did register the words “dark energy,” and the context thereof.

Into the room he went, as if floating upon a dream cloud. Time slowed as Eadon stepped aside to reveal the figure before them.

Roakore's dwarves roared triumphantly as the elves' flaming arrows cut into the backs of the retreating Draggard. To be a Draggard upon that shore that day meant doom. The battle had raged into the afternoon and evening, and the casualties for all armies had been devastating. Of the thousands of dwarves, fewer than five hundred remained, and those were mostly Roakore's hardiest. Of

the Eldalonian army, only five battalions of fifty still breathed. The elves had lost many to the Dark elf force of only seven. Many dwarves wondered at what they had witnessed of the elves, and most shuddered at the memory of the awesome power. Lightning had been pulled from the sky, tornadoes had tossed hundreds of Draggard miles into the air, and the ground itself had pulsed and fought as a mammoth monster of dirt and stone. Trees had been torn from their roots and rained down on the battle. Living flames had devoured hundreds. The dwarves had witnessed the true power of gods that day.

In the end it was Zerafin who had claimed the final Dark elf kill with a stone monster from the very side of the mountain. It pounded the kneeling Dark elf into the ground, its boulder fists hammering the elf's protective energy shield. With a final ground-shaking blast, the stone behemoth punched through the earth, burying its arm up to the shoulder, and froze. There it stayed, and all knew that the Dark elf was dead.

At the end of it all Roakore stood with Abram, Rhunis, and Zerafin, staring out over the bloody battlefield. They awaited reports from their respective commanders. One such commander, a dwarf, ran up to them and slammed his chest.

“Me king. Our scouts hear tell the beasts that retreated south be hunted down an’ slain.” He paused. “The Draggard queen...”

Roakore and the others looked on expectantly. “Well? Out with it, laddie!”

The dwarf straightened. “We have found her, Sire, in the lowest reaches o’ the mountain.”

“Alive?” The dwarf nodded. “Then together let us end this bloody battle and call the day a victory. If you will, I would have ye accompany us in this last fight. Ye have all earned it.”

Zerafin looked to the mountain. “A Draggard queen is not to be underestimated. They are not the mindless beasts you might think. They are highly intelligent, they speak, and they are skilled in the ways of the Dark arts. You must allow the elves to deal with her, my good dwarf.”

Roakore stumbled over his words. “Let the elves handle it—the elves! If you had a chance to take back yer home land, would ye let the dwarves take care of it? No, my good elf, you would not! Am I to rob me fellows o’ the chance to take back their own mountain with their own might?” He slammed his axe hilt onto a large stone at his feet. It shattered into pieces.

Zerafin did not speak, he simply sighed. Abram, for once, did not offer his thoughts, for they were with Whill. It was Rhunis who spoke.

“Let us fight together in this venture as you said, Roakore. The mountain has been taken back, your father’s soul freed.” Roakore’s eyes lit up at the recognition of the fate of his father’s soul. “Let our three races come together as one, as we done on this battlefield. Together we must stand.”

“Whill would want it that way,” Abram said, head still bent as he stood apart from them.

Zerafin nodded. “As would Avriel.”

Roakore sighed and smiled. “As do I, then, as do I.”

The four clasped shoulders.

“But,” said Roakore. “The killing blows will be dealt by us dwarves.”

“Why? Why did you kill your own brother for this...this...” Whill motioned to Eadon with a weak hand. “This madman!”

Addakon stepped forward into the torchlight, a long red cloak dragging behind him. His face—the face of his twin brother—was revealed. Whill sucked in his breath. This face, those eyes, that brown hair—Whill had seen it all before. He had seen it in a dream when he had been but seven, one of the many dreams of his parents. But his first dream of them had been real. It seemed that his powers had revealed themselves as early as that.

Addakon spoke. “Why do we do anything, ultimately?”

Whill waited. He was not about to participate in some lesson with this man, and Addakon saw it in his face.

“For power!” he said, making a fist. “Everything we do is for power. I have learned that the quest for control—be it over nature, each other, death, or anything else—is always fueled by a need for power.”

Whill shook his head. “No, not everything. We do not love for power.”

His uncle smiled, but his voice revealed his malice. “Do we not? Do we not feel power over those we love? Do we not love the powerful?”

“Was it worth it, Addakon? Your betrayal? Your tainted soul? Have you attained the great power you sought?”

“I have attained more power than any human before me.”

“You both know the prophecy, I assume,” Whill said.

Addakon lowered his eyes and quickly raised them again. Whill saw a spark of doubt on his smug face.

“It is written that I will find the sword and destroy you, Eadon. This is written by the greatest seer that ever lived. This you cannot change.” Whill dared to say.

The Dark elf shrugged lazily. "I could kill you with a thought."

"But you have not, and I know you will not, because you didn't in Adimorda's vision." Whill's mind raced. He believed he was right; he believed all of it. Somehow in this, his darkest hour, his moment of revenge, he believed for the first time that he really was the chosen one. That meant he would not die here tonight.

Addakon began to pace. "The blade of Adimorda cannot be wielded by an elf. But we can wield it, Whill, and so could your father. And after I kill you, only I will be able to wield the great power within the blade."

"But you will not kill me. You cannot. For it has been written."

He unsheathed his sword but did not strike. "You believe it, don't you?"

Whill only smiled. "So do you." He eyed him up and down. "You fear me." His uncle said nothing. Then he looked into Eadon's unchanging eyes. "But you do not."

Addakon erupted. "I do not fear you, boy! I will finish this night what I started twenty years ago. You are not the chosen one."

Eadon smiled. "Yes, he is."

Whill unsheathed his sword but did not attack. He could feel the power within, and the energy radiating from Avriel's heart stone. It coursed through his body faster than his blood. He believed it all. He had been named by Adimorda—he alone. He would kill Addakon this night, and later—with the great sword—Eadon.

The evil king raised his hand and a red tendril shot towards Whill. He raised his own hand, and blue tendrils of healing energy shot forth to meet the red. Sparks lit the room like lightning as the two powers collided. Whill did not know how he was doing it, somehow he just knew what to do. Something had been awakened in him, something that had been slumbering for quite some time. Addakon screamed and sent a huge blast through the red tendrils. The blue ones were devoured and Whill was hit with a gut-wracking blow of pure pain. He hit the floor but extended his hand once again. From it came a blast of energy. Addakon redirected it to a bookshelf, which exploded as if hit by a tornado.

Whill had risen even as the blast left him, and brought his sword down on Addakon.

It took the army nearly two hours to reach the deep lair of the Draggard queen. They entered the ancient caverns of Baz'klon. At the bottom of a stair they encountered dozens of crudely built stables filled with livestock, no doubt food

for the great queen. Many wounded dwarves and more than a few dead ones littered the wide hall leading to the chamber.

An elf maiden bent to see to one. Lunara, young even by human standards, was not as seasoned as the other elves, and had less tolerance for the suffering of others. She was still Ullestranna—innocent—in the eyes of her people. It was an unspoken fact that over many years, even centuries of life, elves had to harden themselves to the pains of the world. Many elves did not reach an age of thousands of years, though they had the means. They did not take their own lives, but stopped prolonging them. Many also went into the unknown without fear, for they achieved wisdom beyond the grasp of any human—or dwarf, for that matter.

“What is your name, good dwarf?” she asked.

The dwarf, choking on blood and with closed eyes, answered, “I be Holdagozz, son o’ Holdagar. Who asks, good lady...?” He stopped mid-sentence and looked wide-eyed at Lunara. “I be dead then, and you be me godly escort to the Mountain o’ the Gods, for never in Agora have I seen anythin’ so beautiful.” He cleared his throat. “That is—have I made it into the Hall o’ the Gods?”

She smiled. “No, you have not, Holdagozz, but nor are you dead.” Holdagozz frowned as she continued. “But I’m afraid you soon will be.” She looked at his chest, where two Draggard tails protruded from his armor.

“Bah this? This ain’t nothing.” Holdagozz burst into a coughing fit. His gloved hand came away soaked in blood, and he wiped it on his short cloak. “This is it, then. I go to me gods. Soon my deeds will be read.” He coughed again briefly and looked at his war hammer, Zlynock, forged by his great-great-grandfather seven hundred years before.

“Have I done enough?” he asked Lunara, grasping frantically at her sleeve.

“That is for your gods to answer, friend.” She looked around slyly. “Would you like to do more?”

Holdagozz ignored the blood on his lips. “I would. But I cannot.”

She knelt beside him. “I am young, even for an elf. But we all have special gifts, things we are naturally better at than most. For some it is listening to the wind or talking with birds; for others it is forging weapons or divining the universe. My gift is in healing. If you would allow me...”

“Witchery! Black crafts!” yelled Holdagozz.

Roakore pushed his way over to them and addressed Lunara. “Is he demented? What is it?”

“No, his wits are with him—well, some. I simply offered to heal his wounds.”

An elf commander stepped forward. “You cannot heal every dying person you meet in war, Lunara. Your energy is priceless in times such as these.”

Roakore turned to the tall Elf. “An’ what?” Roakore demanded. “Yer thinking dirty dwarves ain’t for healin’—waste o’ energy, eh?” He stepped so close that his belly bumped the elf’s thighs.

Zerafin put a hand on each of their chests. “Stop this, please. I apologize for Shief, he must not know to whom he speaks. The dwarves in Roakore’s army are the most skilled warriors to ever come out of the stone. It would be a valuable investment into the future of this war to save any of them. I give my blessing on any healing.”

“He is right, warrior,” Roakore said to Holdagozz. “If ye can be saved, ye should be. An’ ye wouldn’t be the first. I..I too have been healed by elven powers.” The army of dwarves around him sucked in their breath. “An that’s all they be...powers, ye buncha old ladies! Like any power, it can be used fer good or ill. These elves use ’em fer good, so quit bein a dragon’s arse, take what’s offered ye. An’ be glad ye can live to fight again.”

Roakore started off down the cavern hall. Zerafin followed close. “Well said, my good friend. I think you may have just brought our two peoples closer than anyone ever has.”

“Bah, to hell with politics,” Roakore huffed.

Holdagozz coughed more blood onto his armor. Lunara smiled weakly, a tear tracing her cheek.

“If ye can make me strong like I was, then ye can do it. But I ain’t gonna live the life o’ no cripple, waiting to stand before the gods.”

Lunara wept with joy. “Thank you, Holdagozz, thank you. You will indeed be strong.”

She did not draw her sword but rather held out before her the staff of Aorentia. The knotted and curving wood shone in the torchlight. She tapped into the energy within and transferred it into Holdagozz, first to numb the coming pain.

“Pull them out,” she said to Shief, and nodded toward the Draggard tails. Shief complied and pulled them out together, one in each hand. Holdagozz did not cry out; indeed he felt nothing. He seemed to be in the midst of the most pleasant dream.

Next Lunara began to heal him and, when the injuries were repaired, delved deeper into his energy fibers. She permanently thickened his bones, strengthened

his ligaments and tendons, and wove new muscle into place. Then she retracted the blue tendrils of healing energy, and lantern light replaced the radiant blue. She helped Holdagozz to his feet. He looked down at his body in awe and flexed and clenched his fists. He sniffed at the air and then began to run his hand over the smooth cavern wall as if looking for a marking, sniffing all the while. Then he stopped. Lunara looked at Shief, who shrugged. Holdagozz stepped back and slammed his fist into the stone wall. Rock exploded from the impact and he struck again, this time up to his elbow. Out of the hole he fished a chunk of rock. He turned to her and crushed the stone in his hands. Pieces tumbled to the floor, but something remained. He crushed more stone and brushed it away, and then with his cloak he polished the object. Extending his hand, he presented Lunara a sapphire the size of an apple.

Whill's sword met Addakon's high above their heads. Their eyes met. Addakon did not see fear in his opponent's, but Whill did. His uncle attacked, spinning the blades and unlocking their clutch. Addakon slashed low at Whill's feet but Whill hopped the blades and came across the middle while in the air. With amazing speed Addakon came out of his attack and blocked the blow, holding his sword in one hand. With the other he threw a pulsing red ball of energy. Whill spun with the attack and instinctively caught the energy in a blue ball of light in his palm. He had somehow known what Addakon would do, as easily as if it had been Abram. Twirling, he sent it back, but it was redirected. There was a great explosion as stone rained down from the tower, and a ten-foot hole appeared in the wall.

"How is this possible?" Addakon screamed as he raised his sword to block. Eadon only laughed, thoroughly amused.

Roakore entered the chamber of the Draggard queen behind his men. Abram and Zerafin followed. Before them was an immense cavern, more than six hundred yards wide, with thousands of hatched and decaying eggs littering the floor. At the center of the room lay the Draggard queen. The body of a wingless dragon, with a beautiful pattern of purple scales, wound its way up into the naked torso of a dark-purple-skinned Dark elf woman. She rose as the small army entered. All in her presence were stunned by what they saw, though none would show it. Zerafin addressed them with an upraised hand.

“Stop,” he commanded, his hand coming to rest on Roakore’s breastplate. The dwarves grunted and looked on with suspicious eyes. Zerafin lowered his hand and pointed at the queen. “A Draggard queen must not to be underestimated, good dwarf. We must plan our attack well.”

Suddenly two dwarf brothers broke rank and charged the queen. “Hold!” cried Roakore, but the dwarves ran on, flinging their many hatchets before them. The queen raised a clawed fist and opened her outstretched hand. The hatchets went whirling into a bright white ball of light within her palm and disappeared. The lead dwarf was hurled into the ceiling by an unseen force. The second dwarf came barreling in with his war hammer held high as his brother’s body hit the ground. He was impaled by three of the Queen’s seven twenty-foot, barbed tails. Then she sneered at the group as she sent the tails in opposite directions, ripping the brave dwarf apart.

Whill was completely absorbed in the sword and heart stone’s powers. He could feel more than the energy; it was the source of the power that emanated from the sword of his father. He soon realized that he was not in control of his actions, for he was fighting and performing far beyond his skill level. The sword moved of its own accord. Words he had never spoken came to his lips, spells he had never heard uttered.

Addakon’s eyes went wide with fear as he frantically tried to parry the lightning-fast blows that rained down on him. Whill’s voice was his own but the words were not. He did not intend to speak, just as he did not now wield his father’s sword.

“Addakon. Brother. Repent now and our soul may yet find rest.” His uncle’s look of fear only intensified. Whill stepped back. “Many years I have waited in darkened slumber within the heart of the dwarf mountain. For two decades I have counted the days until I would feel the energy of my son’s strong hand. Now comes your judgment, brother.”

Whill felt like he was in a dream, watching and listening from within as his father’s spirit spoke. He was a vessel; his father’s spirit flowed forth from the sword and filled him with warmth.

Eadon looked on in amusement. “We elves have known for many millennia the curious relationship that twins share. Did you never come across these teachings in your studies, Addakon?”

Addakon looked, horrified, at the sword in Whill’s hand—Sinomara, the sword of his betrayed brother.

“Aramonis?” he whispered as he bent in shame. The sweat upon his brow glistened in the torchlight. “What trick is this?”

“If it is a trick, it is one of the gods’,” Whill’s voice said coolly.

Eadon explained, “Human love stories speak of soul mates, a blissfully romantic and ridiculous notion when attributed to a lover, but twins are the true soul mates, two bodies with one soul.”

“Which is why I was able, on that dark day of your ultimate sin, to cling to this world,” Aramonis said through Whill. “As my body fell away I poured myself into my blade, to forever wait, to free you from your terrible crimes.”

Addakon fell to his knees. Tears poured from his bloodshot eyes. Facing the brother whom he had wronged so, he fell apart. The years of denial and fear, the haunting dreams and guilt that had gnawed at his resolve for two decades, left him shattered. There was no fight left in him.

“Forgive me, Aramonis!” He pointed a shaking finger at Eadon. “It was him, his lies, his promises—he turned me against you! He said that you plotted to do the very same to me. You must believe me!”

“Yes, brother, it was him. He spoke only lies. I would have never wielded Adromida, nor shall you. Eadon knows this, for it has been foreseen. Only Whill shall wield the blade and destroy him.”

Eadon said nothing. He did not seem angered to hear this. Rather, it left him at peace.

Whill moved to a large silver-trimmed mirror upon the wall, and looked into his own eyes. His mouth spoke, but he did not form the words himself. “I learned of Adimorda as a young man, Whill. I, like the elves, believe the prophecy to be true. Forgive me. It is why I named you as I did. I have placed this great burden on your shoulders. Forgive me, son, as I do my brother.”

Whill turned and saw Addakon smiling through his tears. In that smile, he finally saw the face of his father. “It is time to come with me,” Whill’s voice said softly as tears fell.

Addakon dropped his sword and, with both hands, ripped open his clothing to expose his bare chest. “Take me from this place.”

Whill’s body lunged forward and stabbed Addakon through the heart. A blinding white light engulfed the room for many moments as the sword’s energy poured forth, and two souls became one again.

Just as quickly as it started, it ended. Addakon was dead, his father’s spirit gone. Whill was left holding the empty sword of his father, and Eadon laughed with delight.

“Hold!” Roakore screamed again as the many groups rustled and tensed, ready to charge. “Keep yer bloody heads, ye crazy sons o’ rock moss! Next one that breaks rank I kill meself!”

Roakore turned to his council. “So what ye thinking, Z?”

Zerafin looked oddly at Roakore, then to the Draggard Queen.

He began to lay out the plan for attack when the Draggard queen spoke. Her great voice filled the cavern, and though no one would have admitted it, the voice was like soft music.

“Ah, the great and powerful Roakore, son of the fallen king of the Ebony Mountains, heir to a tomb.”

Roakore’s lip curled in a snarl as he turned to face her. She took three graceful strides closer, but was still more than two hundred paces away.

“I met your father once, briefly.” She sucked the tips of each of her clawed fingers in turn. “He gave me much nourishment for my first litter of Ebony Mountain-born children.” Four large fangs flashed behind midnight-black lips.

Groaning, Zerafin closed his eyes and shook his head. “That did it,” Rhunis muttered.

For a moment Roakore looked stunned. The blasphemy that had befallen his ears shocked his sensibilities to such an extent that he was dumbfounded. For the first and last time in his life, he was speechless.

Roakore did not storm off in a rage. He turned to his friends with tears welling in his eyes, and tightened his grip on his axe. “Help me if ye want, but do not stop me!”

Zerafin grabbed his shoulder as he turned to engage the queen. “I will not stop you, but please accept my strength.” He sent a jolting blast of energy from his hand into Roakore’s body and weapons. Feeling electrified, as though lightning pulsed through his body, Roakore turned and began a steady charge at the queen—to the cheers of his men.

He sent his stone bird whirling and called the names of his father and the gods. He charged on as the weapon reached its target in less than two seconds; it was a blur and it came in hard. The queen caught the whirling stones in a ball of light and the weapon twirled, suspended. Roakore was now less than fifty feet from her as he barreled in. She sent her seven tails at him from the right; barbed and pointed spears of death came at him fast. He did not stop, but extended his hand down towards the stone floor, and hollered the dwarf word for stone. Two slabs of rock blasted out from the ground and caught the tails in a vise-like grip, completely crushing them. The queen howled in pain. Roakore veered right and jumped high into the air. He flipped over his axe as if it were a vaulting pole, and his feet never slowed when they hit the floor.

“A distraction!” ordered Zerafin, and the soldiers complied. The elves sent a glowing, multicolored volley of arrows at the queen as the dwarves launched their many hatchets. She lifted her hands, and every missile stopped in its course and flew back at the attacker. The elves pushed back with mental energy of their own in a stalemate.

She screamed at her attackers and knew her doom. She could not stop the crazed dwarf without letting up on the missiles, but she could take this little bastard with her. She would wait until the last second to let down her guard, and then she would tear him apart.

Roakore barreled in. The queen’s greedy teeth awaited him, but he came to a sudden sliding stop, not ten feet away, and slammed his fists into the floor. She was slammed with a stone tide as the floor erupted before her. Pebbles and chunks of rock alike riddled her flying body. Her attention shifted to her own pain, and the arrows and hatchets rained into her. She was dead before she hit the ground.

“Hail, King Roakore!” Zerafin cried.

All took up the cry. “Hail, King Roakore!”

Roakore went to the fallen queen and, with his great axe, hewed off her head—just in case—and raised it to the crowd. The cheers swelled.

“I have seen a great many amazing things in all my centuries. That was simply beautiful. You should be proud of your father,” Eadon said.

Whill held his father’s empty sword and looked at him with disgust. “I need not be told that by one such as you.” He wiped the blood from Sinomara’s blade and sheathed it. “I will not be used by you. I will not help you find Adromida. I do not know what your plans are, or how you intend to stop the prophecy, but I will not be your puppet.”

Eadon laughed, but when the laughing ceased there was no smile. He began to circle Whill. “Don’t you see? You have defeated your uncle; you are now king of all of Uthen-Arden. You need not fight me, for I am not your enemy. Never again will you have enemies if you follow me. You can have the world, Whill.”

“I am the rightful king, that is true,” Whill said softly. The Dark elf smiled.

“And as king I shall make you pay for all you have done. I do not want the world, Eadon, I simply want a world without you or the damned Draggard. I want a world of peace.”

Eadon’s smile turned to a sneer in the blink of an eye. “I will teach you pain beyond human endurance. Should you defy me, I will make you beg for death

before I am through with you. Every day you will be brought within an inch of it, only to be healed. You will bend to my will—me, your master.”

“Never!”

Before the word could leave his lips he was slammed into the wall with a flick of Eadon’s wrist. He got to his feet and unsheathed his father’s sword. It was ripped from his grasp by the Dark elf’s mind, and slammed against the wall. Whill lunged forward, but Eadon raised a hand and his body froze. The Dark elf lunged forward and dealt a double-fisted blow to his ribs. He was thrown backwards into the wall and landed with a thud, his ribs shattered. He could not draw breath; many of the bones had penetrated his lungs. He coughed blood, and Eadon was on him in a flash. Whill was lifted into the air only to be slammed against the wall once more. Then he was pulled through the air and caught by the throat in Eadon’s powerful grip. He brought his face close to Whill’s as he choked the life from him.

“Yes, my friend. You know it to be true. You cannot win; you cannot defy me. The outcome can only mean loss for you.”

Whill blacked out. Finally the pain ceased, and there was nothing—sweet, beautiful, warm nothing. He had been delivered by death from the clutches of the murderous Dark elf. But then—

Sound, smell. He opened his eyes in time to see the blue tendrils of healing dissipate. His ribs and lungs were healed, and Eadon stood over him.

“Thus begins your training, apprentice,” he said as he stepped aside. Another Dark elf approached, followed by two Draggard. Whill got to his feet and stood before them boldly.

“This is Thazak,” Eadon said. “He will be your first teacher.”

He was taller than Whill and slightly shorter than Eadon, with black hair and dark eyes. His face was adorned with intricate black tattoos. Whill’s body froze as Thazak grabbed his face by the jaw and inspected him. “I have practiced the art of torture for many years in anticipation of your arrival. Your pain will be legendary.” He smiled. “I promise.”

Thazak proceeded to beat him within an inch of his life, and Whill thought that if he could somehow survive this, he could survive anything. His limp body was dragged down many stairs by the Draggard. They took him to the special dungeons far below the castle, from which no screams would be heard. The young man Whill had been would never return from those depths, even if his body did.

Roakore entered the throne room, and there upon the throne he saw it, the skeleton of his father. The enemy had propped him up in the chair, crown and all. This had been meant as an insult, but to Roakore it now seemed proper. He raised his hands and tried as hard as he could to picture his father. With the image in mind, he commanded the stone and it obeyed. It rose up from all sides and encased the dead king and his throne. It fused together, but then the outer stone fell away revealing a sculpture of Roakore's father. It was so perfect, it could not have been made by hand. When the clan had amassed its wealth once again, Roakore intended to encrust it with diamonds.

He went down on one knee. "Father. I have done as ye asked. I have taken back our mountain. Let yer soul be free."

For a moment there was only silence, but then a draft picked up and blew through his hair. From the statue rose a silver mist. It lingered for a moment, and then spiraled up and disappeared into the ceiling. Roakore burst into tears of joy.

He joined his new friends and looked out over the battlefield in the fading sunlight. They had all—elf, dwarf, and human—lost many lives this day. Abram looked to the sky and thought of Whill. Roakore knew his mind.

"What has become of him?" Abram asked the faint wind.

Zerafin looked at the ground. "He has been taken by Eadon. Our greatest fears have been realized. We have won today's battle, but at a great expense. Without Whill, we cannot win the war. We have no other option but to try and free him from the Dark elf's grasp."

"How do we free him from one so powerful?" Abram asked.

Zerafin shook his head. "How indeed?"

The End

Afterword

Michael James Ploof is a bestselling author of epic and urban fantasy. His epic fantasy series—Legends of Agora—currently consists of six books set in Agora, a land inhabited by humans, elves, dragons, and dwarves. He has recently branched out to urban fantasy with his post-apocalyptic series: The Orion Rezner Chronicles. Michael lives in Northern NY (as far north as you can get) with his wife and two teenage children.

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Whill of Agora series

Book 1: Whill of Agora

Book 2: A Quest of Kings

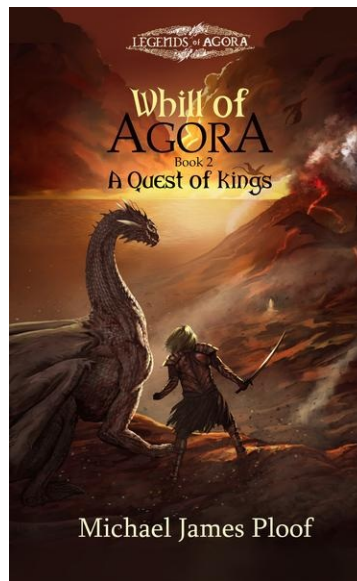
Book 3: A Song of Swords

Book 4: A Crown of War

The Windwalker Archive

Book 1: Talon

Did you love *Whill of Agora*? Then you should read *A Quest of Kings* by Michael Ploof!



"Michael Ploof is one of the indie good guys. Don't be surprised if he is soon swooped up by one publisher or another. *Whill of Agora* is a fine example of why I think so." - Award Winning Fantasy Author, M. R. Mathias

Influenced by the works of Robert Jordan, George R.R. Martin, R. A. Salvatore and Tolkien, *Whill of Agora* is a classic coming of age fantasy tale of magic, mayhem, friendship and war. Set in the realm of Agora during the Draggard Wars, five centuries after the fall of the elven lands, *Whill of Agora* brings readers on a heart pounding epic adventure with a colorful cast of characters that are sure to become fan favorites.

It has been six months since the reclamation of the Ro'Sar Mountains and the liberation of Isladon. The lands of Agora are plagued by the hordes of Draggard which poured from the mountains during the reclamation. Eadon's Draggard scourge ravishes the land, sending all nations into chaos, dividing the Kingdoms and their people. The Dark Elf Eadon himself sits upon the throne of Uthen-Arden, impersonating the fallen King Addakon. As King, Eadon has wrought war, famine, and plague upon the Kingdom. As the Dwarves hole up in their mountains, protecting their borders and guarding their treasures, the elves remain silent to Agora's plight. The Sun Elf Zerafin has returned in shame to his people

with his sister's comatose body, her soul a captive of Eadon. Roakore has become King of the Ro'Sar Mountains and freed his father's spirit, his clan has rebuilt the great Kingdom. Abram and Rhunis continue their search within the Uthen-Arden capital city of Del'Oradon, for any clue that Whill remains alive. A Quest of Kings plunges readers into a vast and in depth world of magic, monsters and mayhem, rich in history and culture, where Humans, Dwarves and Elves have managed to live in harmony for centuries. It is a tale of friendship, love, honor, and courage in the face of deception, power, darkness and war.