

The Unsuspecting Mage

The Morcyth Saga Book One

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

Thank you.

Chapter 1

Having your nose in a book may be a great way to spend your spare time unless you do it to the exclusion of everything else. You get up, grab your book, and read until night comes when you're forced to put it down for sleep. Oh sure, you have the occasional interruptions in the pattern like eating and school, but that I suppose must be tolerated. James Reese, a young man in his senior year of high school, does just that. Unless there is something of dire importance demanding his attention, he will be found lying on his bed, deep within his current favorite book. He sees nothing wrong with spending every possible, available moment reading. Reading to him is grand adventure, new ideas and it sure keeps him out of trouble. His main interest is fantasy adventure books, though he does dabble in sci-fi occasionally. He has kept every book he has ever read since he was around twelve. His book collection, now pushing over five hundred titles, is the one thing he takes the most pride in.

An obtrusive knock at the door brings him back from the middle of a particularly exciting battle. "James, breakfast is almost ready," he hears his grandmother's voice through the door. "Put your book down and get ready, or you're going to be late for school."

Finding a good place to stop, he carefully inserts the bookmark and places it gingerly on his nightstand. He's read it before, many of the books lining his walls have been read several times over the years, and most are still in very good condition. Some think that he cares more for his books than for anything else. There are times when he thinks they may be right. His friends always kid him about rereading the same book over and over, but he asks them if they ever saw the same movie twice or ever went to the same place for a vacation. Having made his point they leave him alone.

He picks up some clothes from off the floor that don't seem too dirty and gets dressed. After slipping on his shoes, he grabs his backpack which he's rarely seen without. Slinging it over his shoulder, he opens the door.

Coming out of his room, the aroma of eggs, bacon and biscuits fill the house. His grandmother is in the kitchen where she's just finishing cooking breakfast. "Have a seat at the table, James," she says from the kitchen. "It'll be ready in a few minutes." His grandparents have raised him for the past five years, ever since his parents were killed by a drunk driver.

At the table, his grandfather is reading the morning paper. So intent is he on an article that he doesn't notice him right away. James has some trepidation about disturbing his grandfather. For the last few months his grandfather has been encouraging him to get a job and has been directing his attention to the latest ads in the paper that he feels James might be interested in. It's his senior year in high school and it's almost over. He knows he needs to make some decisions about his future but has never been that great trying new things. Some call him antisocial but he thinks of himself as just nonsocial. He doesn't hate being around others, he just prefers time to himself, with his books.

Setting his backpack on the floor by the legs of his chair, he joins his grandfather at the table. Having noticed him, his grandfather leans toward James and shows him an article in the paper.

Local Teen Missing

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

"Isn't he one of your classmates James?" his grandfather asks.

"Yes he is," James replies, "but I don't know him very well. He's on the football team and is well liked by everyone. Hope he's okay."

Just then, his grandmother emerges from the kitchen with breakfast. James grabs a biscuit and helps himself to a big portion of his grandmother's jam. It won 2nd place at the county fair last year, old Widow Jones took 1st place. His grandmother always says that

Widow Jones puts too much sweetener in her jams and that is why she wins every year.

“James,” she reminds, “let’s say grace first.”

Looking at his grandmother, he sees that look in her eye. He puts down the biscuit he was about to eat and bows his head for prayer. His grandfather prays, “Dear Lord, please bless this food to our good, watch over us and guide us. And *please* help James find a job! In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

“Leave the boy alone John,” his wife chides him as she places her napkin in her lap. “He’ll find one when the good Lord is ready.” Turning her attention to James, she adds, “Just find one that you are interested in. There is nothing worse than spending your life at a job that is dull and lifeless. One should come along when the time is right that will be just right for you. Now hurry and eat or you’re going to be late for school again.”

Stuffing his mouth full of eggs and bacon, he mumbles, “I’d better eat on the run.” He tucks several biscuits in a napkin to eat on the way. “Thanks for another award winning breakfast,” he says to his grandmother before giving her a peck on the cheek as he heads for the back door.

“Don’t forget your lunch, it’s sitting on the table by the door.” she reminds him.

“Got it!” he hollers back to her as he stuffs it in his backpack. Opening the back door, he leaves the house and heads for the garage. Pulling his bike out of the garage, he hops on and quickly makes his way down the road to school. Haveston High isn’t much more than a mile away and only takes him a few minutes to get there.

As he arrives at school he notices several police cars, both marked and unmarked, in and around the parking lot. Pulling into the bike rack, he grabs his chain and starts securing his bike. His best and only friend Dave soon rides up and parks his bike in the slot next to him.

“James, did you hear that Seth is missing?” Dave asks as he secures his bike.

“Yeah, I saw it in the paper this morning,” James replies. “Wonder what happened to him?”

“Don’t know. Let’s go and see what’s going on,” he says as his lock clicks into place. Grabbing his backpack, he spies a nearby policeman and heads that way with James following right behind.

Approaching the officer Dave asks, “What’s going on?”

The officer turns to them and says, “We’re interviewing students about Seth Randle. His mother says he’s been missing since Wednesday evening. Would you boys know anything about it?”

“No,” replies James, shaking his head. “We barely know him.”

“That’s right,” Dave adds.

The officer hands each of them a card and says, “If you see or hear anything that might help us in locating him, please call.”

“Sure,” says Dave.

“If we hear anything we’ll be sure to let you know,” James adds.

Heading to class, they both can’t help but wonder what’s happened to Seth.

The rest of the day, all anyone could talk of was Seth. They had an assembly before lunch where they were told the facts surrounding his disappearance. Evidently, he had been heading downtown after school and that was the last time anyone had any contact with him. They were given the standard lesson on strangers and what to do in emergencies, the basic “Don’t talk to strangers” lecture they’ve had for years.

At lunch James and Dave sit in their regular spot in the lunch room. They both brought their own lunch today but Dave was not very enthusiastic about his.

Reaching into his lunch sack, he pulls out a poorly wrapped sandwich. “How about a trade,” he asks James with longing in his voice. “My mystery meat sandwich for whatever your grandmother made for you?”

James pulls out a six inch homemade hoagie and smiles, “Not on your life, bud. My stomach isn’t that strong. Besides, after all these years of your mom’s infamous cooking, you should be use to it by now.”

Taking a bite, Dave replies, “I suppose so. No use in subjecting another living thing to this stuff.”

Hearing a sigh from his friend, Dave looks over to see James holding a small piece of paper he had just pulled out of his lunch sack.

“What’s the matter?” asks his friend.

“I thought I had gotten off easy this morning,” James explains. “You know how my grandfather always mentions jobs he thinks I would like?” When he gets a nod from Dave, he continues. “Well, instead of pressuring me about it this morning, he slips one in with my lunch.” He reads the ad as he continues eating his lunch.

“This one is at least interesting, if a little odd,” he says after several bites.

“What do you mean?” asks Dave curiously.

Handing him the ad, James says, “Here, read it.”

Wiping his hands on his pants, he takes the ad:

Magic! Real Magic! Ever wanted to learn?

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

*1616 Commercial Ave
Room 2334
Haveston, CA*

“That is different, I’ll give you that,” affirms Dave as he hands the ad back to James.

Putting the ad in his wallet, James asks, “What do you think?”

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

“Yeah, you’re right. Maybe I’ll go down tomorrow and see what it’s about. If nothing else, it should please my grandfather and maybe get him off my back for a while.” Taking a bite out of his hoagie, James ponders the ad, thinking it was definitely worth looking into.

Pointing off to the right Dave says, “There’s Alyssa. You should go invite her to the dance next week. I know you have a thing for her.”

Smiling, James says, “I haven’t quite worked up the nerve yet. I’ve tried twice, but my mouth gets all dry and I can’t find the words. I’m afraid I’ll look like an idiot.”

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

“I know,” he sighs. “Maybe I’ll ask her on Monday.”

“If you ask her at all.” Dave’s attempts to bring him out of his room have met with very little success, but he keeps trying.

After they finish eating, they leave the lunch room and head over to the chess room where they spend the rest of their lunch break playing one role playing game or another. James is usually the one running the game since he enjoys making the campaigns more than Dave does. Back in his bedroom he has a whole collection of campaigns that have never been played. He simply likes designing them almost more than playing them.

Dave on the other hand prefers to be the character, or characters, like what he’s doing in this one. He’s playing a thief and a mage who are currently trying to find the third ring of Xanak, the god of fire.

James sets up his godwall and removes the dice and papers from his backpack. He always keeps meticulous notes during his campaigns. Dave gets his papers, dice, and the player’s rulebook ready as well. Once everything is ready, they begin.

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

“On to fame and fortune!” Dave exclaims with a grin. “Thief is checking for traps as they go down the steps.”

James nods. “No traps were found. Upon reaching the bottom step, you discover a long hallway stretching far into the darkness ahead. A sound can be heard coming from out of the dark, and it seems to be coming toward you...”

The rest of the day goes along pretty much as usual. Classes, including the dreaded PE class that James is about ready to flunk. He simply is not much into sports or anything else exertive. His gym teacher tells him that he needs to show more enthusiasm for the physical side of life, but his teacher’s arguments do nothing to sway him in that direction. It’s not that James is fat or anything, he actually looks quite fit. He just doesn’t go for that sort of stuff.

After school at the bike rack, Dave informs him that he plans on accompanying him down to the interview. For moral support, as he puts it.

“You don’t have to come with me you know,” James tells his friend.

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

“Are you afraid I am going to chicken out or something like that?” he asks.

“As a matter of fact, yes, yes I am!” he replies with a smile.

“I plan on catching the 512 at 9:00 a.m. If you want to go with me, meet me at the bus stop.”

“I’ll be there,” insists Dave.

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

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

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

“I will,” responds James. “I don’t plan on making any decisions on the spot. I plan on finding out what the job is and how much it pays. It sounds interesting though.”

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

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

A little after dinner, James is again in his room reading. There’s a knock on his bedroom door.

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

“James,” his grandfather’s voice comes through the door, “You should come and see this.”

“Now what?” he says to himself. Slipping his bookmark within the pages, he gets up off the bed.

Out in the living room, he finds his grandparents raptly watching the news. “There is another missing person,” his grandmother informs him. “This time a girl”

The news reporter goes on to say that this is the second person who has come up missing in the past week. There are no leads, no connection between them. They come from different cities in the same area. They both just up and disappeared without a trace. The report continues on with interviews of different family members of the two missing people.

“This is getting serious.” his grandfather says. “You be extra careful tomorrow when you’re downtown.”

“I will,” James assures him. He continues watching the report on the missing teens until the reporters begin repeating themselves. Then he returns to his room where he lays back down on his bed and picks up his book.

He found it difficult to concentrate on what he was reading. After realizing he read the same paragraph three times he decides that it’s a lost cause and put his book down on the nightstand. Thoughts and worries about the interview tomorrow make him far too nervous to be able to concentrate on reading. The ad continues running through his mind, ‘well versed in fantasy novels and role playing games’, ‘may need to travel’. It all sounds exciting. *Maybe Dave is right. It could be a traveling magician.*

Different theories and thoughts continue running through his head until he finally gets up and undresses for bed. Crawling in under the covers, he reaches over and sets the alarm clock for seven thirty before switching off his reading lamp. He lies there in the dark, enjoying the cool night air as it drifts in through the window over his bed and wafts over him. Eventually, he’s able to fall asleep.

It seems like he no sooner fell asleep when his alarm goes off. Hitting the off button, he rolls over onto his back and tries unsuccessfully to keep his eyes open. He is just way too comfortable and almost doesn’t have the energy to pull the covers off and get this day going. His sense of responsibility eventually overcomes his laziness and drags himself out of bed. Also, Dave would never let him hear the end of it if he left him waiting at the bus stop.

After a quick shower, he put on some of his better clothes. Not his church clothes to be sure, but ones good enough to look nice. Once he’s dressed, he takes his backpack and empties all of his role

playing paraphernalia onto his bed. *I'll clean this up when I get back.* He puts a clean handkerchief in his backpack along with the book he's currently reading. Pausing a moment, he decides to take the two candy bars lying in the pile on his bed and places them inside as well. Shouldering his ever present backpack, he opens the door to his room and goes out to see about breakfast.

Sausage, eggs and biscuits, are already on the table. His grandparents had been nice enough to wait for him before eating.

"My, don't you look nice," his grandmother says.

"Thanks," he tells her as he comes to the table. "I better eat on the run, or I might miss my bus." He throws together two sausage, egg, and biscuit sandwiches. Wrapping them in a napkin, he heads toward the back door. His grandmother's "Good luck James!" follows him out the door.

Eating, he hurries down the road to the bus stop where he'll catch the 512. When he arrives, he finds Dave is already there, waiting.

"Good morning James," Dave says when he sees him approaching. He'd always been a cheerful morning person, which usually irritated James.

"Good morning yourself," replies James somewhat moodily as he finishes his last bite of breakfast. He definitely was not a morning person.

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

"You're on, I can almost taste the burgers now," boasts James as he keeps a lookout for their bus. When he sees it turn the corner he announces, "Here comes the 512." Picking up his backpack he prepares to board the bus. The 512 pulls up and they have to wait a moment as an elderly woman leaves the bus, then they get on. Showing the driver their bus passes, they then move to the back of the bus and take their seats. The 512 will take them most of the way before they'll need to make a transfer to the 33 for the last leg to Commercial Avenue.

"Nervous?" inquires his friend after they sat down and the bus begins to move.

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh well, that’s life.”

As they get closer, James begins turning quieter as he starts thinking about the upcoming interview. Dave tries a couple of times to get him interested in further conversation but his mind really isn’t on it. Finally, he gives up and they ride the rest of the way in silence.

When the Park and Ride is announced where they’ll be getting off to transfer to the 33, James grabs his backpack and readies to disembark from the bus. When the bus pulls in, they get off and go over to the water fountain for a drink. Dave looks at his watch and says, “We’ve got about five minutes before the 33 shows up.”

The 33 does a loop through downtown and passes right down Commercial Ave. Going over to Berth 4 where it will stop, they stand in line behind several other passengers. Dave nudges James when he sees a pretty girl wearing practically nothing, but James is too preoccupied with what lies ahead of him to pay much attention. The mere thought of the interview is making his stomach do flip-flops.

Finally, the 33 shows up and pulls into Berth 4. They show the bus driver their passes and get on, going all the way to the back. They have to wait a few more minutes before it’s time for the bus to leave. When it does, it isn’t long before they see a tall building displaying 1616 Commercial. James hits the cord and the bus pulls over to the next bus stop and comes to a halt. They get off and make their way back toward the building. The butterflies are beginning to congregate in James’ middle.

Passing through the front door, they make their way over to the elevators and press the ‘up’ button. While they are waiting for the elevator to arrive, Dave notices James looking at the building’s list of businesses. When he moves over to join him, James glances at him and says, “There’s no listing for 2334.”

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

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

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

Shrugging, James just smiles.

Ding!

The elevator door opens and they get in along with several others. James presses the button for the 23rd floor. It takes a few minutes to get there as they stop at several different floors to allow various people on and off. By the time they reach the 23rd floor, they’re the only ones left. Another ***Ding!*** and the door opens onto floor 23. Stepping out, they turn down the hallway to their right and come to the door marked 2334.

Once at the door James turns to Dave and asks, “Should I knock or what?”

“Naw, just go on in.” he says.

Getting up his courage, James opens the door and enters with Dave right behind. The room is empty except for several chairs and two end tables, each with a neat pile of magazines and a few books upon them. Across the room from where they entered stood a closed door marked ‘Private’ in bold letters.

“I guess we should sit down and wait,” suggests James.

“How are they going to know that we are here?” wonders Dave as he enters and closes the door behind them.

“There’s probably an alarm on the door. Someone will most likely be out in a minute,” reasons James.

Looking through the material on the nearest table, James doesn’t find anything of interest so he moves to the other table by the door marked Private. Lying on top of the other reading material, sits a small brown book with a weird design inscribed in gold leaf on the cover. Intrigued, he picks it up and is startled when he receives a static shock. Reflexively, his hand lets go of the book and it falls to the floor. The book lands on its edge and a piece of paper slips out. Bending over to pick it up, he notices writing on the paper.

“Welcome and thank you for coming. Glad you found the book. If you could read the first page and then walk

through the door marked Private, we can begin the interview. If you brought anything with you, please feel free to bring it along.

He picks the book up, bringing it and the letter over to show Dave. As Dave begins reading the letter, James says, “That’s a dumb way to start an interview. What if I had never found the piece of paper? I could’ve been sitting out here for a long time!” he exclaims.

Finishing the letter, Dave looks up at him and shrugs, “You’re right, this guy must be some kind of an eccentric or something. In the ad, he mentioned role playing games. Maybe in his mind this is some kind of test.”

Nodding in agreement, James sits down in one of the chairs and opens the book to the first page.

Underlying Principles of Magic

The practice of magic is very simple and basic. Magic is the process by which the individual taps into the reservoir of strength or power inside himself and manifests it into changes of the world around him. Every individual has a different amount of power available allotted to them. Some have very little, just enough to do simple spells while others have vast amounts that can be used to literally bring down mountains.

Looking up from the book, James turns to his friend and says, “Unless I am mistaken, this book is going to explain the workings of a magic system. Not Houdini type but Gandalf type. It is talking about using the power within you to manipulate things in the world.”

“Weird. This guy must be a real character,” Dave jokes.

“Yeah, but character or not, a job’s a job.” Turning back to the book, he finishes the first page quickly as it’s not too long. Closing the book, he climbs to his feet and looks at Dave. His friend could see the nervousness in his eyes. “Wish me luck.”

“Luck!” replies Dave, giving his friend a thumb’s up.

Slinging his backpack over his shoulder, he carries the book and walks over to the door marked Private. Pausing only momentarily to calm his nerves by taking a deep, soothing breath, he opens the

door. Stepping through to the other side, he suddenly finds himself in the middle of a small meadow that's entirely surrounded by a forest of trees. A small stream cuts through the middle of the meadow.

He stands there momentarily in dumbfounded shock as his brain tries to make sense of what he's seeing. Turning around to ask Dave if he's hallucinating or something, he receives another shock when he discovers the doorway is no longer there.

Did I just cross over into the Twilight Zone?

Unable to believe what his own eyes are telling him, he rubs them and then looks around the clearing again as he works to make sense of it. Trees swaying in the gentle breeze, the sound of birds singing in their branches, and the soft trickling melody of the stream as it makes its way across the meadow to disappear in the trees on the far side give this place a surreal feel. Especially since there's no way it could've been on the other side of that door.

Movement out of the corner of his eye causes him to glance across the stream to a fallen log lying near the edge of the forest. What he sees there almost convinces him he's lost his mind. Sitting atop the log is a strange little creature, about four and a half feet in height with skin that's a dark greenish color. Wearing a blue vest and a crazy felt hat, it looks out of place in such a surreal place as this. There seems to be intelligence behind those yellow eyes and they're looking right at James.

I'm having a hallucination.

Not knowing what else to do, he walks through the short grass of the meadow toward the creature. He pauses at the stream uncertainly when he sees the creature hop off the log and get to its feet. When no hostile action is forthcoming, he carefully jumps across the stream and walks the few remaining feet until he's standing before the creature. "Hello," James says.

To his utter astonishment the creature says "Hello" right back at him.

"You can talk?" exclaims James in shock.

"Of course I can talk. Any intelligent creature can talk. But not many have anything worthwhile to say," it replies.

Before James can get his next question out the creature says, "'Where am I?' Was that to be your next question? You're not where you started out, boy. My master has set me here to get you started and that is all I intend to do. I am not here to hold your hand

or wet nurse you, do you understand?” The creature gives him an intent look as he waits for a response.

Nodding his head, James gives a weak, “I think so.”

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

“First of all, magic works here. Read the book you have in your hand. It will help you get a handle on it. Your survival may well depend on it.”

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

“Lastly, you need to get your sorry butt to the village of Trendle.”

With that, the creature jumps into the air and with a faint popping noise, disappears.

James ol’ boy, he thinks to himself. *You’re screwed!*

Chapter Two

Trying to come to grips with the enormity of the situation, he glances around. There has to be some rational explanation! The forest surrounding the meadow looks like any forest that might exist back on Earth. Pine trees, birds singing in the distance, insects buzzing here and there, normality. Nothing strange, except for the little detail that there is no way he could have arrived here by stepping through that door.

The ad said ‘traveling’. Well, I have traveled. The ad also said that being well read in fantasy novels and experience with role playing games would be a bonus. Thinking of the little creature just encountered, he can see the logic in that as well. Such a background might enable a person to more willingly accept these odd occurrences.

Okay, let’s take this one step at a time. What actually happened to you? You were on the 23rd floor of an office building, stepped

through a door and then you're in the middle of this meadow talking with an odd looking little creature. Have you lost your mind?

After taking a quick mental check, he feels relatively sane. No odd thoughts or urges running through his mind. No hallucinations, unless this meadow and that creature are one.

Bending over, he reaches down and runs his fingers across the grass. *Feels normal.* Standing up, he again looks around. He just can't think of this place as not being real. *So, if this is real, then what just happened?* A breeze blows through the meadow, ruffling his hair. Closing his eyes, he takes a deep breath and holds it for a second before exhaling slowly. Opening them again, he found the meadow still there. He didn't really expect that to change things, but it's what everyone does who gets into these sorts of situations.

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

Pulling out the book he brought with him from the waiting room, James takes a much more interested look at it than he did before. There is an odd design on the cover, and not very many pages. *Think, James, think. What now? You were brought here for some reason. For your benefit? Probably not, it never is.* James reflects on various books he had read over the last several years. Some have this sort of thing in it, and the main character rarely has a fun time of it.

Opening the book, he rereads the first couple of paragraphs. *For the sake of argument, let's suppose this is in fact, a true guidebook on magic. And let's further suppose that since I was brought here and told to bring it with me, then it stands to reason that I should be able to make it work. For why else would they have bothered?* A couple of the sentences stand out:

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

“Maintain a visualization in your mind of the effect you wish to produce.”

Sounds easy enough. He decides to give it a try and see if he can in fact work the magic as the little creature had told him works here.

Let's see, keep it simple. Spying a small stick lying on the ground near him, an idea begins to form. In his mind he creates a visualization of the stick rising off the ground and hovering there. *Now for the words...*

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

With the utterance of the first word, James begins to feel pressure building deep within himself, like water behind a dam. He raises his hand as he says the words and points to the stick on the ground. Each word uttered causes the pressure inside him to build, wanting to be released. As the last word is spoken, the dam breaks and the power surges out of him. He can almost see the magic flowing from him to the stick, though it's probably just his imagination.

The stick on the ground begins slowly rising into the air. It gets about a foot off the ground before he becomes so excited that his concentration breaks and the stick falls back to the ground with a thump.

IDID IT!!!! *James ol' boy, you are one amazing wizard!* Cavorting around with jubilation, he goes over and examines the stick which, just a moment before, had been floating in the air. He reaches out and touches it hesitantly. Seeming normal, he picks it up and examines it closely, but doesn't see anything out of the ordinary. Feeling a little cocky, he thinks for a second and then tosses the stick into the air yelling,

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

This time he tries to maintain his visualization without breaking it. With the utterance of the last word, the power once again surges out of him. The stick comes to a sudden stop where it hangs motionless six feet above the ground. James walks over to it, all the while maintaining his concentration so as to not disrupt the spell.

He walks around the stick as it hangs in the air, running his hand over and under it as a magician might do to prove there were no wires holding it in place. Encountering nothing, he reaches out and touches it with a finger. It moves a fraction, but otherwise maintains

its position. Placing his hand under the stick, he stops concentrating on the spell and it drops into his hand.

Quite pleased with himself, he smiles at his success. He feels a little tired from the magic, so walks over to the log where the creature had been sitting and rests himself. *I could get to like this*, James thinks to himself. Then sadness comes over him when he thinks of how his grandparents are going to feel when he doesn't come home. *I may never make it home. Oh my God! What about Dave? He saw me go through the door. How will he take it? I guess the best he can, that's all any of us can do.*

Reaching into his backpack he pulls out one of the candy bars he had brought with him and munches it while he contemplates what he should do next. *Eat it slow James, you'll not be getting another one of these for a long time. What am I going to do for food? Shelter? Toilet Paper??* The thought of using leaves doesn't bother him half as much as it used to before that one camping trip with his dad, oh so long ago. He smiles wistfully at the memory.

Realizing that sitting there is not going to get him anywhere he looks around the clearing and tries to determine the best way to go. By the position of the sun in the sky, it's a little after midday. Which kind of surprises him as it had only been mid morning when he and Dave had taken the bus downtown. *Maybe time works differently here?*

One of the things that little creature had said was 'to get your sorry butt to the village of Trendle', wherever that may be. Around the clearing, all he can see are the tops of trees. The forest itself looks unforgiving, lacking even the most rudimentary type of path. He'll have to forge his way through when he leaves.

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

Determining where West lies by the position of the sun, he shoulders his backpack and gets up off the log. A touch of excitement mingles with his fear and apprehension. Sure he had no clue where he was or even if he would ever find his way home. But

beneath such a beautiful blue sky on a warm summer day, things didn't seem so bad. He had worked magic hadn't he?

On his way across the meadow to the forest's edge, he spies a good sturdy branch lying on the ground which would be ideal as a walking stick. Tearing off the smaller twigs and branches, he soon holds a stout walking stick. Turning back to the forest, he pauses upon reaching the edge. His excitement dims as he stands there about to enter an unknown world. What lies beyond these trees? What secrets may be hidden within? Beneficial ones? Or those less so? Taking a deep breath, he pushes a tangle of undergrowth out of the way and enters the forest.

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

It doesn't take him long before he realizes this forest is nothing like the tame camping areas where his dad had taken him. For one thing, this one has no paths. The bushes and trees were all grown in together, at times forcing him to push his way through the tangled undergrowth, often with painful results. Walking over the uneven ground soon has his feet and ankles aching as well. Bleeding from a myriad of scratches and scrapes, his feet beginning to protest in earnest, it wasn't soon before all he wanted to do was go home.

An hour into the forest, a growl from his stomach reminds him he hasn't eaten for awhile. He reaches into his backpack and pulls out his last remaining candy bar. But not wanting to use up the last of his food, he sighs and puts it back much to the loud protest of his stomach.

As he continues making his way through the forest, the sun overhead gradually makes its descent to the horizon. The shadows begin to grow long. In the deepening gloom, James starts to get jumpy, hearing and seeing things that at first make his imagination run wild, but which turn out to be something quite innocent. *Better find someplace to hole up for the night.*

But there was no place. All about him was nothing but trees and more trees. He finally locates a large one with accessible low branches and climbs up into the upper branches as far from the

forest floor as he can. Finding a crook between a large limb and the trunk, he settles down into it and tries to get comfortable.

The forest descends into a place of haunting shadows and mysterious noises as the night gradually deepens into darkness. Hungry, scared and exhausted, he clings to the tree. His body hurts from hundreds of scratches received from pushing through the obstinate bushes that had been blocking his way all afternoon. The throbbing from his poor feet and ankles lends another level to his misery. Shifting around as best he can, he simply can't find any position that is comfortable. It's not too long before his butt begins hurting and going numb, forcing him to continue moving about in a fruitless attempt to alleviate his discomfort.

As he sits there in the tree scared and alone, the light gradually fades away, leaving him alone in darkness. The canopy of leaves above prevents even the smallest glimmer of starlight from coming through. He sits there in the dark, listening to the sounds of the forest, and rests his head against the bole of the tree. *I want to go home!* He despondently thinks to himself as tears of loneliness and fear roll down his cheek. Somehow, though long in coming, he does manage to fall asleep.

Howrrrrrrrr!

Startled awake, teeth chattering from the cold, he quickly realizes he wasn't just having a bad dream after all. From his perch high in the tree, he hears off in the distance the howls of a wolf pack on the hunt. He listens as they call to each other, every howl sending a shiver of fear through him. Face pressed tight to the bole of the tree, he silently prays that he will remain undetected.

The darkness of the night is alleviated somewhat by the faint light of the moon that is somehow filtering its way through the thick canopy of leaves above. Rays of moonlight pierce the canopy of leaves giving the forest an aura of ghostly light. Sitting there, eyes darting to and fro, James remains as quiet as he can while listening to the hunting pack.

For ten minutes the wolves call to each other when suddenly, their cries alter, becoming more intense as they begin crashing through the underbrush. Several shadows pass beneath his hiding spot as they race toward the latest call.

“Oh my God! Help Me!”

A cry of terror from off in the distance cuts through the night. Scared, immobile, James hugs the tree all the tighter. Looking off

into the darkness where the scream originated, he catches a brief glimpse of the man as he runs through a patch of moonlight. A second after he passes out of the light, several wolves race through the light in pursuit.

Tears stream down his cheeks as he hears the man cry out for help again. A second later, a fearful bloodcurdling scream tears through the night before being abruptly silenced. He sits there crying as he listens to the wolves. Saddened by the death of that man, ashamed of his own cowardice, tears stream down his face.

There was nothing I could do, James tells himself. Had I gone to help, I would have been torn to shreds as well. Getting little comfort from his own selfish reasoning, James presses his face against the bole of the tree and tries to think of home as he attempts to shut out the sound of the wolves. Sometime later, he hears the wolves begin howling as they race off through the forest. As the woods again become quiet, he tries to stop his imagination from replaying the scene of the man being torn apart by the wolves. Somehow, he manages to calm himself and finally goes back to sleep.

The morning sun shining through the trees wakes a very tired, cold and sore James. Remembering the events of the night before he knows that to stay in the forest will mean his death. *I gotta get out of here, he thinks to himself. No more pussyfooting around, I have to cover ground before night comes!*

Making sure the forest floor holds no menacing predators, he climbs down out of the tree. He then takes care of his morning business, realizing that plant leaves are not a good substitute, and starts to worry about food. Gazing around, he finds a bush bearing little pink berries. Wondering if they might be poisonous, he goes over and pulls one off the bush. Holding the berry between his fingers, he contemplates for a moment his chances of survival if it is in fact poisonous. Figuring one won't kill him even if it were, he puts it in his mouth and bites into it. Tart and firm. Not very ripe but not entirely unpleasant to the taste either. Chewing it slowly, he waits to see if he's going to react. When nothing odd happens, he swallows it.

Picking several more of the riper ones to take with him, he wraps them in a leaf before putting them in his backpack. If he doesn't get sick in an hour or two then he'll eat the rest of them.

Remembering the man the wolves killed during the night, he wonders if there may be something that the man might have had with him that may be of use. The death scream had come from the northwest so James grabs his spear and begins heading in that direction. It doesn't take him long to find the body, or rather what's left of it. If he'd had a full stomach he would have lost it right there. The scene was ghastly, bits of bones and flesh were strewn around. Strings of intestine lie strung in all directions. The clothing the man had been wearing was shredded and soaked with blood.

Horror grips James when his eyes settle on what's left of the poor guy's jacket. The letters *H-A-V-E-S*... are still discernable across what is left of the back of the jacket. It looked an awful lot like a letterman's jacket from his high school. Using the end of his walking stick he turns the torso over and sure enough, the name Randle is stitched across the front. *So Seth wound up here just like I did, no wonder no one could find him.*

Dropping to his knees beside the body, James begins sobbing. "Sorry Seth," he cries. "There was nothing I could do. I hope you can understand that." James is filled with guilt and humiliation at his weakness last night, wishing that he had had the courage to do something to help poor Seth. He knows logically there was nothing he could've done. Had he known it was Seth, would it have made any difference? Ashamedly, he realizes it wouldn't. Coward!

"Though there was nothing I could do for you last night," he says, "there is something I can do for you now." With that, James grabs a rock and begins to scrape out a hole, a grave for his former classmate. It takes him some time, the ground is firm but he manages to get it large enough. He then sets about gathering the pieces of Seth that are scattered about, and lays them in the grave. When the last piece of Seth is laid to rest, James fills it in with dirt and makes a cairn of stones. Tying two sticks together with some vines for a makeshift cross, he hammers it into the ground with his stone at the head of the cairn.

Bowing his head, he says a few parting words before picking up his backpack and walking stick. Taking a deep breath in an attempt to settle his shaking nerves, he sets out once more westward. Hopefully he'll come across this Trendle before the wolves return. The woods no longer bring him peace as they had yesterday. Wariness and dread fill him today.

As he continues making his way through the forest he comes to the conclusion that he is going to need to be able to defend himself.

It's unlikely that he will make it out of the forest before night comes again, and he may not be able to make it through unmolested. Thinking about his walking stick he comes up with an idea. Formulating the words he says:

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

With the last word, James again feels the surge of power and watches as his walking stick slowly changes, becoming exactly like what he is visualizing in his mind. Its surface begins to smooth, one end rounds off while the other comes to a very fine point. When the spell runs its course, where the walking stick once stood, now a dark brown spear stands in its place.

Testing the tip with his finger he pricks it and blood wells out. *Sharp, I hardly even gave it any pressure.* Feeling somewhat better for having a weapon, he picks up his backpack and once again sets off toward the west.

After forcing his way through the undergrowth for awhile, he comes upon another small clearing with relief. He pauses at the edge of the clearing and watches numerous rabbits hopping around and eating the grass. His stomach is still grumbling and the memory of a rabbit his father had once caught and cooked on one of their camping trips makes it even worse. Even though he finished all the berries, it just wasn't enough. He's *Hungry!*

Knowing that he has no skill with a spear, he comes up with a spell that may help his aim. Holding up his spear and getting ready to throw, he says quietly:

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

As he speaks the last syllable, he draws his arm back and throws his spear at the nearest rabbit. When the spear leaves his hand he again feels the surge of power as he watches the spear fly unerringly through the air. Impaling the rabbit, the spear embeds itself in the ground. The other rabbits flee to the shelter of the nearby bushes.

Yeah Baby! Excited, James runs over to the rabbit, watching as it kicks in its death throes. Pulling his spear from the ground with

the rabbit dangling limp upon it, he looks at it uncertainly. *Now what? Never skinned a rabbit before, or any animal for that matter. Only saw my dad do it once.* All he has on him that is sharp is the spear which will be of little use in skinning a rabbit. Looking around he spies a pile of stones. Laying the spear with the rabbit down, he walks over and picks up a hand-sized stone and smashes it against a larger one. With a crack the smaller stone splits in two. One of the halves has a sharp edge, well sort of, but it should work.

Very carefully he takes the sharp rock and slices off the head and feet. Feeling slightly nauseated at the blood going everywhere, James again takes the rock, and using the sharp edge, slowly peels the skin off. The rock is not the best tool for the job but he eventually gets it all off.

Looking at his blood soaked hands and the raw meat he holds, his thoughts turn to Seth and a shudder runs through him, his gorge rising. *Steady boy, don't let the past rattle you. You did the best for him that you could.*

Laying the carcass on a layer of leaves James uses dirt to rid his hands of as much of the blood as he can before gathering kindling for a fire. Then after clearing a place on the ground, he carefully stacks the wood together. Placing bits of dried moss under the stacked wood he says:

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

With that the moss begins to smoke and James watches as it bursts into flame, the fire rising upward to lick the wood. He kneels down and blows gently on the flickering flame, coaxing it higher until the larger pieces have caught and the pile of wood is burning well. Satisfied that the fire will continue on its own, he creates a makeshift spit with a couple sticks and begins roasting the rabbit.

Once it's set and the fat begins dripping into the fire, he sits back and relaxes. The position of the sun in the sky tells him it's a little past noon, still several hours before night will come again to the forest. Every once in a while, the far off cry of a wolf can be heard echoing through the trees. A tremor of fear courses through him every time he hears it. He definitely doesn't want to spend another night in the trees, but what choice does he have?

The wolves are remarkably like the ones you would expect to find in a forest back home. In fact, all the animals he has seen so far

have been very similar to the ones you would come across in an Earth forest. If it wasn't for the little creature and the fact that he can do magic, he would say he was back home on a camp out.

He and his dad used to go camping every once in a while. It was one of the few good memories he has of his parents. They would go up around Yosemite and backpack, do the nature thing. His dad would catch fish and they would have a fish fry. When they returned home they would tell his mom about all the fish they had caught, both real and imagined. She would then say how good he is and how proud of her little man she was.

What would his dad say if he could see him now? He's starting a bit rough but he has food and a weapon, as well as his health; he's managing.

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

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

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

With a tear in his eye James walks over to his father and gives him a hug. His father returns the hug warmly.

Crash!

Startled out of his daydream, James finds the spit that had once held his lunch, burning in the fire and his dinner running away in the mouth of what looks like a small dog. *Stupid daydreaming fool!* Lurching to his feet, he races after the dog. Running under bushes and around trees, the dog quickly out paces him and is gone, along with his lunch.

"Crap!" James yells loudly.

Returning back to his fire, James picks up the spear and looks around the clearing for more rabbits or an acceptable substitute. Nothing! His yell and the chasing of the dog must have scared everything away. *No use sitting around here!* Using his foot, he puts the fire out by sweeping dirt over it. Grabbing his backpack he stalks off westward with recriminations running through his head and fierce growling in his belly.

No more than half an hour goes by before he has found, killed and begun roasting another small animal. Not sure exactly what it is, or was, it kind of looks like a squirrel but the size of a small cat.

This time he keeps his wits about him and remains alert for any scavengers who might happen by for a meal.

The aroma of roasting meat makes his stomach cramp. Impatient for the meat to be done, he removes it from the fire when it has cooked 'enough'. Taking it over to a nearby tree, he sits down with his back against it and proceeds to eat.

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

Before he even realizes it, he's stripped the meat from the carcass. Still a little hungry, but feeling better with something in his stomach more substantial than berries, he tosses the bones into the bushes before cleaning off his hands and face in a nearby stream.

Now clean and refreshed, he picks up his backpack and sets out once more in search of Trendle. The nearby stream seems to be flowing in the general direction he had been going so decides to follow it. He stands less of a chance of being turned around if he uses it as a guide. Also, it might eventually lead to civilization. Streams lead to rivers, rivers to lakes and ponds. And where there is water, there are usually people.

If it wasn't for the thought that he might die at any time, he would be enjoying himself. Growing along the streambed are more of the berry bushes he had come across earlier, each bearing numerous berries. Picking the ripest ones he can find, he eats his fill, though his stomach grumbles about too many immature berries. He picks more and puts them in his pack for later. Between the animal and the berries, he now feels quite full.

About an hour before nightfall, the land begins to slope downward and he comes to a drop. The little stream he's following flows over the drop where it cascades down as a small waterfall. James looks over the edge and discovers a small pond thirty feet below. There is a clear area to the right of the pond that would make an ideal spot for a camp. It has the wall of the drop flanked by the pond on one side and a large fallen tree on the other, so will provide him some shelter through the night.

He tosses his spear down to the clearing before working his way down the side of the drop. Once at the bottom, he sets his pack down against the back drop and then starts gathering wood for the camp fire. After sufficient wood has been gathered, he picks up his

spear from where it landed and sets out in search of game. It doesn't take him long before he bags another rabbit. Taking it back to camp, he takes out his skinning stone and preps it for the fire.

He sets the readied carcass on some leaves while he gets the fire going. Using the same spell he used before, he soon has the fire going well and then puts the rabbit upon the spit. Sitting there with the waterfall sprinkling into the pond twenty feet away, he listens to the fat from the rabbit snap and crackle as it drips into the fire while it cooks. He feels kind of good. He's getting the hang of this world, magic hasn't been too difficult, at least not the simple spells he's been attempting.

Turning the rabbit occasionally for an even cook, he sits back and just enjoys the peacefulness. The aroma coming off the meat is wonderful. He gets up and walks over to the pond where he washes his hands and face, doing his best to clean up before he eats. The pond is a sparkling blue, fresh and clean. After allowing the water to clear after his cleaning, he takes a good long drink. It's so pure and crisp that he doesn't think there could be anything like it back on Earth.

Night is falling fast now and the rabbit is almost done. James opens his backpack and takes out some of the berries and lays them on a leaf near the backdrop and then goes over to the fire. Taking the rabbit off the spit he settles down against the backdrop and begins to eat it with a gusto only starvation can give you. Between bites of the rabbit, he pops several berries into his mouth. This time he takes his time, savoring each bite, but still finishes it quickly.

Before it grows too dark, he takes the carcass of the rabbit a dozen yards away from the campsite and tosses it off into the forest. He didn't want it close to where he will be sleeping as it might draw animals to his camp in the night. On the way back he gathers more wood for the fire, having no wish to freeze through another night. Keeping a fire going all night will bring him comfort and hopefully safety from wild animals as well.

Stoking up the fire, he settles down to sleep. Lying on his back and wishing for a blanket, he stares up at the trees above. Sleeping near the fire provides him with a sense of security that he lacked the night before. The soft sounds of the little waterfall and the fire crackling and popping gradually lulls him to sleep.

He awakes shivering several times during the night and puts more wood on the fire to keep warm. The coming of the dawn finds him frozen and that his fire has completely gone out. He's chilled to

the bone, teeth chattering and breath misting in the morning air. Needing to get warm, he goes over to the remnants of his fire and stirs the coals, finding a few embers still aglow within the ashes. Putting small twigs and moss on them he encourages a flame and then after adding some of the bigger pieces, soon has a good fire going again.

While he's warming himself by the fire, he looks up through a break in the canopy above at the clouds rolling in. *Great, rain. That's all I need.* He eats the remainder of the berries while he enjoys the warmth of the fire. Once finished with the berries, he puts out the fire and then gathers his things before setting off once more. He leaves the pond and waterfall behind to follow the stream as it makes its way through the trees.

Throughout the morning as he follows the stream, James continues to come across the bushes with the berries. It doesn't take him long to acquire a sufficient quantity to last him for a while. As the day progresses further breaks in the canopy reveals the clouds have continued to roll in and soon, thunder begins to be heard off in the distance. Around midday, he comes across another stream that joins the one he's following. The stream swells with the added water and becomes much wider and deeper.

When the grumbling of his stomach tells him it is lunchtime, he stops and makes a quick camp. After getting a fire going he grabs his spear and wades out into the stream, this time looking for a fish to fry. Using a variation on his hunting spell, James soon has a large fish wriggling impaled upon the end of his spear. Pleased with himself, he brings it back to camp, and in no time has it roasting over the fire.

The forest continuously grows darker and darker as the thunder becomes louder. *Unless I want to walk in a downpour I better find myself some shelter soon.* When the fish is ready James eats it quickly, making sure to leave some for later. He wraps what's left of the fish in a large leaf before putting it in his backpack. Kicking dirt on the fire, he puts it out before setting a quick pace downstream looking for shelter to wait out the storm.

He comes to an area where the trees begin thinning out somewhat and makes out a ridgeline off through the trees to the south, a little over a hundred yards away. He sees what looks like an opening which may be a cave at the base of the ridge.

As he moves toward the promise of shelter, it begins to sprinkle. Hurrying quickly, he rushes through three trees on his way to the

cave, hoping to beat the rain. Just as he enters the clearing before the cave, there's a thunderous crack of lightning and the rain begins pouring in earnest. Feeling relief at finding shelter, he rushes into the opening before the rain has a chance to soak him. Turning about, he looks out of the cave and watches the rain come down in what his grandma always called a gully washer.

The cave is dark but with the intermittent flashes of lightning, he can see that it extends some distance further back in the hill. The foreboding gloom of the cave seems to be shrinking in on him. His imagination begins causing him to start at shadows and soon realizes he'll want a fire before too much longer. The thought of sitting all night in a dark, cold cave is not something he wants to contemplate.

Looking outside at the rain, he realizes that it's pointless to go outside and collect firewood, since it would all be soaked and unusable. *Maybe a spell to make a glowing orb?* It wouldn't give off any heat, but at least the darkness will no longer terrify him. Working out the spell doesn't take very long as it's becoming easier to do. Concentrating he says:

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

With the last word he stretches out his hand and a glowing orb, cool and firm to the touch, forms on his hand. He smiles in satisfaction and places the orb on a nearby stone. Unlike the other spells, after the initial surge of power, he continues to feel a very slight draining of power. *Guess the orb needs a continual source of power, like a light bulb, in order to keep working,* he reasons.

Looking around the cave, he notices many bones lying scattered across the cave floor. *Must be the cave of a predator, or used to be.* Not feeling secure until he makes sure that he is definitely alone in the cave, he picks up the orb and carries it with him as he moves deeper into the cave. The cave as it turns out doesn't extend too much further and he quickly reaches the far end. This area of the cave contains the most bones, and from the looks of it, nothing has been back here for a while.

Feeling better, he goes back to the front of the cave and concentrates on the orb, dimming its light so it's not quite so bright.

Reaching into his backpack, he takes out the fish that was left over from lunch and sits down by the entrance of the cave. Pulling out the book he took with him from the waiting room, he reads more of it as he eats. A lot of what it says makes sense. It isn't a text book about magic just an overview to get you started.

By the time he's done eating it's completely dark outside. Yawning, he realizes just how tired he is. Putting the book back in his backpack, he gets ready to sleep.

One of the things mentioned in the book is that it takes a mage's concentration to keep a spell active. It occurs to him that when he falls asleep, the orb might go out. Not wanting to remain in complete darkness all night he tries to come up with a spell that will enable the orb to continue glowing all night, even while he's asleep. Coming up with the words he concentrates on his desired effect and then casts his spell:

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

With the final word, he again feels the surge of power, but this time it feels as if he's being sucked dry. Unable to stop it, he feels a tremendous amount of power being drawn out of him, the effect of which leaves him weak. Gasping as his knees buckle, dropping him to the floor, he's relieved as the spell finally runs its course. Lying there on the cave floor, with barely the strength to keep his heart beating, he comes to the realization that there may be a limit to what he can do with magic.

He can see the orb on the rock next to him, still shining, unchanged. The constant, minute draining of power he had felt earlier is now gone, and the orb no longer requires his concentration to keep from disappearing. Happy that he managed the spell but not about its effects on him, he realizes he's going to have to be more careful in what he attempts before it kills him.

Crawling over to his backpack, he rests his head on it and passes out.

Awakening in the middle of the night, it takes some time before he becomes aware as to what awakened him. When his eyes finally focus, dread overcomes him as he realizes that he is no longer alone

in the cave. A wolf has entered and is standing not three feet away, sniffing the glowing orb. Visions of Seth run through James' mind. Rather, the pieces of Seth that he had laid in the grave run through his mind. Hoping to scare the wolf away James concentrates and says very softly:

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

With that the orb flashes momentarily into a brilliantly, blinding light. At the same time, James sits up and lets out a savage, primal scream as he waves his arms wildly. The wolf jumps two feet off the ground, turns and races out of the cave with a yelp. That spell, so soon after weakening himself earlier, leaves him light headed and dizzy.

Using his spear to steady himself, he manages to get to his feet and looks out into the night. There in the rain he finds a dozen pair of glowing eyes staring back at him. Using what little strength he has left, he holds his spear aloft and yells at the wolves, but they just continue staring at him.

Now what James? he asks himself as he leans upon the spear for support. *You're in a pickle for sure.* Still feeling drained from the earlier spell, he doesn't feel like he can afford to do much magic. *Can't make myself any weaker or I won't be able to defend myself should that become necessary.* Thinking for a second, he reaches down for a small stone and as he prepares to throw it, says,

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

With the last word he throws the stone at a pair of the eyes and there's a crack in the air as it shoots toward the wolf. A loud thud along with the sound of snapping bones tells the tale and a pair of glowing eyes goes out as the wolf falls over dead. The rest of the pack begins yelping and howling as they turn and race off into the night.

With dots dancing in front of his eyes, James sits down abruptly and rests his head on his knees, panting. *Too much,* he says to himself, *no way can I do any more.* If the wolves come back tonight

he's a dead man for he has nothing left within him. He tries to stay awake but he's just too exhausted. Trusting to fate, he lies down on the floor and quickly passes out. Some time near morning the rain stops and when the first rays of the sun's light enters the cave, the glowing orb vanishes.

A rustling near his head startles him awake and he sits up quickly, fearful that the wolves had returned. He discovers instead, one of the small dogs similar to the one that had made off with his dinner earlier. The dog is looking straight at James, still and not moving. James says, "Boo!" loudly which frightens the dog, causing it to run out of the cave.

His head feels like it's about to crack open and he's shaking a little but he gets to his feet and shoulders his backpack.

Using his spear for support, he steps to the mouth of the cave, looking around for any sign that the wolves are still in the area. It's with much relief that he looks out and finds the clearing before the cave, clear of any wolves. He does however see the wolf he killed last night and the hole in its chest where the stone had struck. To his utter shock, the back half of the wolf had been blown away by the force of the stone. He feels sorry for the wolf even though he knows the wolf, if given a chance, would've had him for a late night snack. Keeping eyes open for any of its friends, he makes his way back down toward the stream and continues to follow it westward once more.

The stream has swollen greatly through the night; the water now rushing pell-mell over the rocks in its bed. He finds more of the berry bushes and picks several handfuls, stashing most of the berries in his backpack, though keeping out a handful to munch on while he walks. His strength slowly begins to return and it's not long before the headache and shaking goes away.

He continues making his way along the streambed all morning. Shortly before noon he comes to a sudden stop and a shiver goes down his spine. For within the forest on his side of the stream, one of the wolves from the night before stands motionless amidst the trees, watching him. He reaches down and picks up some stones, placing them in his pocket, just in case. Looking back over toward where the wolf was standing, he readies a stone to throw, but the wolf is gone.

For the next several hours, he continues catching glimpses of the wolves amidst the trees, pacing him along his side of the stream.

Actually, it's getting to be a rather large stream. Several tributaries have contributed their out flow and now the stream spans twenty feet across, becoming more of a river.

James comes up to another large tributary that crosses his path on its way to join the river. Across the tributary sits a grassy knoll and staring at him from atop it stands a large, lone wolf. Reaching into his pocket for a stone he takes one and cocks his arm back to throw. Just before he launches the stone, the wolf lets out with a spine chilling howl. Several answering howls come from all around him and breaks his concentration, ruining the spell just as he throws the stone. Without the power of the spell behind it, the stone flies wide, landing in a bush several feet wide of the mark.

Wolves burst out from behind the bushes and trees racing toward him growling and snarling. He makes for the river as the wolves close fast. Using his spear as best he can, he swings at the wolves, trying to keep them from catching him before gaining the water. When he reaches the water's edge, he turns to face the oncoming wolves as he slowly backs further out into the water. Swinging the spear in desperation to keep the wolves from getting close, he manages to keep them at bay for the moment. The coldness of the water takes his breath away as he continues backing further into the river.

The cold in his legs and the terror of the wolf pack keep him from being able to formulate any spells. The wolves rush him as he enters the water and he lays about himself with his spear, using it like a quarterstaff. Beginning to pant hard, he connects several times and even manages to stab a few but they are beginning to wear him down. He still has not fully recovered from the night before.

With his footing becoming treacherous as his legs slowly lose feeling due to the coldness of the water, he slips on a loose stone under the water and almost falls. Having to thrust his spear into the riverbed to remain upright he's unable to keep the wolves away.

Seeing its chance, one wolf rushes in and nips him on the leg, tearing a three inch long gash. Blood flows freely from the wound, and James is sure this will soon be his end. He regains his balance and is able to use his spear once again to defend himself as he strikes out at the wolf which bit him, driving it back. But his swings are becoming ever increasingly slower and less powerful, his arms losing the endurance to continue wielding the heavy spear.

A large wolf jumps at him and James strikes with the spear, piercing the wolf's chest. Though dead, the wolf's momentum carries him forward, knocking James over and pinning him under its dead weight. Frantic, he tries to push the wolf off him but it's too heavy, and he is just too weak. He looks up as three wolves move in to finish it. Barely able to keep his head above water, he takes his spear and tries to beat them back but his efforts have minimal effect, only managing to slow their approach.

Thwock!

An arrow flies from the opposite bank and pierces the side of the wolf closest to him, causing it to fall over dead into the water. Looking over his shoulder, James stares with disbelief at a man standing there wielding a bow. The man lets fly another arrow, grazing the side of another wolf that was closing in on James, causing it to yelp and leap back to the shore.

"Come on. Move! Stay there and you're going to die," the stranger yells at James. With renewed strength at the prospect of surviving this ordeal, he manages to get the wolf off him and staggers toward the other shore. Having to use his spear as a crutch due to the wound in his leg, he at last reaches the shore near the man.

Letting fly another arrow, the man puts an arm under James' shoulder and helps him to walk away from the river. James looks at his benefactor and says "Thanks" before collapsing into unconsciousness.

Chapter Three

Waking up disoriented, James initially fails to realize where he is. At first he thinks he's lying abed in his room, coming out of a particularly vivid dream. Then reality hits him and he sits up abruptly. Pain flares in his leg from the sudden movement which only lends credence to the memories of the day before. He's not in his room but in a cabin of some sort. *It wasn't a dream*, he thinks to

himself. Lying back in bed, he finds a position which lessens the pain throbbing in his leg.

Looking around the room, he finds it has very little in the way of furnishings. Simply the bed he's lying in, a night stand and a chest with clothes lying folded across the top. With relief, he sees his spear and backpack resting in the corner near the chest with his clothes.

Lifting the covers, he discovers that someone has removed his clothes and cleaned him up. The leg where the wolf had bit him is now bandaged and throbs whenever he moves it. Not sure how he came to be here, he vaguely remembers someone at the edge of the stream helping him as he fought off the wolves. Or rather, rescuing him when the wolves were set to finish him off.

Through a small window in the far wall, he sees that the daylight is beginning to fade. Through the window comes the sound of wood being split with an axe. A slightly off-key whistling tune accompanies the chopping.

Lying in bed, he listens to the whack, whack, whack of wood being split. Then the chopping stops and he hears footsteps making their way around the cabin. From the other side of his bedroom door comes the sound of what must be the front door opening quickly followed by wood being dumped into a wood box.

There's but a moment of silence before the footsteps resume, only this time they are heading toward the door to his room. He listens with trepidation as they draw closer, and when the footsteps stop just outside the door, he looks with fear to the door's handle and watches as it turns.

The door opens and a man walks through, smiling when he sees James is no longer sleeping. "Finally awake I see," the man says as he pauses in the doorway. "You slept all night and through most of this day. I bet you're hungry. Yes?"

James takes in the man. He's in his mid forties, about six feet tall with brown hair and quite muscular. Nothing fat about him, he's in very good shape. Dressed in what looks like woodsman attire, he has a clean if not stylish appearance. James is soon put at ease by this man's friendly demeanor.

"Hungry?" he replies as his stomach begins to grumble. "That I am. Where am I? And who do I have to thank for my life?"

"As to where you are, you are here, in my cabin," the man replies. "My name is Ceryn and I am the Forest Warden in these

parts. It's lucky I came along when I did. That wolf pack would have had you for dinner for sure."

"Ceryn?" James says hoping he pronounced the name right, "I'm James, and I appreciate you saving me."

"Glad I was there to help," he replies with a grin. "You can rest for a little while longer. Supper's cooking and will be a few more minutes before it's ready. If you have the strength and wish to get dressed, your clothes are over there on the chest. I cleaned them a bit, washed out the worst of it. Strangest clothes I've ever seen." With that Ceryn turns and exits through the door without another word. Soon, the sounds of what James' grandfather always called pattering could be heard coming from the outer room.

Not really having the energy or drive to get up, but not wanting to eat dinner lying naked in bed, James gingerly climbs out of bed and hobbles over to the chest. He finds that his clothes have indeed been cleaned, and begins carefully putting them on though they are still slightly damp.

Once dressed, he looks through his backpack and takes inventory. Everything is there except for the book explaining the workings of magic. He quickly scans the area where his backpack had sat but fails to find it. It occurs to him that he could possibly have lost it during his flight from, and subsequent fight with, the wolves. But that doesn't seem likely as the pack was still closed tight. *Could Ceryn have taken it?* James didn't want to think that of his benefactor, but what did he really know about the man?

Deciding to take things one step at a time, he returns his pack to the corner and takes up the spear. With his leg hurting as it is, he could definitely use it to lean on. Not to mention the feeling of security it gave him to hold a weapon in this unfamiliar situation. Hobbling across the room to the door, he opens it and passes through to the outer room.

There he finds a room three times the size of the one he just left. In the center sits a wooden table with several chairs. Along one wall are several shelves containing plates and other cooking equipment. Setting against another section of the wall is a simple wooden desk atop which lay several papers. An inkwell sits near the stack of papers with a quill lying beside it. Hanging near the desk is the bow that saved his life along with a quiver of arrows. Also hangs a sword nestled in its scabbard and a shield, both of which have the look of having been well used.

Glancing over at the opening of the door, Ceryn continues to prepare what looks like a stew with meat and vegetables as James enters the room. Indicating the table with a nod of his head, he says, "Have a seat. This will need to cook for a little while before it's ready."

Hobbling over to the table, James looks longingly at the stew. The aroma filling the room makes his stomach growl. Taking a seat facing Ceryn he says, "I haven't had a good meal for a while."

Laughing, Ceryn replies, "Whether this will be what you call good or not you'll have to decide." Finishing with the preparations, he places the pot over the fire to finish cooking. He then fills two mugs with liquid from a pitcher and brings them over, handing one to James.

James takes it and sniffs the contents uncertainly.

"It's just ale, lad. You look like you could use some," Ceryn explains. Then he takes a deep drink from his own mug.

Bringing the mug to his mouth, James hesitantly takes a sip. When the liquid hits his tongue, he has to admit it wasn't bad. A little strong for his taste, but not worse than some of the stuff he'd tried over at his friend Dave's place. Looking over to Ceryn, James notices that he's being scrutinized.

"I suppose you have a lot of questions about me?" he asks.

Smiling, Ceryn answers, "Yes, a couple. But your business is just that, your business. You seem like a nice enough lad and you needn't feel obligated to tell me anything more than what you want." Ceryn gets up and walks over to the stew pot to stir it a little. "Can't let it burn on the bottom."

"That's what my grandmother always says too," James responds. Thinking of sitting in his grandmother's kitchen while she cooks makes him a little homesick.

"She must have been a nice woman, a good cook maybe?" asks Ceryn, stirring it a couple more times. Satisfied that it won't burn right away, he places the spoon back on the counter and returns to the table. Grabbing his mug, he downs the rest of it.

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

Hearing his stomach, Ceryn says, "It'll be just a few minutes longer."

"Where am I exactly?" asks James.

“You mean you don’t even know where you are?” queries Ceryn.

“Not really. I’ve been lost for a while,” explains James as he sips more of his ale.

“You are near the Kelewan River, close to the township of Trendle,” explains Ceryn. “The forest I found you in is called The Dark Forest of Kelewan. Nothing really dark about it unless you come here ill prepared. It’s my job to help people in trouble, like yourself, and if need be, get a crew to clear the roads through the forest when the occasional tree falls and blocks the trails.”

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

“About a day and a half’s walk,” he explains. “You will need to rest at least until tomorrow, then I could take you there if you like.”

“I’d like that, yes,” replies James.

Coming to his feet again, Ceryn walks over and inspects the stew, taking a bite with his spoon. Nodding approvingly, he removes the pot from the fire and carries it over to the table. He then crosses over to the shelves and gets down two bowls and spoons. Returning to the table, he hands one of each to James.

Following Ceryn’s lead, James dips his spoon into the pot and proceeds to fill his bowl. The stew has a thick gravy and contains many different vegetables with a little bit of meat. While he fills his bowl, Ceryn fetches a loaf of bread. Using his belt knife, he cuts off two chunks and hands one to James.

James breaks off a piece of the bread and dips it into the stew’s gravy. When the gravy covered bread hits his taste buds, his salivary glands go into overtime. *This tastes great!* he realizes. Taking up his spoon, he eagerly scoops up as much meat and veggies as the utensil can hold. “Oh man,” he mumbles as he begins to chew. The meat is flavorful without being tough and the veggies are soft yet still firm. Eating with gusto, James soon empties his bowl and is scooping a second helping out of the pot.

“Hungry?” laughs Ceryn.

James realizes that he is starting his second bowl while Ceryn still hasn’t yet finished his first. Slightly embarrassed at eating so fast, he replies, “Either I am totally starving or this is the best stew I have ever had!”

Chuckling, Ceryn says, “Maybe it’s a little bit of both. Eat as much as you can hold, you look like you could use it.” Finishing his first bowl, he scoops out his second and cuts off another section of bread for James.

When they finish eating, Ceryn takes the bowls and spoons outside to the river and washes them. Bringing them back inside, he sets them on the shelf, and then places a lid on the stew pot before moving it over onto a side table.

Night has fallen by this time, the only light is that coming from the fire. Ceryn settles into a chair near the fire and pulls out his pipe. Filling it with pipe weed he takes a smoldering stick from the fire and lights it. Leaning back in his chair he takes a big puff and smiles contentedly.

James pulls a chair near the fire and sits quietly watching the flames dance as they consume the wood. Though thoughts of the past two days occupy his mind, he is having a hard time keeping his eyes open. Repeatedly, his head droops down to his chest only to be suddenly jerked back up.

Noticing his problem, Ceryn offers him the bed he awoke in earlier, an offer James is no way going to refuse. After thanking his host, he uses his spear again as a crutch and makes his way to the back room. Climbing into bed, he thinks to himself, *Lucky to have found Ceryn. Not many would have taken a stranger into their home and feed them. I owe him a lot.* A few cursory thoughts about what the next day may hold are all that he is allowed before sleep takes him.

Thud!!!

In the darkness of night, James is startled awake by the sound of the door slamming forcefully against the wall. Sitting bolt upright, he turns bleary eyes toward the doorway. Three men armed with swords wearing worn, mismatched armor enter and do a quick look around. Upon seeing James, one of them hollers out the door, “There’s another one in here, a lad hiding in the bed. Ceryn lied!”

From outside, James hears the reply, “Bring him out, we’ll take care of both of ‘em.”

One of the men comes to the bed and takes him roughly by the arm, hauling him to his feet. Propelling him through the door with a shove, James stumbles out into the front room, his injured leg protesting with throbbing pain. Another rough shoves from behind

and he's pushed toward the door leading outside. Despite the pain in his leg, he somehow makes it through the doorway without falling.

Not far from the doorway are two more men with drawn swords standing around a bound body on the ground. As James is pushed forward, he discovers that the bound body is Ceryn. He's relieved to see Ceryn turn his head and glance silently at him. At least the Forest Warden is still conscious and alert. One of the men who took him from the cabin pulls his arms behind him where they are bound painfully tight. Once his hands are secured, he's pushed to the ground next to Ceryn.

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

James glances up at the man and nods.

Seeing that James is going to cooperate, the guard grunts and then turns to his partner.

With their captor's attention for the moment focused elsewhere, he moves closer to Ceryn and whispers, "Who are these guys?"

"Outlaws, they're mad because I brought one of them in and was executed," Ceryn replies. "The guy raped and killed two women who were traveling through here a while back."

"What are they going to do with us?" asks James nervously.

"They'll probably torture and kill me. You..." Ceryn pauses as one of the guards glances in their direction. When the guard again focuses his attention elsewhere, he continues. "You they may kill or they may take you south and sell you to the slavers. Sorry kid."

An outlaw a little larger than the rest bearing a tattoo of a snake on his left arm storms over to Ceryn and kicks him in the side. "I told you to be quiet!" he yells. "Another word and I'll cut out your tongue." To emphasize his point he kicks Ceryn hard in the side twice more before walking off.

Two outlaws continue to stand guard over James and Ceryn with their swords drawn and ready. James scoots a little closer to Ceryn and in a barely audible whisper asks "Are you ok?"

A slight nod of Ceryn's head gives the affirmative.

"I'm going to try and loosen your bonds," he says.

Another nod, Ceryn understands.

Trying to concentrate James whispers:

***Ropes that bind me and you
Come apart in pieces two.***

James feels a slackening in the ropes' tension as the fibers part. Ceryn turns his head toward James, giving him a surprised look when he feels his bonds snap in two.

Whispering so only Ceryn will hear him, he says, "Now for the outlaws, be ready." Another nod from Ceryn, he understands.

Looking around he searches for something that can be used to hurt, maybe even kill the outlaws. His gaze comes to rest on the fire and an idea takes shape. Speaking softly, he begins to cast his spell.

Fire that's hot

"Hey the boss said no talking," one of the guards says to James. Ignoring him, James continues,

Fire that's bright,

"I said to shut up or I'll shut you up," exclaims the guard one more time.

Send balls of flame

Moving closer to James the outlaw says, "Ok, you asked for it" Reaching his side, the guard gets set to kick him hard in the head.

Before the guard can complete the maneuver, James looks him in the eye and shouts the rest of the spell:

To burn outlaws this night!

At the final utterance of the spell, magic streams from him as balls of flame explode outward from the fire. Sailing through the air, they begin striking each of the outlaws, igniting their clothes. The spell uses far too much of his unreplenished reserves, causing him to black out.

Ceryn sees James slump into unconsciousness but can't take the time to determine if he's okay. When the balls of flame erupt out of the fire, he immediately rolls and trips one of the guards. Knocking him to the ground, he quickly jumps on top of him avoiding the fire beginning to consume the guard's clothes. Wresting the sword out of the guard's hands, Ceryn upends it and plunges it through the man's chest, pinning him to the ground.

Getting to his feet quickly, he places a foot upon the dead outlaw's chest and pulls the sword free. A nearby guard cries out as his hair ignites and goes up in flames. Moving toward him, Ceryn strikes out with his sword and the outlaw's head goes flying. The head hits the ground and rolls like a flaming ball until it comes to a sizzling stop.

Screams fill the night, both of terror and anger. Another of the outlaws is lying motionless on the ground as he burns. Still another is running through the forest, a pillar of flame in the darkness, the man's screams echoing through the night. Looking around, Ceryn sees no sign of the leader and the remaining two.

Returning to where James lies on the ground, he finds him to still be breathing but is unable to wake him. Using one hand, he takes James by the shirt and begins dragging him toward the cabin. In his other he continues to hold the bloody sword which has already taken out two of the outlaws. He doesn't get very far before the man with the tattoo appears from the direction of the river, dripping with water. Behind him walk the remaining two outlaws.

"Ceryn," he shouts, "I'm going to gut you and let the animals eat your entrails while you're still alive to enjoy it. And then I'll cut the heart out of that demon damned mage." Covered in burns, clothing all charred, the three outlaws make a frightening sight. The tattooed man comes straight for Ceryn while the other two move to flank him.

Knowing they'll follow him and ignore James as long as he's unconscious, Ceryn leaves him on the ground and approaches the outlaws with sword at the ready. Three to one would be bad odds in a normal situation but the outlaws, having just suffered bad burns, will be slowed by the pain.

Ceryn feints at the one on the right; out of the corner of his eye he sees the one on the left coming in to his exposed flank. When the one on the left slices toward Ceryn's head, Ceryn drops to the ground and rolls toward him, striking a serious blow to the outlaw's thigh, opening an artery. Dropping to the ground, the outlaw gives out with a cry of pain as blood rapidly flows from the wound. With him out of the battle, Ceryn turns his attention to the other two.

Fanning out, the leader and the last outlaw come at him. The leader comes in with a swift thrust aimed at Ceryn's chest which is blocked, then is forced to jump back when Ceryn counter attacks with a slice to the leader's leg. Unable to avoid, Ceryn's sword opens up a shallow cut on his upper thigh.

Seeing an opening created by Ceryn's attack on the leader, the remaining henchman leaps in and thrusts. Ceryn twists just in time and manages to receive only a small cut along his shoulder. Ignoring the pain, he feints at the leader and then comes back with a backhanded slice that causes the henchman to stumble backward and trip over the other outlaw who has bled to death on the ground.

Seeing his chance, Ceryn presses the leader, who is becoming weakened from the loss of blood and the trauma of all the burns. Slash, block. Block, slash. He needs to finish the leader before the remaining henchman regains his feet and rejoins the battle.

Ceryn slices at the leader's head, at the arm, the head, back and forth. The leader is successfully blocking each of Ceryn's maneuvers. "Ceryn, you cannot win. I am the better swordsman!" exclaims the leader. Undaunted by the taunts, Ceryn doubles his efforts.

Having regained his feet, the henchman moves to rejoin the battle. Ceryn sees him approaching and with a burst of speed and skill, continues his attacks upon the leader. The leader, with the continuing loss of blood from the wound in his thigh, is weakened and is beginning to show signs of slowing.

The henchman finally rejoins the battle and presses Ceryn hard, giving the leader time to drop out of the battle for a moment to catch his breath. Hack, hack, slash, showing no sign of skill, simply trying to bull through Ceryn's defense, the henchman hammers away. Using skill acquired through dozens of conflicts, Ceryn successfully blocks each of the attacks, and begins to understand the rhythm of the attacks. Hack, hack, slash. Hack, hack, slash. Timing it just right, he blocks the two hacks and when the henchman comes in with the slash, Ceryn drops under the incoming blade and thrusts with his own sword, taking the outlaw upward through the chest. Ceryn kicks out with his foot to dislodge the outlaw from his blade and turns to find the leader coming straight for him, a wild look in his eyes.

With a primal scream the leader charges, holding his sword in both hands. Bringing down the blade with all his strength, he attempts to hew Ceryn in half. Striking the leader's sword, Ceryn succeeds in deflecting it away, throwing the leader off balance. Ceryn then kicks out with his foot and connects with the leader's knee. With satisfaction, he hears the knee joint snap. Off balance and with knee broken, the leader cries out in pain as he twists and drops face first to the ground.

Moving to finish it, Ceryn slices through the leader's back and severs the spine. Lying on the ground paralyzed, the leader stares with hate filled eyes at Ceryn as the blood flowing out of him first brings unconsciousness, then death.

Panting, tired, Ceryn surveys the battlefield and finds no one else alive. He tosses the sword down and walks over to James. Using the last of his strength, he drags James into the cabin and lays him upon the bed. Collapsing next to James, he passes out.

Waking up the next morning, James finds Ceryn next to him on the bed. Checking to make sure the Forest Warden is still alive, he finds that most of the blood staining Ceryn's clothes is not his own. Even though he has a head that feels like it's being used as an anvil, he manages to rise and investigate the situation outside.

In front of the cabin he finds a scene of carnage. Bodies litter the ground and blood is everywhere. His respect for the swordsmanship of Ceryn is high. He moves from one outlaw to the next. Not finding any that still lives, he returns to the cabin and builds a fire in the fireplace. Not with magic, he can't even think of magic without his head hurting. The spell with the fire last night had been much too draining. In fact it had almost killed him. He determines to refrain from using magic for the time being, at least until he regains some of his strength.

He finally gets a good fire going and then hangs the pot of stew from last night over the flames to warm it up. Taking an empty jug, he hobbles with the aid of his spear out to the river and fills the jug with fresh water before bringing it back inside. He then fills a bowl with water and locates a somewhat clean cloth. Taking them into the bedroom he starts cleaning the blood off of Ceryn.

Not long after he begins, Ceryn awakens. Grabbing the cloth out of James' hand he says, "I can take care of this myself, I'm not that weak."

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

"I think we both deserve credit with still being alive," Ceryn says as he moves to sit on the edge of the bed. "You have many surprises about you, yes?" Coming to his feet, he heads for the door.

"I suppose I do," replies James as he accompanies Ceryn out to the river. His leg still hurts badly, but with the aid of the spear, he's able to make it without fear of making it worse. Changing the subject, James asks, "Who were those guys last night anyway?"

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

“Uh, thanks, but I wouldn’t feel right about taking all of it,” explains James.

“Take it,” he insists. “If you don’t, it’ll just get put in some fat administrator’s purse. I’m sure you could use it.” After removing all traces of blood from his exposed skin, he gets up and heads back toward the cabin. Once inside, he heads over to the cook pot where he stirs it and pronounces it ready. Removing it from the fire, he carries it over to the table.

James takes the bowls and spoons from the shelf plus a couple of mugs and sets them on the table. While he serves the stew, Ceryn pours the ale and they set to eating.

After Ceryn finishes his first bowl, he looks at James and asks, “So, you’re a mage eh?”

“In a matter of speaking, I guess you could call me that,” James replies.

“That was some spell you cast, with the balls of fire, quick thinking. You would be a good one to have on your side in a fight,” Ceryn says approvingly.

“Not too much good if I pass out before it’s all over,” James replies. He feels slightly ashamed at his weakness of the night before. He feels like he let Ceryn down when he needed him most.

“Now don’t you belittle what you did last night. What you did turned the tide in our favor and without it, we most likely would be dead or wishing we were right now.” Ceryn scoops out the rest of the stew into his bowl and continues to eat.

James thinks about what Ceryn had said, admitting to himself that there could be some merit to it. Feeling slightly better, he downs the rest of his ale and lets out a loud belch.

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

It doesn’t take long before they’re finished eating. Ceryn looks at James and says, “Just rest here and I’ll get my horse hitched to the wagon and bring it around front. We need to bring in the bodies if you’re to receive the reward.” Heading out the door, he turns and goes around the cabin to the corral behind the house. In a few

minutes he has his horse hitched to the wagon and is bringing it around to the front.

With a strength belying his wounds, one by one he gathers all the bodies of the outlaws and lays them within the wagon. After placing the last dead outlaw in the wagon, he covers them with a tarp and returns back inside telling James to gather his things, that it's time to leave.

James returns to the back bedroom to gather his belongings, then carries them out to the wagon. Remembering the missing book he asks Ceryn, "You didn't happen to see a book lying on the ground back where you rescued me from the wolves did you?"

"No, but I wasn't looking for one either," he replies. "I was more interested in saving your life. Why? Was it important?"

"Yeah, it was," James replies.

"I doubt if we could find it now," he says. "If you lost it during the last fight with the wolves, then it's in the river and no telling where it would be now."

Handing his stuff up to him, James climbs up and takes his seat next to Ceryn. Once seated he says, "I guess you're right." He feels bad about losing the book, but realizes there is little that can be done about it now. No sense bemoaning what can't be changed.

With a flick of the reins, Ceryn gets the horse moving and they pull out onto the dirt lane leading from his cabin. After a short ways it meets the main road which will take them on into Trendle.

Not very far from where they turned onto the road they come across the outlaws' horses tied in a picket. Stopping for only a short time, Ceryn gathers the horses and ties them in a long line behind the wagon. Once that's done, he returns to his seat and takes the reins, getting the wagon moving once more.

For a time they remain quiet as James takes in the beauty of the area. To his right is the rolling Kelewan River, well over fifty feet across and flowing smoothly. The sun shining through the trees warms the summer day, bringing out the birds in a multitudinous chorus.

"How far is Trendle?" asks James.

"About a day's ride," replies Ceryn. "We should be there by nightfall."

Glancing over at James, he adds, "I probably should warn you that mages are not well thought of in these parts. Some bad things happened a while ago and, well, let's just say that the people haven't forgotten. They don't much trust strangers at all, really. It

takes them a while to warm up to anyone. They're good people, just wary."

"I can understand that," says James. "I'll try not to give them reason to distrust me."

"There's a good family that I know who has a farm just outside of town. If you like I could take you there and see if they'll let you stay with them while you're recuperating."

"I'd like that," replies James. "I'm usually a pretty quiet person and try not to be a bother to anyone."

"I noticed that about you," agrees Ceryn. "After we drop off the bodies at the Town Hall and talk to the mayor, we'll head out there."

Nodding, he agrees to the plan. "How much of a reward is there for Garrett and his band," he inquires.

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

Eleven hundred gold pieces and a horse! James thinks to himself excitedly. *My situation is getting better and better.*

"I don't know too much about horses," James admits.

"Don't worry, I'll pick one out for you. One that's not too temperamental," offers Ceryn.

"Thanks, I would appreciate that," James replies.

For the rest of the trip, they ride in silence. James dozes on and off, still not completely over the previous day's exertions and last night's battle. When he finally wakes up, Ceryn directs his attention ahead down the road. Nestled in among the trees along this side of the river are several wooden buildings. Ceryn nods when he looks questioningly at him. Trendle.

Chapter Four

As they begin passing through the outlying area of Trendle, the countryside begins changing from a wooded area to tilled lands with crops growing tall in the summer sun. Throughout the various fields farmers can be seen working their crops. Some pause and take notice of Ceryn as they pass and holler a greeting. He just smiles and waves back. If they are close enough he might offer a few words.

“You seem to be popular around here,” observes James.

“Oh, I’ve been the Warden in these parts for a little over a score and a half of years,” he replies. “I know just about everybody within fifty miles.”

Just then a small girl runs toward them across one of the fields. Upon seeing her approaching, Ceryn slows the wagon, brings it to a halt and waits. When she reaches the side of the wagon, she says “My daddy was wonderin’ if you’d be stopping by while you’re in town?” With dirt streaks on her face and a smile that would brighten even the darkest day, she waits for a response.

Returning her smile Ceryn replies, “Tell your daddy I’ll be along after dark, I have business in town I need to see to first. Also, tell him I’ll be bringing someone along with me.”

“Ok,” she replies. She glances at James and gives him a friendly smile before running off across the field to where a group of farmers are hard at work. The men are using scythes to cut the stalks of grain. Ceryn has the wagon moving again by the time she reaches the farmers. One man leans down to hear what she says and then waves to Ceryn. James sees him say something to the girl and then watches as she heads off at a run toward the farmhouse in the distance.

“That’s Elizabeth, the daughter of the family I mentioned earlier. She’s going to grow up to break some man’s heart someday.” Ceryn explains. “Her father’s name is Corbin. His family has been working these fields for over three generations. Good, solid people they are.”

Coming to the town proper, James discovers Trendle not to be what one would call a major metropolis. Rather it was a small farming community with a couple multi-storied buildings near the center of town. As the townsfolk notice Ceryn approaching down the road, many pause to wave a greeting while others come over to say hello. “What brings you into town, Ceryn” says one old timer as he approaches their wagon.

“You can tell everyone that Garrett the Snake is no longer a threat,” he replies while still rolling on down the street.

One man comes along behind the wagon and lifts up the tarp, “Looks like you got the whole bunch of them. What happened?”

“Can’t talk now, have to take ‘em to the mayor,” he says. “I’ll be by the Squawking Goose later on and I’ll tell the story then.” As he continued on his way, people begin gathering in groups to share the latest gossip about Garret the Snake.

As they trundle their way through town, James begins noticing how the townsfolk stare at him. Not in an unfriendly way, more like he’s a curiosity. “Why are they staring at me Ceryn?” James finally asks.

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

“Great,” James exclaims, feeling uncomfortable with all this attention as they continue rolling on through town.

Someone must have run ahead to let the mayor know that Ceryn was coming, for a man dressed in attire finer than anything anyone else has been wearing thus far, stood waiting for them at the top of the stairs of the largest building in town. Several others are also standing around the outside of the building, all looking in their direction as they approach the town hall. Seeing the man waiting for them Ceryn says to James, “That’s the mayor. He’s an honest man but at times can be a bit stubborn and headstrong,” As they draw near, the mayor descends the steps to meet them.

Coming to a stop before the steps, Ceryn waves a greeting to the mayor. The mayor returns the salutation, “What are you doing in Trendle, Ceryn? Got too lonely out there with just yourself and the squirrels?”

Laughing, Ceryn replies, “No, John. Actually we have business with you.” Climbing down from the wagon, Ceryn gestures the mayor closer to the wagon. Flipping back the blood stained tarp, he shows the mayor the corpses. Grabbing the arm of one, he turns it to exhibit the snake tattoo.

“So, Garrett the Snake is dead, eh? You do it all by yourself?” the mayor asks, looking approvingly at Ceryn.

“No, had the help of James here,” he says as he pats James on the back, “Without his help, I’d be dead right now or wishing to god I was.”

Looking appraisingly at James, the mayor says, “You know there’s a bounty on their heads? Looks like you got Garrett and six of his henchmen.” Turning once again to Ceryn he gestures to the long line of horses tied to the rear of the wagon and asks, “Are these their horses too?”

Ceryn nods affirmatively, “Yes they are. I would like you to give the whole bounty to James here, I owe him my life. The horses are the town’s, according to our agreement, except one that James will take for his own.” Walking back down the line of horses, Ceryn unties one from the line, a brown stallion with white patches, and leads it to a hitching post near the stairs. “This one will be yours James,” Ceryn tells him as he secures the horse to the hitching post.

James leans heavily on his spear as he dismounts from the wagon then goes over to the horse and strokes its neck, delighted with the choice that Ceryn has made.

“As you wish, Ceryn” says the mayor. “Come inside and we’ll get this settled.” Hollering over at a couple of men, the mayor says, “Marin, Josh. Take the wagon around back and unload the bodies. Put the horses in the stable.” Confident that his orders are being carried out, he turns and leads Ceryn and James up the steps. Entering through the door, they cross a large open room before ascending another flight of steps to the second floor. At the top is a hallway that runs the length of the building, ending at a set of double doors. The mayor leads them to the double doors, opens them and then precedes them into his office.

The office is officially decorated. A large desk with a chair dominates the room, before which several comfortable chairs are positioned for visitors. One wall has several shelves containing dozens of large, expensive looking books, along with another having expensive looking knick knacks.

Sitting down at his desk, the mayor pulls out a piece of paper, vellum really, and dips one of his quills into an inkwell as he proceeds to write. With very nice handwriting, he writes out a payment voucher that James can take over to the local bank to get his reward. It’s for eleven hundred gold pieces, just like Ceryn had thought.

Handing the paper to James he says, “Son, you’ve done this town and this area a service that’s needed doing for some time.

Take this and our gratitude for a job well done.” Standing up, the mayor extends his hand toward James who quickly shakes it before taking the reward voucher.

“Now Ceryn, how long do you plan to be in town?” asks the mayor.

“I’ll be heading out in the morning,” replied Ceryn as he comes to his feet. “First I want to take James over to Corbin’s and see if he’ll let him recuperate there awhile. He needs a place to hole up while his leg heals.”

“I do hope it’s not too bad?” the mayor questions. When James shakes his head negatively, he adds, “Good, good.” Coming around the desk, the mayor says to James, “Hope you enjoy your stay here.”

“It seems a very nice town sir,” replies James, working with the spear to come to his feet.

Turning to Ceryn, the mayor claps him on the back and walks with him and James to the door of his office. “Going to be at the Squawking Goose later on?” asks the mayor.

“After a while. I told some of the townspeople that I would be there to let them know what happened,” replies Ceryn. “And maybe squash any wild rumors that I am sure are already making the rounds about James.”

“Most likely,” laughs the mayor, “I’ll see you there if I can get away.”

Laughing, Ceryn says “I hope so.” He indicates to James that it’s time to leave and that he should precede him out.

Once they leave the office and make their way outside the building, James asks Ceryn, “He doesn’t seem too busy, why wouldn’t he be able to get away?”

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

They find Ceryn’s wagon out front, the bodies of the dead outlaws having already been removed and most of the blood stains rinsed out. Ceryn unties James’ horse from the hitching post and then secures its tether to the back of the wagon. Meanwhile, James works his way up onto the wagon seat and waits for Ceryn.

Climbing up to take his seat on the wagon, Ceryn grabs the reins and flicks them to get the horse moving. Turning the wagon back

around the way they came, he heads through town on the way back to Corbin's farm.

The sun is almost down to the horizon by this time and the streets are beginning to empty as everyone has either gone home or is heading there for dinner. A few lone people walk the streets, stragglers from the marketplace or shopkeepers on their way home after closing for the day.

Several wave a hello to Ceryn, or call out a greeting. Ceryn answers back in his usual cheerful manner. They leave the town behind them and drive down the road a ways. The sun is just dipping below the horizon when they pull onto the dirt lane leading toward Corbin's home.

They haven't made it far down the lane when two dogs come running down the drive, barking with tails a wagging, greeting the new arrivals. James sees the door to the home open and two little girls emerge and begin running down to greet them. One of them is Elizabeth, whom he recognizes from their meeting on the road. The other can only be her sister, a younger version of Elizabeth. A shout from within stops them a few feet from the door.

"Ceryn, Ceryn!" the girls holler as the wagon rolls closer. The two dogs race in circles around the wagon, barking and jumping. In the doorway stands a man with the look of having been working in the fields all day. James figures it to be their father, Corbin.

"Good evening master farmer," Ceryn greets with a slight nod of his head as he stops the wagon in front of the house.

"Master farmer indeed," snorts Corbin, then a smile breaks across his face. "Ceryn, it's good to see you again. I hear you brought in some outlaws?" To the dogs he yells, "Cyne, Tor, quiet!" The dogs cease their barking and confine their racing about to the space between the wagon and the house.

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

Nodding approvingly to James, Corbin says, "Any friend of yours is welcome in my home. Won't you both come in?"

James starts to get down off the wagon when the dogs come and jump in friendly greeting up the side of the wagon at him. "Down, boys!" Corbin yells. The dogs back off and give him room to come down off the wagon. Corbin notices how he's using his spear for support and is favoring the leg where the wolf bit him. "You alright?" he asks as James comes around the wagon.

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

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

"Devin!" Corbin turns his head and hollers back into the house. A lad of about fourteen emerges at his father's call. "Take Ceryn's wagon and the horses and see to their care." The lad nods and takes the horse's reins as he leads Ceryn's wagon around back.

Coming into the house James finds a homey, well cared for country home. A woman is in the kitchen area, working on dinner, "That's my wife Mary," says Corbin to James. "Have a seat at the table, dinner should be ready shortly."

James takes a seat, and the girls each sit on either side of him. Ceryn just smiles.

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

"What?" he replies, as he takes his place at the head of the table.

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

"I would help out where I could," offers James, "I could even pay some to help if you wanted."

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

"Yes sir, we do." James says, giving his agreement.

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

"It's coming now," Mary says as she brings in a platter loaded with roasted chicken and accompanying vegetables over to the table. Once the platter is on the table, she turns to Corbin and says, "If you holler like that at me again, master farmer, you can go eat out with the hogs for all I care." They exchange a brief glare before she returns to the kitchen. In spite of the bickering, James gets the feeling that they really care for each other.

About this time, Devin returns from taking care of the horses and Ceryn's wagon. He takes his seat at the table, opposite James.

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

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

"That's okay," James assures her father. Turning to Cyanna he says, "I'm from a small town like this one that's far, far away." He gestures toward his clothes, "And this is what we wear where I come from."

"Do you miss it?" Cyanna asks. She casts a quick glance at her father, who doesn't say anything about her questions since it doesn't seem to be bothering James.

"A little, you always miss your home," replies James wistfully.

As Mary places the last of the food on the table, she sits down and Corbin announces, "Enough questions, let's eat."

Baked chicken, some vegetable, and bread. Simple, as Corbin had said, but very good and filling.

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

During the tale, James is startled when his leg is unexpectedly thumped. The dogs had taken position beneath the table, and James notices that Corbin and his family toss the bones down there to them. The dogs spend the meal happily, and noisily, gnawing on the bones. James even caught Cyanna magnanimously sharing a few of her vegetables with them as well.

When dinner concludes and everyone has eaten their fill, the men retire to the living room for a smoke and a cup of ale. Ceryn comes over to James and takes his leave. "I'm heading down to the Squawking Goose," he explains. "I promised to tell the story of the bandit attack. You'll be fine here. Corbin's a good man, if a bit grumpy at times."

"I heard that," says Corbin grumpily.

"Of course you did, I said it for your benefit." Smiling, Ceryn continues, "If I don't see you when I get back, take care." With that he extends his hand and James shakes it.

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

“I’d say we are even. I saved your life, and now you’ve saved mine.” Ceryn says goodbye to Corbin and his family and then heads out the door to the stables, getting his horse ready to ride into town.

They show James to his room where he finds his backpack and spear resting in a corner. Devin must have put them there when he took care of the wagon. The room is rather small. James sits on the edge of the bed and finds it to be somewhat soft and comfortable. The furnishings are sparse, with but a bed, nightstand, and a squat three legged stool. There is also a small chest in which to store clothes positioned at the foot of the bed. James lies down on the bed and relaxes. A window above his head allows a soft breeze to waft in and soon lulls him to sleep.

Long before he has any desire to shed the veil of sleep, an annoying rooster stations itself under his window and begins crowing, making a general nuisance of itself. The insistent crowing prevents him from being able to fall back to sleep. Every time he was about to slip away again, the rooster would crow, startling him back to consciousness.

Sighing, he realizes that further sleep is simply impossible with that racket going on outside. He lays there for some time hoping the rooster would stop, but the crowing seems to go on and on. Exasperated, he sits up on the edge of the bed. That’s when he realizes that he had slept in his clothes. Feeling better for the full night’s sleep, but wishing the rooster had picked a spot further removed from his window to crow so he could have slept longer, he gets out of bed and makes his way over to the window. Looking down he finds a little rooster standing beneath his window. It cocks its head to one side and looks up at James out of one eye as if to say ‘Yes? You want something?’

“Shoo!” James exclaims.

As if in spite, the rooster crows one last time before walking away.

The world outside the window was the beginnings of a beautiful summer day. The sun was already well over the horizon and he could see Corbin and Devin out in the nearby field already hard at work. From somewhere the faint odor of breakfast reaches him and his stomach growls. Discovering that he is starving, James makes his way out of his room to the front area of the house.

There he finds Mary sitting at the table where they ate dinner the night before shelling peas. She glances up as he emerges from his room. "Feeling better?" she asked.

About to answer, he was forced to wait as a yawn came over him. "A little," he replied. Indeed, his leg throbbed, but not to nearly the degree it had last night. It must be on the mend.

"We thought it best not to wake you," she explains. "Ceryn came by earlier and picked up his wagon. He left for his place an hour ago." Picking up another pod, she cracks it open and empties the peas contained within into a bowl already half filled with the round objects. "Corbin and Devin are out in the fields, as is Elizabeth. Cyanna is around here somewhere. Are you hungry?"

The growl from his stomach is all the answer she needs. Smiling, she gets up and says, "I know how to fix that." She taps the chair next to her and says, "Sit down and I'll bring you something." She puts the empty pod on the discard pile before heading into the kitchen only to return a short time later with a plate full of biscuits and a small jar of jam. She places the plate in front of him and then returns to the kitchen, this time emerging with a skillet containing leftover eggs and potatoes from breakfast. She scraps all the rest of it onto his plate as she says, "The eggs may be a bit cool, they've been done for a while."

Cool though the eggs may be, they are very good. He puts a hearty helping of jam on his biscuit and takes a bite. The taste brings back the memories of his grandmother's biscuits that he had had just a few days before.

"Good breakfast, it reminds me of home," says James between bites.

Sitting back down to her peas she smiles at the compliment. "Ceryn says he found you lost in the woods, almost ready to be killed by a pack of wolves?"

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

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

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

"Poor boy. Are you going to head for home when your leg gets better?" asks Mary.

“I intend to, but I may stay around here at least for a while.” Finishing the last of the breakfast, he sits back and watches her shell peas, she has a large pile of them to shell. “If you like, I could help you with that,” he offers. “I used to help my grandmother when I was back home.”

Getting up, she takes the dirty plates back to the kitchen and returns with a bowl. Placing the bowl in front of him, she divides the pile of peas, giving herself the larger portion, and then they begin shelling in earnest. He feels good about his progress, his bowl fills at a steady pace and soon his hands are shelling like an expert. He’s worked through almost half his pile when Cyanna comes in with the dogs trotting beside her. Seeing James shelling peas with her mom, she comes over and sits in the chair next to him. The dogs take up position on the floor beneath the table.

Mary kicks at the dogs and says, “Outside you two!” The dogs get up and run back outside. “They’d stay in here all day if I let them,” she explains as the dogs leave through the kitchen door.

“Would you like to go see the pond out back?” Cyanna asks. “It’s got lots of ducks in it.”

James looks at Mary and she nods and smiles “Don’t be too long you two, lunch will be ready in an hour or so. Thanks for your help James,” she says with gratitude.

Grabbing James’ hand, Cyanna pulls him toward the door. Unable to go as fast as she wants due to his leg, she keeps encouraging him to hurry up, that the ducks will all be gone before they even get there. Once they’re out the front door, the dogs see them and run over, joining them on their walk.

On the way she gives him the grand tour of all the different things on their farm. She points out the chicken house and the dog houses, all the things a little girl is interested in.

They continue on a little farther and soon he spies the pond with the ducks. He agrees with her that there are a lot of ducks out there. He can see several different species, none exactly matching any he’s ever seen back home. But ducks are ducks and finding a good spot to sit, they relax and simply enjoy watching them.

“When I was little,” he tells Cyanna, “my father would take me camping in the mountains near where I grew up. We would hike a long ways through the mountains, sometimes taking as much as two days to get there. Often we would camp near a lake and it always felt like we were the first people to have ever been there. Many

times we would watch the geese as they came in to rest on their trip south.”

“Where is your father now?” she asks him.

“Dead,” replies James. “He’s been gone for awhile now.”

“That’s sad,” she says.

“Sometimes I really miss him,” he admits. “But he’s never really gone, not as long as I keep him alive in my memories.”

“Mama and papa are never going to die, they said so,” insists Cyanna.

James smiles at her innocence, “That would be good.”

“And I’m never going to leave them, ever,” she asserts.

“Later on you may change your mind,” replies James. “Just enjoy the time you have with them now.” Enjoying the peace and quiet, he lays back and watches the clouds go by. Cyanna lays her head next to James’ and they spend the next over an hour on their backs, finding different shapes in the sky.

Their cloud watching is eventually interrupted when Cyanna’s mother calls them in for lunch. James felt it was too soon for lunch, but then realizes that the family had eaten much earlier than he had. Not really hungry, James allows Cyanna to help him to his feet and back to the farmhouse. The smell of fresh baked bread reaches them long before they near the house.

Corbin and Devin are already there, washing up at the well outside the house. As James and Cyanna approach, a rider comes at a gallop up the lane toward Corbin.

“Corbin!” the rider hollers as he reins in his horse.

“What’s the good word Lor,” Corbin replies, drying his hands on a towel.

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

Looking concerned, Corbin asks, “What’s it all about Lor?”

“He didn’t say, only said to make sure I notified all the members and to do it fast,” he replies.

“Tell the mayor I’ll be there,” he says.

“I will,” responds Lor. He gives Corbin a nod and then turns his horse back toward the lane. “I’ll see you tonight.” With that he prods his horse into a gallop and is off.

Glancing at James, Corbin says “If the mayor is sending Lor to all the council members for an emergency meeting, there must be bad trouble afoot.”

“What do you mean?” asks James.

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

Nodding, Devin goes into the house with Cyanna to tell their mother what Lor had said. “You’d better stay here too,” Corbin tells James.

“I understand,” he replies. Turning toward the house, they both go in and have lunch.

After lunch, Corbin rides into town and life at the farm continues. Devin and Elizabeth go out to the south field while James helps Mary with additional chores around the house that his leg will allow him to do.

Late afternoon rolls around and Mary begins the preparations for dinner, sending him out to the well to bring in water. Grabbing a bucket, James limps out the door and to the well. As he’s filling the bucket, Devin and Elizabeth appear, returning from the fields. James can see they’re tired and looking pretty hot, so he fills the wash basin next to the well for them.

“Thanks James,” Elizabeth says as she approaches, giving him a warm smile. Devin doesn’t say much of anything, simply goes over to the basin and proceeds to wash off the dirt and grime from his face and hands. James then refills the bucket with more water and returns to the house, leaving them to finish.

Giving the water filled bucket to Mary, James then proceeds to set the table. Once he’s done with that, Mary thanks him for his help and suggests he rests until dinner. “It will take a few more minutes longer before dinner will be ready,” she tells him. “We wouldn’t want you to overexert your leg.” The stew simmering on the stove fills the entire house with a mouthwatering aroma. The bread that was baking earlier in the day has cooled and is already on the table, ready for dinner.

With his leg hurting the way it is, he takes his seat at the table to await dinner.

When the stew is ready, Mary brings it over to the table, calling everyone else to the table.

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

Spooning stew into Cyanna's bowl, Mary responds "Your papa said not to hold dinner for him, that he most likely wouldn't be home till after dark."

Turning her attention to her son Devin, she says, "Devin, would you please slice the bread for everyone?"

Nodding his head, Devin takes the knife and slices off pieces of bread, passing them around.

Bread and stew seem to be the mainstay of meals in these parts; first Ceryn, now Mary. Of course Mary's is by far the superior of the two. Still, it tastes good and that's all that really matters to James.

Near the end of the meal they hear a horse approaching down the lane and Cyanna bolts out of her seat and goes to the window to look outside. "It's Papa!" she squeals in delight, as she runs to the door and goes outside. They hear the dogs barking their greeting.

Shortly, Corbin and his daughter come in together, closing the front door, this time keeping the dogs out. By the look on Corbin's face, James figures that whatever the meeting had been about, it wasn't good.

"Devin," Corbin says to his son, "run out and take care of my horse, please."

"Ok papa," he replies. Taking a last big bite of stew and a slice of bread, he heads out the door to do his father's bidding.

Mary fills a bowl with stew and brings it over to Corbin, setting it down before him. "What happened dear?" she asks as she returns to her seat.

"The Empire to the south, the one we have been worried about for so long, has launched an assault on Madoc, the kingdom to the east of us. They pushed several hundred leagues north and have laid siege to the town of Saragon. The Madoc Council has sent runners to Castle Cardri for assistance. One of them passed through here and gave the mayor forewarning."

"Are we in danger?" his wife asks him, concerned.

"Not at the present, their push seems to be isolated to Madoc. Though if Madoc falls the Kingdom of Cardri will most likely be next," he replies, trying to ease his wife's fear.

"What does the mayor want us to do?" she asks him.

"Right now there is nothing that we can do. We're in the middle of summer, and harvest is not far off. We cannot spare anyone right now, but if the situation in Madoc worsens, and they feel Cardri will be threatened, I'm sure they'll be calling up a levy in all the towns."

“A levy papa?” inquires Elizabeth.

“Yes, dear, it’s where they call the able bodied men for service. I don’t think we have much to be worried about, Devin’s too young and they don’t enlist girls for fighting,” explains Corbin.

“What about James?” asks Cyanna.

“James, I’m afraid, would be a prime candidate,” replies Corbin. Looking at James he goes on, “but I don’t think you have much to worry about right now, the war here is a ways off.”

James doesn’t like what he’s hearing. He definitely does not want to go into the army, especially not one in an age where doctors use leeches and pain killers are not a part of life. Thinking of the documentaries on the Civil War he saw on television makes a cold shiver go down his back.

“The main thing the mayor wants us to do is to keep our eyes open for strangers, people asking a lot of questions. Could be spies scouting for the Empire,” says Corbin. Taking some bread he soaks up the last of the gravy in his bowl and eats it.

“Are you a spy?” Cyanna asks James.

“What?” he asks. Startled by the question he almost chokes on the mouthful of stew he had been in the process of chewing.

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

Withering under the stern glare of her father, she says quietly to James, “I’m sorry.”

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

“That’s good,” Cyanna says. “I mean good you’re not a spy.”

“Who’s not a spy?” Devin says as he comes back through the door, sitting back down to finish his dinner.

“James,” answers Cyanna.

“Is he supposed to be one?” Devin asks.

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

“So what’s the problem?” he asks.

“The problem,” their father interjects sternly, “is people who only hear the end of a conversation.” He glares at his children, getting them to be quiet, and quickly flashes James a smile that only lasts a second.

Corbin stands up and stretches, “James,” he says, “let’s take a walk outside for a bit. That is, if your leg is up to it?”

“It can make it, it’s been feeling better,” responds James.

“Good, come along then.” Motioning for James to follow, he heads for the front door. As they exit the house, the dogs see them and run over, falling in behind Corbin as he makes his way over to the stables.

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

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

“No, what I wanted to talk with you about has to do with something else. Several nights ago, Hern, a farmer that lives a few miles out of town at the edge of the Forest, disappeared. The day before, he asked a neighbor to come over the following morning to help with getting rid of a stump in his field. When the neighbor arrived, he discovered Hern’s front door open. There was no sign of him outside so he figured that he was within. He called out to Hern but received no answer.”

“Thinking that Hern might be sick or hurt he went into the house only to find it empty as well. The table looked as if Hern had set out his dinner but had never eaten it. His plate was still clean, as if he had just pulled it down off the shelf. There was a bowl of stew sitting on the table, looking like it hadn’t even been touched. The neighbor rushed outside calling Hern’s name but never received an answer.”

“So far, no sign of Hern has been found and all the neighbors claim they hadn’t seen or heard anything strange the night before.”

“What does this have to do with me?” asks James.

“Nothing directly, but let me finish please,” replies Corbin. Getting a nod from James he continues.

“Last night another person went missing, this time a little boy,” explains Corbin. “He had gone out to get water from the well and never came back. When his parents went to look for him, they found the pail lying on the ground by the well, but no sign of the boy. The boy’s family lives on the edge of the forest just like Hern,

about two or three miles from his place. I was hoping that you could help find them in some way?"

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

"We would all be grateful with whatever aid you could give," says Corbin

Nodding, James thinks for a bit. *Whenever the detectives are trying to solve the case they always examine the scene of the crime.* "Maybe we could ride out to Hern's place tomorrow and I can look around," he suggests. "Maybe something would turn up."

"Ok, then, first thing in the morning," Corbin agrees. "We better be getting back before Mary sends one of the young'ens out to find out what's going on."

James agrees and they return to the house where they find that Mary already has the kids preparing for bed. With a round of goodnights and several kisses they head to their rooms. James goes to his room as well, and lays there most of the night trying to come up with some way in which to help.

Chapter Five

After breakfast the following morning, Corbin informs Mary that he plans to take James into town to see about the reward money and to show James around Trendle. He tells her not to worry about lunch as they will eat at the Squawking Goose.

It looks to be another sunny, summer day. Above was a crystal blue expanse only broken by a few high clouds. Coming out of the east, a breath of wind helps to ease the heat of the day.

Once at the barn, Corbin begins putting on the tack and saddle when he notices James just standing there, looking at all the various straps and buckles in confusion.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

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

Laughing, Corbin says “That’s hard to believe.” Seeing the redness of James’ embarrassment, he sobers up and adds, “Here, let me show you what to do. If you’re going to own a horse, you had better learn what to do and how to care for it.”

“Thank you,” says James gratefully.

He starts off by having James become acquainted with his horse. First he has James gently stroke the face and the neck, letting the horse know that he’s a friend. Corbin then retrieves a carrot from a nearby bin and hands it to him. Taking the carrot, James offers it to the horse who readily eats it right out of his hand. Smiling, he continues petting the horse on the side of the face as it eats and soon isn’t quite as nervous around the beast as he had been.

Corbin proceeds to instruct James in the proper way to place the saddle and tack, allowing him to do all the work so he’ll better learn what to do. When James finishes, Corbin rechecks the tightness and placement of every piece until he’s satisfied that it was done properly and will not loosen.

Once they are done with James’ horse, he has James do it all over again with his. This time, James manages to do it a little faster while making fewer mistakes. Once Corbin is again satisfied that everything was either done right or had been corrected to his satisfaction, he then instructs James on the proper mounting technique. Despite the stiffness and soreness still present in his leg, James manages to mount his horse in only two attempts. Once Corbin is sure that he will not fall off right away, he mounts his own horse and begins instructing James in the various nuances necessary in guiding his horse. He shows him how to use the reins and his knees to move in the desired direction.

Once James has a basic understanding of controlling his horse, they leave the barn. Outside by the house stand Corbin’s wife and children who are there to see them off. Corbin waves goodbye and begins making his way down the lane. After several feet, he realizes that James hasn’t followed. He glances back and finds him trying to get the horse to move.

James flicks the reins but the horse just stands there. “C’mon boy,” James says to him but the horse just turns his head and looks

at him. Feeling slightly embarrassed with everyone watching his ineptitude, he continues in his efforts with little success.

“Kick him gently in the sides,” Corbin advises. “You have to show him that you are in charge.”

James gives him a gentle kick and the horse just snorts. James looks to Corbin who says, “Harder.”

So James kicks hard and the horse lurches forward, breaking into a gallop and proceeds to fly down the lane. Seeing the horse bolt, the two dogs begin barking wildly and chase after, which only makes the horse go faster. Terrified and holding on for dear life, James flies past Corbin. It isn’t long before he begins losing his balance and starts tipping to one side. His scream of terror echoes across the fields.

“Tor! Cyne!” Corbin yells at the dogs as he bolts forward to catch up. “Back home! NOW!”

The dogs break off their chase and turn toward their master.

“Home!” shouts Corbin as he gallops past after James.

Ahead, he sees James tip even more precariously to the side. At the speed James is going, it’s likely he will suffer serious injury if he should fall. Kicking his horse in the sides, he races forward.

“James!” shouts Corbin as he quickly closes the distance. “Hang on!”

Just as James begins to lose his balance and starts to fall off his horse, a hand reaches out to snag his backpack. James gives out with an incoherent scream as he comes free of the horse. But instead of slamming to the ground, he’s pulled against Corbin’s horse as Corbin brings them to a halt. Once they’ve stopped, Corbin lowers James to the ground. But his legs are so shaky with the after affects of terror that they are unable to support him. So in a most undignified manner, he drops to the ground.

“Are you okay?” Corbin asks.

“Yes,” replies James.

“You really weren’t kidding about never having been on a horse before,” he says.

“No, I wasn’t,” James affirms.

Looking up toward the house, he sees his family running down the lane toward them. Waving them to go back to the house, he hollers, “He’s alright. Get on back to the house.” They stop and head back up the lane.

James’ horse had gone quite a ways before coming to a stop. Corbin left James on the ground to get his nerves under control

while he went to fetch the errant steed. Returning, he dismounts and extends a hand to help James to his feet.

“Now, let’s get you back on and we’ll work on those commands again,” Corbin says as James takes the hand and comes to his feet. His legs have stopped shaking and is able to once more get up into the saddle. Once James makes it into the saddle, Corbin remains next to him while he practices the commands for getting the horse to move without bolting into a run.

Again, James has a hard time getting his horse to go, but after a little coaching from Corbin, manages to get it moving without breaking into a mad, terrifying gallop. All the way to town, he continues instructing James in the nuances of controlling his horse and also goes over how to properly care for and feed it.

Hoping to retain at least most of what Corbin is telling him, James tries to listen as closely as he can while at the same time concentrating on keeping his balance so he won’t fall off. Nervously, he rides his horse next to Corbin’s, scared to death that he will fall or that the horse will take off for some unknown reason leaving James in the dirt.

After what seems a very long time to him, though in fact was only about ten minutes, they come to the outskirts of town. As they make their way through town, some of the townsfolk offer greetings to Corbin or wave to him as they pass by.

They follow the road through the center of town until they reach a two story building with a sign hanging by the door depicting three stacks of coins sitting on a table. Corbin leads them to the front of the building where he brings his horse to a halt.

Dismounting, as James learns, is easier than mounting. They tie their horses to the hitching post and walk to the door.

“This is Alexander’s place,” explains Corbin. “He’s the local money lender.”

When they enter, James finds a modest room with three armed guards. Two stand on either side of the door while the third is positioned next to a door at the opposite end of the room. Along the same wall as the door is an opening with a counter, probably where they make the money transfers.

Upon seeing them enter, the guard positioned next to the door on the other side of the room says, “Good day sirs. If you would wait just a moment, I’ll let him know that you are here.” With that, he opens the door next to him and disappears into the back. A short

time later, a man dressed in fine clothes emerges through the door followed closely by the guard who closes the door behind them.

“Corbin, how are you doing? Are your little ones doing well?” the well dressed man asks as he crosses the room to shake Corbin’s hand.

“They’re doing well, as am I, Alexander” replies Corbin. Gesturing to James he says, “This is James. He is the one that’s here to see you.”

Looking questioningly at James, Alexander asks, “And how may I be of service?”

Taking out the letter that the mayor had given him, he hands it over to Alexander who takes it and then proceeds to read it. “Ah, yes,” he exclaims, looking up from the letter, “the reward for Garrett the Snake and his band. The mayor was in here yesterday telling me about it and said you would be coming by. What would you like to do about it?”

“What do you mean, ‘do about it?’” asks James, confused.

“Well, I could give it all to you now, but that would far too much to carry about with you,” he explains. “Or I could set up an account here, keeping it safe and secure for you until such time as you need to withdraw it.”

James thinks about it for a second and then says, “I think I’ll set up an account, and maybe just take out fifty gold pieces right now.”

“Very good, sir,” he says. “If you’ll just wait a few moments, I’ll come back with your gold and the papers to sign to set up your account.” With that he turns and the guard opens the door as he passes through and into the back.

James and Corbin wait only a few moments before Alexander appears in the opening with a leather pouch, along with three papers. He motions James over and then opens the pouch. Dumping the gold coins out onto the counter, Alexander proceeds to count them in front of James, ensuring that they are both in agreement that the count is accurate. Once they are both satisfied the count is correct, he has James place the coins back into the pouch. As James slips the money-filled pouch within his backpack, Alexander takes the papers and points to a line. “You need to make your mark here,” he explains. “This says you are entrusting us with your money, until as such time that you request it to be withdrawn.”

James takes the papers and to his surprise, can read them. He looks them over and finds nothing that he disagrees with, so signs on the line.

“Thank you sir,” says Alexander as he takes the papers. “I’m sure that you will be pleased with the level of service that my establishment will accord you and your money.”

“Thanks to you as well, Alexander,” replies James. Turning to Corbin he says, “Shall we go?”

Nodding agreement, Corbin says “Goodbye Alexander.”

“Bye Corbin, hope to see you again soon,” Alexander replies before returning to the back room.

Corbin turns and leads the way out the door to the horses waiting outside. James manages to get into the saddle on the first attempt this time and feels proud of his accomplishment. He gives Corbin a smile of triumph.

“We’ll go to Hern’s farm first and go from there,” he tells James.

“Lead on,” James replies.

They head their horses back through town and leave by a road other than the one they came in on. James finds that the more he rides, the better he is becoming at maintaining balance and control. His horse is also starting to respond well to his directions.

On the way out of town, Corbin asks him what he plans to do once they reach Hern’s place.

“I’m not really sure yet,” replies James. “It’s likely that there will be nothing I will be able to do.”

They ride for several miles before arriving at Hern’s farm. A quick loop around the house reveals nothing out of the ordinary. James doesn’t feel anything weird, like a residual trace of evil or magic. *Yeah, like I’d know what that feels like even if it was here*, he muses to himself.

Returning to the front of the house, they dismount and enter through the front door. They find it just as Corbin had described, dinner still on the table, though by now it was pretty ripe, with no sign of a struggle or anything. It looked like he just up and walked away.

Going back outside, James considers the problem; *Corbin wants to find where Hern is. How can I find where Hern is? How did they do it in all those books I read? Clairvoyance, Clairaudience, Esp., not sure how to go about those. When you need to find something you use...you use...a compass? Could I fashion a magic compass to point out the direction of Hern’s whereabouts?* Thinking for a moment he comes to the conclusion that he might just be able to.

Turning to Corbin he says “I think I may have an idea. Let’s go to his barn and see if we can find some materials I can use to make a compass.”

“What’s a compass?” asks Corbin, as he leads James over to the barn.

“It’s something one uses to find things,” replies James. “Back where I come from they would use it to always point north. That type of compass doesn’t require magic.”

“Why would you care where north is?” wonders Corbin.

“It’s mainly used by sailors when they have no sun or stars to steer by,” he explains.

“That would make sense,” agrees Corbin, nodding. Reaching the door to the barn he opens it and steps back, allowing James to enter first.

Once within, James looks around to see what materials are available that he may use. Over in one corner is a neat stack of a dozen narrow posts. Crossing over to them, he picks one up with a diameter of roughly three inches and examines it. Motioning for Corbin to come over, he asks, “Could you cut me a smooth, half inch section off of this one?”

“Sure,” he says, taking the post from him. He then carries it over to a workbench near where a rack of tools hangs on the wall and lays it upon it. Taking down a saw, Corbin positions the end of the post so it extends over the edge of the workbench. “Do you want it off the end or should I take some of the end off first?” he asks.

Rubbing his finger over the end and finding it rough and cracked he says, “Maybe you should take the end off first. I’ll need it smoother than that.”

“Alright,” replies Corbin as he positions the saw to cut off the area with the cracks. Then he begins to remove the piece James requested.

While Corbin works on the post, James continues to look through the pile and finds another that has a slightly wider diameter than the first. When Corbin is finished removing the desired section from the first piece, he has him saw a similar piece off of this one as well.

Gathering a few more items that he feels might be useful, James returns to the workbench and waits for Corbin to finish sawing off the second piece. When Corbin is done, he replaces the saw and removes the unused portions of the posts from the workbench. Cleaning the surface of the workbench free of saw dust, he then lays

the two fresh cut pieces down upon it. Stepping away, he makes room for James.

Stepping to the workbench, James picks up the smaller of the two and shows it to Corbin. "Is there a way we can drill a hole through this one?" he asks. "A hole slightly bigger than one of these nails?" He then gestures to a pile of nails lying on the workbench.

Corbin gazes at the tools on the wall above the workbench, nods and takes one down. The tool reminds James of a screwdriver but the end is fashioned like a drill. Taking the piece of wood from him, Corbin uses the tool to bore a hole. When he has the hole the size James requires, he blows off the excess wood debris before handing it back.

James examines it. "Perfect," he praises. Placing both pieces of wood on the workbench, he concentrates on what he wants and then releases the magic as he says:

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

At the completion of the spell, he watches as the surface of the two pieces begins to shift and become smooth as glass.

"Unbelievable," he hears Corbin exclaim from behind his shoulder. "I've never seen anything like that." Seeing James glance at him, he continues. "Sure, I've heard of magic but have never seen it done before."

"It's not as easy as it looks," replies James. Turning back to the workbench he checks to make sure both sides of both pieces are smooth then takes the larger piece and places it directly in front of him. He then places the smaller piece atop the larger one and centers it. Picking up one of the nails, he slides it through the hole that Corbin had bored in the smaller piece. Removing a hammer from the rack on the wall, he gently taps the nail until the head is less than a quarter inch from the surface of the smaller piece. Satisfied, he flicks the smaller piece and watches as it spins on its axis. There is some momentum lost due to friction as it rubs along the bottom piece, but it should be serviceable.

Grabbing a piece of charcoal, he draws a line on the surface of the top piece. "It's finished," he announces as he shows it to Corbin.

"It is?" questions Corbin as he looks at it. "What's it going to do?"

“Just watch,” replies James. He holds the bottom piece securely and as he releases the magic says:

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

The surge of power at the completion of the spell takes James’ breath away. Slowly, the top piece begins to rotate until the charcoal line points in the general direction of the forest. “Hern’s that way,” he tells Corbin. James can still feel a minute drawing of power being drawn from him to maintain the spell. Just as the orb spell had back in the cave.

“Are you sure?” asks Corbin, skeptical.

“Pretty sure. Though I’ve never done this before,” he replies. “Only one way to find out.” He gets up from the workbench and walks out of the barn. Outside, the charcoal indicator still points toward the forest. Whenever James turns the compass, the charcoal line always rotates to point in the same direction, toward the forest.

Following the direction indicated by the compass, they reach the forest’s edge and come to a stop. James glances to Corbin and asks, “Shall we go find him?”

“Yes, though let’s be careful,” suggests Corbin.

“Oh, you can bet on that,” he replies.

Continuing to follow the direction indicated by the compass, they slowly make their way into the forest. As they press onward, they at times have to force their way through tangles of bushes and around dense copses of trees in order to continue in the direction indicated.

After about an hour of plodding through the underbrush, they come to a break in the forest and find an old, abandoned house nestled in the middle of a clearing. It looks to once have been a two story dwelling, though half of the house has long since collapsed. The yard and surrounding area show signs of having once been maintained, but the forest has already begun to reclaim it. The compass points in the direction of the house.

Wondering if the compass is pointing to the house or to someplace beyond it, he proceeds to walk around to the other side. As he makes his way around the house, the compass swivels as he moves, always pointing directly to the house.

“It says Hern’s in there,” he tells Corbin after they’ve made a complete circle and returned to the front of the house. Turning to him when he makes no response, James is surprised to see a worried look on his face.

“Something wrong?” he inquires.

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

“What do you mean?” asks James.

“It happened three score years ago. One day a stranger shows up and purchases a claim for a parcel of land within the forest, said he wanted to get away from city life and to find peace and quiet. He contracted several of the townspeople to come and build his house, this house perhaps. The construction took almost a year and once the construction was finished he moved in. After that no one saw much of him. He kept mostly to himself, rarely coming to town and then only to buy supplies.”

“It didn’t take long before rumors began making their way around town about this man. One afternoon, several of the boys decided to come and spy on him, to see what he was about. When they arrived, they couldn’t see anybody around. So they crept up close to the house and one of them even climbed up in a tree so he could see inside. The boy said that he looked through a window and saw the man sitting cross legged on the floor. A circle that encompassed a five pointed star, a pentagram as the townsfolk later discovered, was drawn on the floor not five feet in front of him. At each point of the pentagram burned a candle. The boy said it looked as if the man was in some kind of a trance, and was chanting.”

“He continued to watch the man as he sat before the pentagram, chanting unfamiliar words. As the man continued, the air above the pentagram begin to flux and swirl. At that point, the man’s chanting changed, becoming more intense. Then, from out of the flux and swirl above the pentagram, the shape of an inhuman creature not of this world began to slowly take shape. It seemed to grow more solid with every word the man uttered.

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

“The boys say that just after the window shattered, they heard a monstrous roar. The man began shrieking in terror before being abruptly silenced. The boys ran like hell itself was after them, which was probably not far from the truth. When they returned to town, they went straightaway to the Town Hall and told their story to the mayor, who immediately sent a party out to the house to investigate. Along with the party was the local priest and when they arrived, found no trace of the man. They did find the pentagram on the floor however, with four of the candles having burned down to nothing. The fifth candle laid on its side, shards of the broken window lay around it. Apparently when the window broke, the glass flew and knocked over the candle, which broke the holding spell allowing the demon, that’s what the priest said was most likely being summoned, to break out and take the man. The priest stated that there didn’t seem to be any traces of evil remaining in the house. But just to be sure, he cleansed the house from top to bottom before they left.”

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

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

“Quickly then,” agrees Corbin uneasily. As James leads the way into the house, the farmer follows close behind.

The front room was dark and shadowed with narrow streams of light making their way in through the windows. Everything is covered in a fine layer of dust. Grass and small plants have sprouted through the cracks in the floor. Spider webs are in every corner and the old furniture holds testament that someone had once lived here. James begins to feel a sense of foreboding, but shakes it off as he continues further into the house.

Still following the compass, they leave the room and proceed down a hallway that extends further into the house. The left side of the hallway had partially collapsed at one time and the debris makes for treacherous going. In one place they have to bend over almost double just to make it past where part of the ceiling had caved in.

As they make their way through the rubble, a little bit of light filters through the broken and cracked areas above them, giving an eerie feel to the place.

Not far past the caved in ceiling, they discover an opening on their right. Coming abreast of the opening they find a flight of stairs leading up to the second floor. Though rubble chokes the stairwell, James figures that they could make it through should the need arise. *And I definitely hope the need does NOT! arise*, James silently says to himself.

Moving past the stairwell they reach another doorway, the last one available to them before the hallway becomes completely impassable with debris from where the second floor had collapsed. Cautiously peering around the corner, James looks through the doorway and into a room, one that has somewhat been spared the ravages of time that the rest of the house has seen. Several windows let in light through their broken panes.

He takes notice of a five pointed star inscribed on the floor. *That must have been where the demon was summoned.* Doing a quick scan about the rest of the room, he fails to find anything unusual so decides to step through the doorway and enters the room. Corbin follows close behind.

Walking over to the pentagram, James indicates the broken glass on the floor near where the candle had fallen over and says, "This must be where the shattered window broke the spell of holding." Scanning the area, he doesn't see any blood or bones. He's unable to determine what happened after the spell broke. Reaching down, he picks up one of the broken shards. It's cool, but doesn't feel odd or strange. He tosses it back down to the spot where he picked it up.

"Maybe we shouldn't stay here any longer," says Corbin nervously. James can detect a definite tremble in his voice. "It doesn't look like we're going to find them here."

"Perhaps," responds James. Taking out his compass, James looks at it and to his surprise, the pointer is going round and round in a clockwise direction. "That's weird," he says as he shows the rotating compass to Corbin.

"What does it mean?" Corbin asks worriedly.

Shrugging his shoulders, James replies "Haven't a clue, I told you I was new to all this magic stuff." Discontinuing the spell, James places the compass back in his backpack. He then looks at Corbin and is about to say something, when he catches a slight

flicker coming from the pentagram out of the corner of his eye. He quickly turns his head to try to see it better, but it's gone.

"What?" asks Corbin nervously. His eyes continuously dart around the room and he's beginning to jump at every little noise.

"Thought I saw something," he replies. Turning his head so the pentagram is again just at the edge of his peripheral vision, he once again sees the flicker. This time he holds his head steady and continues to look at the pentagram out of the corner of his eye. After a few moments, he begins to realize that what he originally took as a flash is actually a slow pulsing, barely discernable in the shadows.

"Curious," he exclaims.

"What is?" asks Corbin, glancing agitatedly between James and the pentagram.

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

"Pulsing?" fear is evermore apparent in Corbin's voice. "Let's get out of here." He begins edging toward the exit.

"Yeah, that might be a good idea," agrees James.

Leading the way, he enters the hallway and makes his way carefully through the rubble. Corbin follows him so closely that he accidentally steps on his heels. They pass the stairway to the second floor and then come to where the hallway ends at the outer room.

Just before James passes from the hallway into the outer room, Corbin grabs his arm and brings him to a halt. "Look," he whispers softly as he points out the front door.

James looks where he's indicating and sees two silhouettes approaching the door. Unable to make out any distinct features, he can only tell that one is adult size while the other is smaller. Turning back to Corbin he whispers "Let's go back and climb up the stairs a little ways and hide." *Yeah James, unless they plan to go up the stairs,* he thinks to himself.

Being as quiet as they can, James and Corbin quickly return to the stairs and climb up a short ways until they're hidden from the view of anyone passing in the hallway. Holding still, they await the approach of whoever it may be.

James is sure that the sound of his heart, which feels like it's trying to beat out of his chest, will surely give them away. They don't have long to wait before two sets of footsteps are heard entering the hallway from the outer room. James holds his breath,

his heart beating wildly in fear as the footsteps approach and then pass by the front of the stairway. He can hear them continue down to the room at the end of the hallway, the one wherein lies the pentagram.

James whispers to Corbin as he begins descending the stairs and returns to the hallway, “Stay here, I’m going to see what they’re doing.”

“Are you crazy? I’m getting the hell out of here. If you’re smart, you will too.” With that he climbs down the steps and brushes past James. He quickly moves down the hallway and exits through the front door. Once outside, he breaks into a mad dash as he runs away from the house.

Wanting to follow, but for some reason is overcome with an undeniable desire to know what is going on in there, James slowly and quietly makes his way down the hallway to the entrance of the room. As he approaches, he begins to make out a subtle, pulsing, dark blue glow emanating from the room. Steeling himself, he peers around the corner and into the room.

Two individuals stand motionless before the pentagram, above which swirls a vortex that pulsates with a dark blue radiance. A feeling of horror comes over James, yet he’s unable to turn away.

The taller of the two begins to chant, the unfamiliar words painful to James’ ears. The smaller one, which looks to be a young girl, snaps out of her lethargic trance at the utterance of the first word by the larger one. With a scream, she tries to flee and is only able to take a step before the taller one seizes her by the hair, holding her fast. At the touch of the taller one, the ability to run seems to drain from the girl.

Unable to run or even move, the girl stands there and cries. As James continues to watch, a shimmering wave emerges slowly from the vortex and makes contact with the captive girl. A soul wrenching scream escapes from her as the shimmering wave makes contact. Her body begins spasming traumatically as the shimmering wave starts transferring her life force to the vortex.

As more screams are wrenched from the poor girl, James reacts without thought. He shouts into the air with determination:

***Forces of Good, forces of nature,
Give me your aid this day
Sever the bond, free the girl
Course of evil to stay!***

At the end of the spell, tendrils of power reach toward him from all directions, connecting deep within him. A ray of light arcs from his outstretched hand toward the shimmering wave and upon contact, a veritable explosion of light erupts. The wave from the vortex dissipates and the girl sinks into unconsciousness, sagging in the grip of the evil's minion.

A surge of pure hatred and malice erupts from the vortex. As it washes over James, he can sense the evil in the vortex is now focused upon him.

The evil's minion turns toward James, letting go of the young girl who collapses to the floor. As it begins moving toward him, he realizes it's a girl of about sixteen years of age. She's dressed in blue jeans and is wearing a shirt with the words San Francisco written across the front. *She's from home!*

Her eyes have an inhuman glow, her face twisted in an expression of pure evil. Wielding a dagger in one hand, she chants a spell whose very words begin to make James' skin crawl.

He reaches down to pick up a stone off the floor. Then using his spell, launches it at her. The stone flies toward her, but is deflected by some force before reaching her. Undaunted, she continues toward him and the chanting continues. Out of the corner of his eye he catches sight of a change in the vortex. Taking his eyes off her for a moment, glances quickly over to it for a better look. A shiver goes through him when he sees the vortex over the pentagram is beginning to coalesce and take shape.

The chanting from the girl suddenly stops and a dark cloud exudes from her. The sight of the miasmic cloud flowing rapidly toward him causes him to start backing out of the room but he isn't fast enough to avoid its touch.

Where it comes into contact with him, his skin turns red and welts start forming. Pain, excruciating pain erupts from wherever the cloud touches him. With his nerve endings burning like fire, he somehow manages to cast:

***Soothe and heal
No pain to feel***

Power courses through his body and reduces the pain to a dull throbbing. The black cloud soon dissipates when the power behind the spell is exhausted. The features of the girl are contorted,

misshapen and twisted by the evil which controls her. She continues advancing toward him.

Thinking fast, James glances at the floor as an idea comes and casts:

***Stone like pudding
Soft and slick
Entrap her feet
Then harden quick.***

As the magic flows from him, he watches her foot sink into the stone floor with her next step. Then as she steps forward with the other, it sinks into the floor as well. Once both have sunk into the stone floor a little past the ankles, the stone floor solidifies once again, encasing her feet in solid stone. Her legs continue trying to bring her toward him, as if she doesn't even realize what has happened to her. She begins to chant another spell.

Picking up another stone, he yells:

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

Again he feels a multitude of power tendrils flowing into him, meeting in the center and then surging outward as he hurls the stone at the girl. This time when the stone connects with the shield surrounding her, there's an intense flash of light as the stone passes through it and pierces her chest. The rock explodes out of her back and then her body slumps lifelessly to the ground, settling at an awkward angle due to her legs still being encased in the stone floor.

Tired and exhausted, James turns and looks toward the pentagram and the evil coalescing above it. The swirling vortex has now almost completely formed into a shape, inhuman in aspect and malignant in nature. The glowing red eyes of the creature are fixed upon him and he can feel the hate from the creature wash over him like a filthy tide. Somehow, he knows that he must find a way to close this portal between worlds before the creature is able to manifest completely. Though tired and exhausted, he concentrates and says:

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

One last time, he feels the gathering, the influx of multiple tendrils of power as they suffuse him with more power than he's ever dealt with before. So intense is the power as it passes through him, that it feels like it's burning his nerve endings as it flows out. He can see in his mind the portal and the power of the evil fighting to keep it open. Such malignant hate and evil, James had never even believed such existed. His mind's eye concentrates on the portal, directing the magic to draw it close. The power continues to flow to, and then out through him toward the portal.

James is struck by wave after wave of malignant hate, almost causing him to falter, but somehow manages to remain focused and continue directing the magic in closing the portal.

When the portal finally snaps closed a surge of hate, malignant hate, blasts over him and knocks him back several steps. With the closing of the portal, he ends the spell and all the tendrils of magic cease flowing into him. Completely drained and exhausted, his eyes roll up in the back of his head as he collapses to the floor and passes out.

He awakens, feeling disoriented and with his head pounding. He looks up to find several people in the room, but is having a hard time getting his eyes to focus properly.

"James, are you ok?" a familiar voice asks. He knows it's familiar, but can't quite put a name to it. Unable to talk, he shakes his head no. Then he gives a weak smile as his eyes finally focus on the one addressing him, Ceryn.

"When Corbin came running into town and told us what was going on, we hurried as best we could," he explains. He then gestures over to a man by the pentagram and continues, "I dragged our priest along just in case. We thought we would find you dead, the devastation was unbelievable."

"Devastation?" croaks James.

"Hell yes, devastation," exclaimed Ceryn. "All the trees in a mile radius are dried up and dead, most of the animals too."

"How?" asks James.

"We thought maybe you could tell us," says Corbin.

James just shakes his head. He looks over and sees a man holding the little girl that had collapsed over by the pentagram, crying with relief. The man notices James looking at him and says, "Thank you. I don't know how I can ever repay you for saving my little girl."

The priest comes over and addresses Ceryn, "The girl is fine, if very weak. She'll be ok, just needs some rest I would think." Turning to James, he continues, "You could do with a little rest yourself." With that, he goes back to the girl and her father and talks with them quietly.

Another man comes in and walks over to Ceryn, "We found Hern and Joshua upstairs, they're both dead. Looks like they were sucked dry somehow, their bodies are being loaded on the wagon as we speak and then we're taking them back to town."

"All right," replies Ceryn. "We'll see you when we get there. Thanks for your help." The man shakes Ceryn's hand and then turns to walk out the door.

The man by the pentagram helps his daughter to her feet and with the priest lending an arm, they manage to get her moving. They make their way slowly out the door and disappear down the hallway.

Ceryn and Corbin help James to his feet. He glances at the older girl, feet still encased in the stone. "What are you going to do with her?" he asks.

"Leave her for now," Ceryn replies. "We're coming back tomorrow and the priest will thoroughly cleanse the house. Then we're going to raze it to the ground."

They help him up and out to the narrow hallway, but not before he takes one last look at the girl and the words *San Francisco* on her shirt. When he finally makes it outside, he can see what they mean by devastation. All the trees are twisted, curled in on themselves. Some look to have been blasted apart. In every direction he can see the signs of devastation and it's not only the trees but the bushes and even the grass show signs of withering.

"My god!" James exclaims as he sees two shrunken husks that had once been the horses they had ridden out here. Thinking back to the battle and all those tendrils of power that came to his call, he understands. *Forces of Good, Forces of nature. I did this. My spell called on nature and nature responded.*

Keeping quiet about his thoughts, he lets them help him onto Ceryn's horse. He rides in silence while they lead him through the

dead forest back toward Trendle. As they approach the edge of town, Ceryn says his goodbyes to Corbin and James. He tells them that James can keep the horse, he'll get another from the mayor. Then he continues on into town where he'll confer with the town council about what happened out at the old abandoned estate. Corbin leads the horse back to his house, where he carries James in and places him in bed.

Chapter Six

Over the next two days James takes it easy, sleeping through most of the first, only awakening when Mary brings in a plate filled with eggs and potatoes. During his breakfast of the second day, he spies the girls peeking at him through the doorway. Their giggling alerts Mary who immediately shoos them away saying, "Let the boy eat in peace!" Once he's eaten his fill, he lies back down.

"You rest," she says.

As she passes through the doorway, James hears Mary again berate her girls for bothering him. Apparently they hadn't shoosed very far. He couldn't help but grin. He has come to like Corbin and his family. They had definitely done everything they could to make him feel welcome while staying with them.

The redness and welts caused by the black cloud have all but disappeared, and he feels much better after having rested the day before. He manages to fall asleep again and remains so until Mary brings in his lunch. The sound of her approaching his bedside prompts him to open his eyes.

In her one hand she carries a bowl of soup and in the other, a cup of water. When she sees him looking at her, she asks, "How are you feeling?"

"Better," he replies as he sits up.

She sets the glass of water on the nightstand next to the bed and then hands him the bowl and a spoon.

The aroma coming from the soup makes his stomach growl. Taking the spoon, he eagerly scoops out a portion and begins eating. "Very good," he says much to Mary's pleasure.

Taking a seat on the edge of the bed, she inspects his injuries. "We were worried about you," she says. "Corbin said that when they found you, he thought you were dead."

He gives her a grin. "I can imagine," he replies.

"Too bad about Hern and the boy," she says sadly. "At least you were able to help the girl."

"Is she alright?" he asks.

Mary nods. "Her father says that she is much more subdued than what she used to be," she explains. "Our priest thinks after some time has past, she will gradually regain much of her youthful exuberance." A pause, then... "She used to be such a happy girl."

"After what she went through," began James. "I can imagine it taking some time for her to recover."

"Yes," she agrees. "We are all just thankful she is alive."

His bowl is soon empty. Taking it, she leaves the room with a final word about him getting more sleep.

Taking her advice, he lies in bed for awhile but sleep is an unattainable goal. It isn't long before he concludes that he's not going to be able to fall asleep any time soon. Thankfully the throbbing in his head which had been nigh on unbearable the day before has subsided to a dull ache and he starts thinking that he may be able to enjoy living again. Being tired of lying in bed, he decides to get up and stretch his legs, wobbly though they may be.

Taking it slow, he swings his legs over the bed and attempts to stand. When he gains his feet, sudden dizziness strikes him and he has to sit back down on the bed. Holding his head in his hands to calm the dizziness, and the slight increase in pain, he takes several deep breaths. Once the dizziness subsides and the pain returns to a manageable level, he again attempts to get to his feet, this time managing it without the sudden onslaught of dizziness and worsening of his headache. Feeling only slightly dizzy and unsteady, he refuses to give into weakness and shuffles over to the chair where his clothes are laid out and gets dressed.

Once he manages to dress himself, he opens the door and walks out into the front area. There he finds Mary sitting at the table mending a pair of trousers. "Where is everyone?" he asks, coming over to the table.

“The kids are out in the fields,” she replies, “and Corbin went with those returning to the house to help raze it to the ground.” She puts the trousers down and says, “Can’t sleep?”

Shaking his head in response, James replies, “Not tired. I’m feeling much better too, your soup really hit the spot. I think I’ll take a little walk to stretch my legs and get some fresh air.”

“Cyanna’s outside playing with the dogs,” Mary tells him. Picking up the trousers she continues, “If you should see her, tell her I would like her to come help me, okay?”

“Sure will,” he agrees and then walks over to the door and goes outside. He looks for Cyanna but there is no sign of her or the dogs.

Enjoying the warmth of the summer sun, he decides to walk over by the pond to find a comfortable grassy spot where he can sit down and relax. The ducks have since traveled on, so he just lays back and watches the clouds going by, enjoying the peace and quiet. The warm sun soothes his weary body, making him very relaxed. Before he even realizes it, he falls asleep.

Plunk! Plunk!

The sound of stones being tossed into the pond awakens him. Thinking Cyanna has come to join him, he opens his eyes and glances over to greet her. The whimsical greeting he was about to say dies stillborn on his lips. For there, not three feet away, sits the little creature with the blue vest and crazy felt hat he previously met upon first arriving in this world.

“Awake, are we?” it asks. “Enjoying yourself?”

Not sure how to respond, he says, “I’ve had better days than the last few.”

Chuckling, the creature responds, “I’m sure you have. But you’ve done well, my master is pleased.”

Curious, James asks “Just who might your master be?”

“I haven’t been directed to tell you that as yet.” ***Plunk!*** Another strikes the water, sending ripples across the surface of the pond. Holding up his hand to forestall any more questions, the creature says, “Nor have I been given permission to answer any of your questions.”

Reaching into his vest pocket, the creature pulls out a silver medallion on a chain and tosses it over to him. “This is for you. Consider it to be a gift of sorts.”

Catching the medallion, James looks at it and finds that one side has a raised pattern of lines that sort of looks like a stylized star.

Turning it over, James discovers the back to be smooth, without design.

“What is this?” he asks.

“Like I said, a gift,” it replies. “Though should you desire to, you may give it away or even sell it, though I’d advise against that at this time. You may need it later on.” *Plunk!*

“What do you mean, ‘later on’?” James asks. Not entirely liking the prospect of what that might foretell.

“Later on, as in a future time,” explains the creature with a grin.

“What am I suppose to do now?” James asks. “Obviously I’m here for some purpose, would you care to enlighten me?”

“Just do what you feel is right and I’m sure everything will turn out for the best,” replies the creature.

“Yeah, and if I think it feels right to toss this medallion into the pond, should I?” he demands irritably. He wants some answers not all this cryptic god stuff.

“Not suppose to answer questions, remember?” The creature stands up, “You should be fine. I’ll see you later on.” With that, he hops in the air and disappears just like he did before.

James stares at the spot where the creature had just recently stood for a moment before lying back down on the grass. He examines the medallion more closely and mulls over his choices. The design looks to be the same as the one that had been on the cover of the book explaining magic, the one he inexplicably lost back in the forest. The loss of that book still bothers him. He could sure use it now.

Not for the first time he wonders why he was in this world, not to mention what forces brought him there. He has difficulty to believe that it is for some nefarious reason for the creature had told him to ‘do what you feel is right’. Hardly the advice one would expect a minion of evil to give. But still, you never know.

How long he spent mulling things over he wasn’t sure. But before long, Mary’s voice reaches him calling everyone to dinner. Coming to his feet slowly so as not to be overcome with dizziness again, he begins making his way back to the house. He puts the medallion around his neck for safekeeping and tucks it inside his shirt. When he returns to the house he doesn’t mention the little creature or the medallion to Corbin and his family.

That night after dinner as he lies in bed trying to drift off to sleep, he can’t quit thinking about the medallion and why it was given him. *There must be a reason.*, he insists to himself. *There*

must! Sometime before drifting off to sleep he comes to the conclusion that he needs to find the answers to the many questions plaguing him, and that the answers will most likely not be answered in Trendle.

Early the next morning when he wakes and goes out to the front area, he finds Corbin and family eating breakfast before heading out to the fields.

“Good morning all,” he says as he approaches the breakfast table.

“Feeling better this morning?” asks Corbin.

Mary brings a plate for James and he helps himself to the eggs and biscuits. “Much better, thank you. It was probably Mary’s cooking that did the most good.” James smiles over to her who then grins back at him.

During breakfast, he sits quietly at the table, absentmindedly picking at his eggs and biscuits while he tries to come up with the right words to say.

Corbin asks, “Something on your mind, James? You seem to be a bit preoccupied, barely even touched your breakfast.”

Realizing that he has been pushing his food around, he says “Well, as much as I have enjoyed your hospitality, I think it’s time for me to be moving on. I was wondering if you could go into town with me and help me pick out some traveling gear?” He takes a bite of his eggs while he waits for Corbin’s reply.

“I guess I could,” responds Corbin. “Where are you planning to go, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I’m not sure where anything is in this area,” replies James. “Where is the nearest major city?”

“The closest city of any size is Bearn. It lies two days south along the Kelewan River. Three days further south out on the coast you will find Castle Cardri, our capitol. If you go east about a week, you’ll come to the city of Trademeet, a bustling city where merchants of many nations meet. It lies at the foot of the mountains separating Cardri and Madoc.”

“Do you think Castle Cardri would have a library or something that I could use?” he asks.

“Probably,” he replies. “Though it’s unlikely you would be permitted inside. Only the nobles or known scholars are allowed entry. Or so I hear.”

“Well,” says James, “it wouldn’t hurt to try.”

He finishes his breakfast and together they go to the barn to saddle their horses. This time James does a decent job of it, proud that he didn't require Corbin's help. Climbing into the saddle, he directs his horse out of the barn. The kids are there with Mary as he nears the house. She comes up to him and hands him a sack filled with bread, dried meat and fruits. He takes the sack of food and gives her his heartfelt thanks.

Devin brings out his spear and backpack. Reaching down, he grabs the backpack but tells him to keep the spear. "I really don't think I'm going to need that. You go ahead and keep it," he tells him.

Devin smiles up at him and nods, gripping his new spear.

He looks to Mary and says, "I appreciate your hospitality and have enjoyed being here more than you know."

"Goodbye James," she says, "and be careful."

"I will," he assures her.

With a chorus of goodbyes, James turns his horse and follows Corbin down the lane. Looking back he sees Elizabeth and Cyanna still waving goodbye. He raises one of his arms and waves back, then turns and catches up with Corbin who's already at the road leading into town. The dogs follow them, barking and jumping until the end of the lane where they turn back and race for the house. He and Corbin then ride side by side as they continue on into town.

Upon approaching the outskirts of town they see a column of soldiers marching along the main road heading east.

"Who are they?" asks James.

"Cardri soldiers," he replies. "They must be heading east to reinforce Dragon's Pass. The siege is still raging at Saragon, at least that's the rumor. If it falls, they may swing our way. Doubtful, but best to be prepared."

"I suppose so," he agrees.

Once the soldiers pass, they make their way through town to Alexander's. Arriving at his establishment they dismount and tie their horses to the front post before entering. Within they find Alexander at the counter dealing with an elderly woman so they wait a few moments until she concludes her business.

When she is done and turns to leave, James steps to the counter. Alexander looks up at his approach and says, "Why, it's James. How may I be of service today?"

"I'm leaving town so need to withdraw the rest of my money," he explains.

“Very well,” Alexander says. “A thousand gold pieces is a lot to carry around with you. If you prefer, I could give you a letter of account. Such a letter would be honored by any money lender in Cardri. It would be less bulky than a chest full of coins that any robber would surely take an interest in.”

“Alright then,” agrees James. “Give me another hundred gold pieces to take with me and the rest in a letter of account. That should last me until I get to Cardri.”

“You’re heading to the city of Cardri then?” Alexander asks.

“Yes,” James replies, “I plan to head in that direction.”

“My brother has a money lender establishment in Cardri,” he explains. “I’m sure he would be more than willing to cash this for you. You can find him in the merchant’s quarter of the outer ring.”

“That sounds good, I’ll look him up when I get there,” James says.

“Very good sir, I shall be but a moment,” Alexander says as he turns and disappears in the back. It doesn’t take long before he returns to the counter with a pouch of coins and the letter. Together they count the money, both verifying that James is indeed receiving the correct amount, and then the money is put back into the pouch.

Handing the pouch and the letter to James, Alexander says, “Protect this letter carefully. If you lose it, you’ve lost your money, understand?” Seeing James nodding that he understands he adds, “And if you see my brother, tell him all is well here.”

“I will be sure to do that,” James assures him. After signing a few papers stating that Alexander was no longer responsible for his money, he and Corbin leave his establishment.

Next to Alexander’s is the Chandlers’ Shop where a variety of equipment and supplies that would be useful for travel are sold. Inside, they find useful wares displayed throughout the shop. Bags, cloaks, belts, etc. An open counter lines most of one wall and a portly man stands behind it.

When he sees who has entered his store, he says, “A good day to you Corbin. How may I help you today?”

“Not for me, but for James here,” Corbin corrects him as he points to James.

“James? Not the same James who rescued Jake’s little girl?” asks the chandler.

James responds, “I guess so. I need some equipment.”

“What are you looking for?” he asks.

James describes the things he thinks he's going to need, then Corbin and the chandler proceed to tell him what he's really going to need, including several sets of clothes. Together, they compile a list of equipment he'll need. When he asks how much for the lot the chandler replies, "Jake came in here yesterday and told me that if you wanted anything, that I was to charge him for it. He said it was the least he could do to repay you."

Turning to Corbin, James looks questioningly at him.

"While you were recovering, he stopped by to talk to you but you were sleeping and we thought it best not to disturb you," he explains. "He said he wanted to repay you in some way, so I told him that you would most likely be needing equipment and supplies when you left, seeing as how you didn't have anything. He must have come down here and set this up with Burl."

"That's right, he did," agrees Burl.

"Okay, I understand," James says. Collecting his new equipment he says to the chandler, "Thank you for your help."

"You are most welcome," Burl replies.

With his arms full, he exits the shop and begins the job of packing and redistributing his things upon his horse until he has a balanced load. As he gets ready to mount, Corbin stops him.

"Here," he says as he offers James a knife in a simple leather sheath. "This has been collecting dust the last few years and I'd like you to have it. You will need it more than I."

Taking the knife, he pulls the blade from the scabbard and finds the metal well polished with a sharp edge. He then reinserts it back into the scabbard and unbuckles his belt, looping it through the openings in the knife's sheath. Once his belt is buckled securely around him once more, he positions the knife's scabbard in a comfortable position. Having it on his hip makes him feel pretty darn good.

"Thanks, Corbin." Reaching out his hand, he shakes Corbin's. "I appreciate all that you've done for me. I'll drop by if I'm ever back in the area again."

"You're always welcome," Corbin tells him. "You take care now."

James mounts up, turns the horse in the direction of the south road, and canters out of town.

Traveling down the road along the Kelewan River is peaceful and enjoyable. The road has been well maintained and makes for easy

riding. It's a clear and sunny day with a slight breeze, too warm for more than just a shirt. James rides along and covers the miles quickly. According to Corbin it's two days to Bearn. As the day progresses, he passes several travelers, some alone and others as a group. Late in the morning he encounters one caravan with ten wagons and about as many guards. The teamsters wave at him as he passes, while the guards only glare. The lead wagon is not the same flatbed as the others, but a wagon covered with a deep blue canvas. A four horse team pulls it, making him think of the covered wagons in the old western movies.

The wagon is being driven by a young lady who looks to be about sixteen. Next to her on the seat is an older man, most likely her father. As James pulls abreast of the wagon, the lady greets him, "Good day to you sir."

Smiling his most charming smile, he replies, "And a nice day to you too ma'am."

The man looks him up and down, his expression seeming to suggest that he finds James somewhat lacking. He nods a greeting but doesn't say anything.

"Where are you bound?" the lady asks him.

"South to Bearn, then perhaps to the coast," he replies. "By the way, my name is James." He gives her a slight bow.

"I am called Celienda," she responds. Gesturing to the man next to her she adds, "This is my father Meredith."

Bowing slightly, this time to her father, he gives his respect. "Are you heading to Bearn?" James asks.

"Oh, yes. Our home is there but we transport goods to various towns, depending on the markets."

"Could you perhaps tell me of a good inn where I might stay while I am there? I have never before been to Bearn," he explains.

Thinking a bit, she says "The Flying Swan is good and well priced. The owner is a friend of mine by the name of Jillian. If you should stay there, tell him Celienda sends her wishes."

"I will, and thank you for your help. Maybe we'll run into each other while I am there?" suggests James with a grin. Her father gives him a cold look when he hears that.

"You never know," responds Celienda with a cheerful smile.

Giving them another slight bow, he says, "May your travels be both profitable and safe." He speeds his horse up to a canter and begins pulling away from the caravan.

“Fare you well, James,” he can hear Celienda call after him. It doesn’t take long before he’s out distanced them.

When the sun reaches its apex in the sky, James stops to let his horse graze while he has a bite to eat. Finding a shady spot not far from the banks of the river, he removes the sack Mary gave him and settles against the bole of a tree.

His posterior has been complaining for the last hour from having to sit in the saddle, but he’ll just have to get used to the rigors of being in the saddle all day. In this world, it seems to be the preferred mode of transportation.

While he eats, he thinks how peaceful and calm it is there by the river. Pulling the medallion from beneath his shirt, he again contemplates the design upon its face. Questions and still more questions with very few answers. Sighing, he replaces it beneath his shirt and finishes his meal.

The rest of the afternoon is pretty much a repeat of the morning, except that the pain in his bottom grows more pronounced as the day wears on. When the sun is but an hour away from dipping below the horizon, several buildings appear in the distance ahead. Two appear to be houses or storage sheds while a third stands two stories tall with smoke coming out of the chimney. Another long building sits behind it.

As he draws closer he makes out a sign depicting a river turning a bend hanging in front of the large, two story building. *Must be an inn*, he thinks to himself. Since night is quickly approaching, he figures this would be a good spot to stop for the night. Coming to the inn, he ties his horse to the hitching post in front then enters.

The smell of unwashed bodies and smoke hits James like a wall, taking his breath away. His eyes start to water and can barely breathe. Standing there for a second, he slowly acclimates to the stench. Looking around he notices several tables in the common area, only one which is currently unoccupied, and a long bar along one wall. A stairway at the rear of the room climbs to the second floor.

Fortunately the unoccupied table is near an open window. Taking a seat enabling him to sit with his back to the wall so he can see the entire common room, James gets comfortable. Leaning his head back against the wall near the window for the fresh air coming through, he doesn’t have long to wait until the serving girl comes over.

“Hi, I’m Melinda. What can I get ya?” she asks him.

“What do you have?” he asks.

“There are two choices for dinner,” she explains. “Mutton stew or roast beef. The stew is two coppers, the roast beef three. I’d take the roast beef. Some have said the mutton is a bit on the tough side.”

“I’ll take the roast beef then,” he decides, “and some ale. How much are the rooms? I also have a horse.”

“The rooms are a silver a night and two coppers for the stall for your horse. If you need feed for your horse, that’s another copper.”

Reaching into his travel purse, he pulls out two silvers and hands them over to her. She takes them and says, “I’ll be right back.” She walks over to the man behind the counter and his coins change hands. Then the man hands her back several coppers and she returns to give him his change. He gives her two coppers for a tip.

“The stall for your horse is the third from the right,” she explains. “If you need feed for your horse just give a copper to Ferric when you stable your horse. He’s the stableman. Your room is up the stairs and second on the left.”

Despite being in close proximity to the window, he’s unable to stand the stench in the common room any longer. “I’ll take care of my horse first then retire to my room,” he explains. “Would it be possible for my meal to be delivered to my room after I’m finished settling in my horse?”

“Sure, if you would like,” she says. “When you come back from stabling your horse, just let me know and I’ll bring it up there myself.” She gives James a wink and a knowing smile before walking over to another table where a customer is signaling for her.

Getting up, James hurries back out the door into the cool refreshing evening, taking a couple of deep breaths. *Haven’t these people ever heard of baths? I suppose I better get use to it. They’re not very hygienically conscious here.*

He unties his horse and leads him around the side to the stable. There he finds a man filling the feed bins in several of the stalls.

“Are you Ferric, the stableman?” he asks.

“That’s me, what can I do for you?” Ferric inquires.

“Melinda said I was to have the third stall from the right.” Digging into his travel purse, James hands him a copper, “This is for feed for my horse.”

Taking the copper, Ferric takes the reins from him and leads James’ horse to the stall. The stall is roomy and filled with clean straw. At the rear is an area where the tack and saddle can be stored.

Finding a brush hanging on the wall, he takes it down and proceeds to brush his horse's coat, getting all the dirt and dust off just as Corbin said he should. When he finishes with the brushing, Ferric comes over with a pail of feed for his horse.

"He'll be fine," assures Ferric as he pours the grain into the feed bin. "My room is at the end of the stable so I can hear if there is any trouble. Should there be trouble or a problem arises, I will come get you."

Giving him another copper, James says, "Thank you." Turning to his horse, he pats him and says, "I'll see you in the morning." With one last pat he turns and heads back to the inn.

James signals to Melinda as he comes back into the inn, indicating that he will be in his room and that she can bring up his dinner. Nodding, she finishes with a customer and hurries into the kitchen.

He climbs the stairs and finds a long hallway stretching the length of the building. Four doors line each side of the hall and two lit oil lamps at either end do little to banish the growing shadows. Coming to the second door on the left, he opens it and goes inside.

The room is somewhat dark as the window faces east and the sun has begun dipping below the horizon. A single candle sits in a candlestick on the middle of a small table. He tries a simple spell to light the candle's wick.

***Candle wick,
Light quick.***

A barely perceptible surge of power flows from James and the wick bursts into flame, giving off a comforting light. He sets his backpack and travel bags down in the far corner and then sits on the bed. It's sort of soft with a few lumps. The sheets and pillows are stained and not entirely clean. The room, though small, doesn't feel cramped. Aside from the bed there is a small table with two chairs.

Getting up from the bed, he crosses the room and opens the window to let in some fresh air. He finds that it overlooks the stable and courtyard below. Now that the window is open, the noise from the common room is more pronounced. It's not long until he hears a knock on the door.

Opening the door he finds Melinda carrying a tray of food balanced on one hand with a flagon of ale held in the other. He

takes the tray from her and sets it down on the table. She brings over his ale and asks if there is anything else he would like.

“No, not right now, thank you,” James tells her.

“I’ll be back in a while to take the tray back downstairs, after you’ve finished.” With that she leaves him to his dinner.

The roast beef is surprisingly good, not too tough and a little juicy. The half loaf of bread that came with the roast beef is somewhat fresh, with a hint of nuttiness about it. It doesn’t take him long to finish the meal. After sopping the last bit of juice up with some bread, he goes over and stretches out on the bed. He lies there awhile, thinking about the last few days and where the next ones will take him.

Knock! Knock!

Not wanting to get up, he hollers “Come on in.”

The door opens and Melinda walks in. “Is there anything else you will require this evening?” she asks him.

“Nothing, thank you,” replies James.

Coming over, she sits on the bed next to him, “Are you sure there is nothing else that you want?” She lays her hand on his leg and gives him a look that leaves little doubt what else there is available.

With the state of personal hygiene that he has seen since coming to this world ever present on his mind, he says “No, not tonight I’m afraid.”

Getting up off the bed, she gives him a disappointed look and then goes over to the table to gather the dinnerware. As she leaves, she turns to him and says, “I’ll be around all night if you should change your mind.” And with that she turns and walks out the door, closing it behind her.

James gets up and hurries over to the door, securing the lock. Turning to the table he blows out the candle and then gets undressed before crawling into bed. He fervently hopes there will be no biting bedbugs, then slowly drifts off to sleep.

The morning dawns bright and sunny, the sunlight coming through his window awakens him from a dream of home. Getting up, he quickly dresses and after gathering his things, heads downstairs for breakfast. There are still a few people at the tables eating and he makes his way to the same table under the window where he sat the night before.

It doesn't take long before a girl comes over to take his order and is soon enjoying a breakfast of ham steak, potatoes and eggs. While he eats, he notices two gentlemen at a table in the middle of the room in the midst of a friendly conversation. One is in his mid forties and the other is a younger man, perhaps early twenties. They look like father and son, both dark haired and dressed well.

James takes notice of another man sitting alone at a table in the corner. He isn't eating, just having a drink. He soon comes to realize the man in the corner is taking an unusual interest in the two men. His clothes are a bit ragged and is unshaven, hair uncombed. His eyes never stay on the two men for any length of time, but James notices that they come to rest on them often.

Finishing his meal, James sits back and takes his time finishing his drink. Wondering what the man in the corner is up to, he just relaxes and waits. Sipping on his ale, it's almost gone when the two men finally finish their meal and head for the exit leading out to the stables. Out of the corner of his eye, James sees the man's attention is now completely focused on the two men. As they exit the inn, the man gets up and follows them out.

Curious, James walks over to the door and peers through to see what's going on. He finds the two men entering the stables, while the single man makes his way across the courtyard to a window in the side of the stable and looks inside. The man gazes through the window for a few seconds, and then quickly glances around the courtyard. James ducks back from the doorway then peers around again a second later. He sees that the man is no longer looking through the window. Instead, he's walking around to the stable door where he slips inside.

Leaving the inn, James hurries across the courtyard to the stable's door. Coming from within the stables he hears hushed voices, but is unable to make out the words. Nearing the entrance, he begins to be able to make out what is being said inside.

"...Now!" says a voice, menacingly.

"Here, take it! Just don't hurt us." James recognizes the voice of the older of the two gentlemen. Cautiously peering around the door, he sees the older man handing a purse over to the robber. The robber is standing with sword drawn, the point scant inches from the chest of the younger man. Taking the purse, he gauges the weight of the coins contained within and then places it inside his tunic.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” the robber says. He begins backing toward James slowly, his sword still leveled at the two men.

James quickly looks around and sees a pile of old broken boards lying next to the side of the stable. He quickly and quietly takes a two foot long piece and then stands ready to wallop the robber as he exits.

From where he stands with the board raised high, he hears the robber coming closer to the doorway. When he judges that the robber is close enough, James swings the board with all his might and feels a soft thud as it connects with the back of the robber.

The robber stumbles forward from the force of the blow, his sword sailing out of his hand. Falling to the floor, he quickly rolls and regains his feet, knife drawn.

The two men, though surprised by James’ attack, quickly react as they draw their swords and advance on the robber. The robber realizes his advantage is lost and leaves his sword on the ground where it fell. Making a quick leap through the side window, he hits the ground on the other side.

“Thief!” the older man yells. The younger man starts running for the door where James stands and gives chase to the robber.

James glances toward the robber as he gains his feet and for a short second, their eyes lock. He can see the hate behind those eyes, directed at him. Then the robber turns and runs to where a saddled horse is tied to the hitching post. The younger man rushes through the door and runs after him, but is not fast enough to catch the robber before he mounts his horse. Spurring him to a gallop, the robber quickly races between the buildings until he is out of sight.

The older gentleman comes to James and holds his hand out, “Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome. I’m just sorry he got away,” he replies, shaking the man’s hand.

Holding up the pouch, the man says, “When you hit him, our money fell out of his tunic as he hit the ground. We are in your debt.”

The younger one comes up as James asks, “Did you know him?”

Shaking his head the younger one replies, “No.” Looking at the older man he asks, “Have you father?”

“No,” replies his father. “But I’ll know him if I ever see him again.” Looking around, he stares at the courtyard, empty except for

themselves and James. No one even bothered themselves to come and give aid when he called ‘Thief!’

Turning to James the father says, “I guess we’re pretty lucky not all people are cowards. My name’s Renlon, this here is my son Kinney. We’re heading north if you’d care to travel with us.”

Smiling at the offer he replies, “No thank you, I’m on my way south to Bearn. My name’s James.”

“Well James, if you’re ever in Illion, you’re welcome to our hospitality,” the father says. “We own and operate an iron mine and smelter. Maybe you’ve heard of us, Renlon’s Iron?”

“No, sorry, never heard of it. I’m new to the area,” he explains. “I will definitely stop by should I be that way.”

Digging into his purse he hands James two gold coins. “Here, take this with our gratitude.”

Taking the gold, he says “Thank you.”

Placing the gold in with his other coins, he then goes and checks on his horse, finding that he has been well taken care of. James then saddles him and walks him over to the hitching post near the front of the inn. Tying him there, he returns to the inn to gather his belongings left by the table when he went to investigate the happenings at the stable. He brings them out and secures them to the saddle before mounting. As he turns to leave the inn, he spies Renlon and his son and waves goodbye. They wave back and soon James has put the inn far behind as he continues his way south.

On the road again..., he begins singing one of his favorite songs. Spirits once again high, he brings his horse to a trot and exhilarates in his freedom. No demands, no tests, no grandparents pushing him to get a job. What could be better? The rest of the day goes by pretty uneventfully. Long before Bearn appears on the horizon, the untamed countryside turns into farmland with hardworking farmers out in their fields. By the time Bearn finally appears in the distance ahead, the sun is only a couple hours away from dipping below the horizon. Two days, just as Corbin said.

He finds Bearn to be much bigger than Trendle. The city seems to stretch for over a mile to the east of the river and probably half as much on the west side. There’s a large bridge spanning the river near the center of the city as well as a smaller one further to the south.

An encircling wall gives the city some security and protection. The road passes through a gate in the north wall allowing entry into the city. Approaching the gate, he notices several guards

maintaining order, occasionally pulling aside various travelers and asking questions. As James approaches the gate, one of the guards comes over and states, "Welcome to Bearn. Please state your name and reason for visiting."

The guard looks bored, as if he has already asked this question a thousand times today.

"My name is James," he explains. "I am just passing through, though I plan on staying the night at the Flying Swan. Maybe a day or two at the most."

The guard nods his head, makes a quick notation on a piece of paper, and then waves James on through.

Once through, he finds merchant stalls lining the street, each with a loud proprietor trying to entice people entering the city to buy their goods. Some people occasionally stop to inspect the goods offered while others pointedly ignore them as they attempt to get by without being hassled.

Several street boys come up to James, each pitching some business or other where they could take him.

"Come with me sir, I can take you to the prettiest girls in town," one lad offers.

"His girls are the ugliest," yells another. "Come to Banif's and you'll see the best."

Holding up his hand for quiet, James asks "Can one of you take me to the Flying Swan?"

Several hands fly into the air and he points to one of about thirteen. The boy heads off with James following close behind.

The boy takes him down several streets and then heads west, crossing over the big bridge that he saw earlier. The boy occasionally glances back to make sure that he hasn't lost him. They finally arrive at a building bearing a colorful sign depicting a white swan in flight over a lake. The boy stops in front of the Flying Swan and says, "Here you are, sir."

James reaches into his pouch and takes out two coppers and tosses them to the boy. Catching the coins out of the air, the boy seems satisfied. "Do you need more help sir?" asks the boy.

"Not right now and thank you for your help," he replies.

"If you ever have need of a guide while you're here, come to the gate where we met," says the boy. "My name is Miko."

James considers the offer and says, "Maybe tomorrow morning you could come here. I have a few things I need and maybe you could help me find what I require?"

Smiling, the boy replies, "Ok! I'll be here, bright and early."

"I'll see you then, Miko," says James.

The boy turns and scampers back into the crowd. In a flash he is gone.

Nice boy, James thinks to himself. He ties up his horse to the hitching post and walks into the Flying Swan.

Chapter Seven

The Flying Swan turns out to be a nice, clean place. In fact, it's the best he's seen so far since coming to this world. Upon entering he can readily tell that it's a cut above the Bend in the River, the inn where he stayed the night before. Curtains drape the windows and candelabra hang from the ceiling. Each table is draped with a clean white tablecloth and the employees present a neat, tidy appearance. One of them, a man in his middle years and dressed slightly better than the rest, sees him enter and moves toward him.

"Welcome to the Flying Swan good sir," he says with a warm and friendly smile.

"Thank you," replies James. "I met a traveler on the road and she said this would be a good place to stay while I am in Bearn."

"Of course, of course, the reputation of the Flying Swan is well deserved." Smiling broader he says, "And who might I thank for such a good recommendation?"

"A lady trader by the name of Celienda," James explains.

"Ah, little Celienda," he replies. "Yes, I know her and her father well. They are old and dear friends. How were they when you last saw them?"

"They were well and she said to tell Jillian that she sends her wishes," he tells him.

"I am Jillian and I appreciate the deliverance of her message" replies the man. "We do have several nice rooms available. The ones on the bottom floor go for a silver a night and the ones on the second floor are a silver and three coppers."

“A room on the second floor would be perfect,” he relied. “Perhaps one with a window overlooking the river?”

“I have one that would suit you. Do you have a steed as well?” he asks.

“Yes I do. He’s out front,” replies James.

Motioning for a lad of about fourteen years to come over, Jillian says to James, “Elren will take you and your horse to the stables out back. It’s another three coppers a night for your horse, but that does include grain.”

“That will be fine.” Turning toward Elren, he gives the lad a nod.

Elren returns James’ nod with a slight one of his own and then precedes him out the front door.

As James turns to follow, Jillian says, “When your horse is settled in nicely, come back inside and I’ll have someone show you to your room.”

Nodding his understanding, James follows Elren outside where he unties his horse and follows the lad around back through a gate, into an enclosed rear courtyard. “We lock the gate at night to prevent thieves from making off with the horses,” he explains. “I sleep in the rear of the stable for added security.”

“Thieving a problem in Bearn?” asks James.

“No, not really,” replies the lad. “But why take chances.”

The stables are just as nice and well kept as was the inn. The lad leads James to the stall for his horse and assists him with removing the saddle and tack. The lad then produces a pail of grain for the horse and starts to brush out his coat. Seeing that his horse will be in good hands, James returns to the inn to find Jillian who gives him a key on a chain with the number ten engraved in a small, iron disc attached to it.

Waving over a small boy, Jillian has him show James to his room.

“Follow me sir,” the boy says as he takes James’ bags. The boy walks over to the stairs and leads him to the second floor. The first door on the right off the stairs is number ten. The boy opens it and precedes James into the room then stops and holds the door open for him as he enters.

Once James is in the room, the boy sits the bags on the floor and turns toward James, waiting expectantly.

Realizing a tip is expected, he digs out a copper and gives it to the boy saying, “Thank you.”

“Will there be anything else I can help you with?” the boy asks as he pockets the coin.

“What time is dinner?” he inquires.

“There is always something available,” the boy explains. “The full menu is available an hour before sunset until late.”

“Thank you,” says James.

The boy nods and walks out of the room, closing the door as he leaves.

The room is much nicer than the one in which he spent the night before. He’s pleased to note there are two windows, one in the wall opposite the door and another in the wall to the right which overlooks the river. The bed is larger than the one from last night and when he sits on it, finds it softer as well.

There’s a table with two chairs, a nightstand and a picture of a swan in flight on the wall. There is also an upright closet with two doors along the left wall. James opens the doors and finds a rod with several hangers available. He puts his bags in the closet then lies down on the bed. Tired from his journey, his eyes quickly close and he nods off for a little nap before dinner.

Music coming from downstairs draws him from a particularly nostalgic dream of home. The sun’s gone down already and the room is dark, with some light coming in through the windows from the moon above and lamps along the street. He feels very relaxed but the grumbling of his stomach will not be denied. With the music coming through the floorboards, he gets up and makes his way carefully through the darkened room to the door.

Out in the hallway there is but a single candle positioned in the middle of the hallway to ward off the dark, its light barely reaching the door to James’ room. Removing the key from his pocket, he closes the door and locks it. He then puts the key in an inner pocket before going down the stairs to the well lit, crowded dining area.

A small stage is set along one wall and a man is there playing what looks to be something similar to a guitar, entertaining the inn’s patrons with a song. Finding an empty table along one wall, he sits with his back to the wall so he can watch the bard. The song reminds him of folk music, something from one of the old Errol Flynn movies he and his grandfather used to watch together.

He listens to the music and gets a touch of homesickness. Before the song comes to its end, a server approaches his table and

asks, "Good evening sir," a young woman greets him. "What can I get for you this evening?"

"I'll take the house special and some ale," he replies.

"We do have some good mulberry wine if you would care to try that instead?" she suggests.

"Ok, I'll try that," he agrees, feeling adventurous.

"I'll have the wine over in a second, but the special will require several more minutes," she explains.

"That's okay, I'm not in any hurry." James sits back as she leaves his table and continues to enjoy the music the bard is playing. The song is a happy one with a good beat and a catchy chorus. He catches himself tapping his finger to the rhythm of the music.

His server brings over a glass and a bottle. She opens the bottle and fills his glass with the dark red liquid. Setting the bottle on the table, she smiles at him and then moves to another table and waits on another person.

Holding the glass for a moment, he lifts it to his nose and enjoys the aroma of the wine, it has a strong berry scent. Lifting it to his lips, he takes a small sip and berry flavor bursts in his mouth, sweet and mellow. *Man that's good!* Downing the rest of the glass, he pours himself another, this time intending to take his time in drinking it.

The bard finishes the song to a rousing applause by the audience. Bowing to their admiration, he starts into another one, this time a ballad of love, soft and slow. About this time his server brings over a large platter with a whole stuffed goose. The goose has been roasted to a golden brown and the stuffing within steams, emitting an aroma of nuts and honey. Encircling the goose is an assortment of varying vegetables, all well cooked and soft to the touch. She also sets a basket with several rolls down next to the platter with the goose along with a bowl of gravy.

"Here you go sir. Do you require anything else?" she asks.

Taking out his knife, he says, "No thanks, I think I'll be fine for a while." Looking around, he notices that people are using their hands, spoons and knives to eat. Apparently forks are not the custom.

"If you need anything, just catch my eye and I'll be over," she says before returning to the kitchen.

James sets to with a hearty appetite. The goose is fantastic, the skin crisp and the flesh juicy with not a trace of pink. The rolls have a mouth watering aroma, he takes one and dips it in the gravy.

Biting into it, he finds that it's soft and fluffy. This is perhaps the best meal he's had since coming to this world.

During the course of the meal, the bard plays several more songs before taking a break. James spies a bowl sitting at the edge of the stage. From the glint of metal within, he realizes that it contains several coins. During the break he notices how several of the patrons walk over and drop coins in. *Must be tipping the bard*, he reasons. Digging into his pouch he comes out with a gold and walks over, dropping it into the bowl. His is the only gold among the coppers and a couple silvers. He returns to his table and resumes his meal.

Soon the bard again takes the stage and starts with another fast paced song. He has the crowd singing along with him after a short time, everyone is having a marvelous time. Upon finishing that song, someone shouts out, "Do the Story of Deagan." Others shout in agreement and the bard starts on a serious ballad about a man on a quest, who slays the bad guy, rescues the damsel and finally dies in the end. Thunderous applause erupts at the end of the song and shouts for other favorites bombard the bard until he begins yet another. He continues singing requests throughout the night, with only an occasional break for him to get a drink and rest his voice.

Having finished his meal, James leans back in his chair and listens to the bard sing the songs. The waitress comes over and clears off the dirty plates, leaving him with just his bottle of mulberry wine and the glass. The music is good and listening to it gives him more of an understanding about the people of this world. Without even realizing it, he finishes the bottle so he signals his server for another. She brings it over and he tips her a copper. Pouring himself a glassful he sits back and enjoys more of the music.

Knock! Knock!

Coming awake, James starts to get up out of bed when a pain that's likely to crack his skull open erupts from behind his forehead. Collapsing back onto the bed with a groan, he grabs the pillow and places it over his face to block out the blinding sun coming in through the windows.

Oh my God! I'm going to die.

Knock! Knock!

"Sir," a voice from outside the door says. "Are you in there?" James croaks out, "Go away and let me die in peace."

“Sir, there is a boy here who claims you told him to meet you here this morning.” The voice won’t go away. “He says his name is Miko.”

So this is what a hangover feels like? Upset stomach, headache that won’t quit. Why do people ever drink?

How did I get here, he wonders. The last thing he remembers is getting the second bottle of wine and listening to more of the bard. Carefully removing the pillow from in front of his face, he squints through eyes that will barely open and he looks down at himself. He’s still fully clothed in garments that are a bit wrinkled and smell the worse for wear.

“Sir, what should I tell the boy?” intrudes the painful voice.

“Have him come on in,” replies James. “And if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, could you send up something to eat and drink for the both of us?”

“Very well sir,” replies the voice. “I’ll send the boy up with your food.” James hears footsteps going down the stairs as the owner of the voice leaves.

Sitting up slowly, James looks over at the table and discovers a bowl of water along with a towel resting on the table beside it. *They must have known I’d need to clean up a little,* he reasons. Taking it slowly, he makes it to the table and plops down in one of the chairs and begins to use the water to wash his face and neck. Once cleaned up a bit, he starts feeling better. His headache continues to throb, but it’s beginning to recede a little. He checks and with relief finds the medallion still hanging around his neck beneath his shirt.

Knock! Knock!

“Sir, I brought your food and the boy,” a voice says.

Rising unsteadily from the chair, he uses every bit of furniture between the table and the door for support as he crosses the room. Opening the door, he squints with eyes barely opened and finds one of the waiters from last night carrying a plate of food and the boy Miko standing next to him. “Come on in,” he croaks in a voice barely above a whisper, “just put it on the table.” He reaches into his pocket and hands a copper to the waiter.

“Thank you sir,” the waiter says. “Will you need anything else?”

“Not right now, thank you,” he replies.

The waiter bows slightly then leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

James gestures to a chair at the table and says to Miko, “Go ahead and have a seat. You can help yourself to the food, there should be enough for both of us.”

With little hesitation, Miko takes a seat and grabs one of the plates off the tray. Then after shoving an entire biscuit into his mouth, spoons a mound of eggs on his plate. He then sets to with great enthusiasm.

James takes his seat at the table and joins Miko in helping himself to the breakfast. He has barely taken his second bite before Miko finishes his portion and is looking longingly at him for more. “Go ahead, take as much as you want,” James tells him. “Did your parents even feed you this morning?”

“Ain’t got any,” answers Miko.

“You don’t have any family at all?” he asks.

Between mouthfuls of food, Miko explains, “Got an aunt somewhere up north, but she don’t care nothing about me.”

“That’s too bad,” James says.

“I can take care of myself,” Miko boasts. “Don’t be needing nothing from nobody,”

“After we eat, we’ll get started on those errands of mine,” he explains.

Talking through a mouthful of eggs, Miko asks, “Like what?”

“I need to buy some things, like parchment, ink and something to carry it all in so it won’t get messed up,” he explains.

“Know a place across the river on the south side. It’s over in the Temple District. Brockman’s, it sells stuff like that to the temples and scribes.” Looking at James, Miko asks, “How much you gonna pay me to show you?”

Smiling, James replies, “I’ll feed you while you’re with me and a silver a day.” Seeing the boy’s eyes open wide, he asks “If you think that will be okay?”

Nodding vigorously, Miko says “No one’s ever given me that much before. Thanks!”

“No problem, just don’t do me wrong,” he cautions the lad.

“Oh, no sir, I won’t,” Miko says earnestly. He snatches the last of the biscuits and tries to slather more jelly on it than the biscuit will hold. With jelly dripping off most of the sides he stuffs it into his mouth. Seeing that James is also finishing the last traces of eggs left on his plate, Miko wipes the excess jelly off of his face with his arm then gets to his feet and waits.

“I was wondering if there was a place that cleans clothes. Maybe even a bathhouse nearby?” asks James.

Thinking a bit, Miko says “The people here at the inn would probably get it done for you. They might even supply a bath here in your room. Some of the better inns do that.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” James exclaims. “Thanks, you’re already coming in handy.”

Miko beams at the praise.

Knock! Knock!

Miko immediately crosses to the door and opens it for James. The waiter who brought the food walks into the room. “If you are done, sir, I can take them back to the kitchen,” he says, indicating the dirty plates.

“Go ahead, I think we’re done,” James says. “Oh, and could I get some of my clothes cleaned while I am out today?”

“We can take care of that for you, sir,” agrees the man. “Just leave what you wish cleaned on the table. Then on your way out let one of us know and we will come and collect them. You should have them back by this evening.”

“Excellent, thank you,” says James. “Also, is it possible to have a bath here in the room?”

“Yes, we do have tubs that we can bring in for the guests,” explains the man. “Would you like one now, sir?”

“No, I can wait till tonight. How much notice do you need to get it ready?” he asks.

“Very little, just let us know,” replies the man. Gathering up the last of the dishes, he walks over to the door and leaves. Miko closes the door behind him.

“What do you want a bath for anyway?” asks Miko.

“Feels good, you don’t stink and you stay healthier,” replies James. “Haven’t you ever taken a bath before?”

“Naw, don’t like ‘em,” says Miko emphatically. “Fell in the river once, though.”

Miko waits patiently while James changes out of his dirty clothes and puts on a clean set he purchased back in Trendle. Once he has them on, he looks at himself in the ‘native attire’. Admiring himself, he thinks, *Not bad*. He folds and places his dirty clothes on the table then grabs his backpack. Indicating for Miko that it’s time to go, he follows the boy out the door and locks it with his key.

Downstairs, he informs a member of the staff about his dirty clothes and arranges for their cleaning. Turning to Miko he says,

“Let’s go.” Following the boy, James heads out the door and enters a street filled with people going about their business.

Miko leads him through the throng and after a short distance, come to the bridge they crossed the day before on the way to the inn. He crosses the bridge and soon arrives at what James assumes is the temple district. Several large buildings that have the look of temples line the street on both sides. Some are made of simple stone and wood while others are quite impressive with ornamentation and delicate architecture.

Passing the temples, Miko stops in front of a modest shop with a single door and window. He opens the door and goes inside.

James can see that this must be Brockman’s, the place Miko had told him about. Many shelves line the walls and are stacked with reams of paper, quills, and ink bottles. Ten tables are spaced about the shop, several having men busily copying manuscripts. He peers over the shoulder of the nearest and can tell that this scribe has a good, artistic talent. The page is beautiful with multiple colors and flourishes highlighting the script.

“Welcome good sir to Brockman’s Manuscripts.” James turns to find a man who’s smiling at him warmly. “I am Brockman,” he says as he extends a hand in greeting. James shakes his hand and asks “You copy manuscripts here?”

“Many nobles pay for copies of important works so they may have them in their own personal library.” Motioning to the man whose handiwork James had been admiring, he says, “For instance, Lord Beleron has contracted with us for a copy of the Story of Beltine for his daughter. It’s a favorite storybook among the nobles these days.”

“That is very good work,” praises James.

“Nothing but the best from Brockman’s Manuscripts. What can I help you with today?” Standing patiently, Brockman looks at James expectantly.

“I need a kit containing paper, ink and quills that I may take on my travels,” he explains. “What would you suggest?”

“I may have what you need,” Brockman says, “follow me.” He leads James around the room to one of the shelves and pulls down a wooden box.

Brockman opens the box and James can see it’s what he wanted. It has holders for inkwells and even an enclosed compartment for quills. There is also an open area where unused sheets of paper are stored. It reminds him of a briefcase, only bulkier.

“Would this be to your liking, sir?” asks Brockman.

Taking the case, James sees that it is not as heavy as he expected. Nodding he says, “Yes. I think it will suit me just fine. I would need to purchase the ink, quills and parchment as well.”

Taking James to another table, Brockman launches into an explanation of the various items he carries. He didn’t realize there were so many different types of each to be had. He finally settles on three bottles of ink, two black and one red. A set of ten quills, half fine points and half broad points. Selecting parchment takes the longest time, for there were more choices. There was thin parchment, but it wouldn’t hold up long and very high quality parchment that would last a lifetime but at a gold a piece. He finally decides on something in between, not too thick but would last for a while.

When he finally settles on all the items he wants, Brockman tells him how much and James digs into his pouch and hands over the amount requested. Brockman takes the money and says with great enthusiasm, “Thank you sir. Would you like me to have it delivered for you?”

“Yes,” says James. “I am staying at the Flying Swan and I’m staying in room ten.”

“Very good sir, I’ll have it over there this afternoon.”

Once they were out of the shop and back on the street, Miko gives him a disapproving look and says, “You didn’t even haggle with him!”

“Haggle?” queries James.

“Yes, haggle,” states Miko. “Didn’t he seem just a little too happy when you handed over the money?”

“As a matter of fact, he did,” agreed James.

“That’s because you paid almost twice what the stuff you bought was worth!” he explains.

“I’ve never haggled before,” James admits.

“Never haggled...?” Miko just stares incredulously at him. “Just where do you come from that doesn’t require haggling?”

“A long, long ways I’m afraid,” he answers. “I guess I’m going to have to get the hang of it.”

“Yeah,” agrees Miko. “And if you don’t, you ain’t gonna have any money left after a while.”

James mulls over Miko’s words. He comes to the conclusion that there needs to be changes in the way he does things. Need to

adapt them to this place and their customs. *When in Rome...*
James thinks to himself.

“Where to now?” asks Miko.

“Is there a library in town?” he asks.

“The only libraries belong to the nobles,” explains Miko. “They don’t let anyone use them. Why do you need a library anyway?”

“Oh, I just like books is all.” James misses his collection of books back home. Seeing the books the scribes were copying brought back some of the homesickness that James had thought he had begun to get over.

“Is there a candy shop in town?” he suddenly asks.

“What’s candy?” responds Miko.

“Just something I use to like back when I was home,” James explains. “How about a bakery or pastry shop?”

“There are a couple bakeries,” Miko explains. “One is famous for its tarts.” He looks expectantly at James and a light enters his eyes when James nods.

“Let’s go,” James agrees. “We’ll see just how good those tarts are.”

Miko takes the lead and they are soon out of the temple district. After making several turns and walking down a couple streets, they find themselves outside a shop with a mouth watering aroma emanating from within. Hanging on the outside of the shop is a sign with a loaf of bread cut in two.

Upon entering, James sees a wide variety of breads and pastries displayed behind the counter. A fat lady in an apron is currently helping another lady so he waits patiently as he looks over the various selections.

When the lady is done, James steps to the counter and is greeted by the fat lady.

“Welcome, welcome. How may I help you today?” she asks with a warm and friendly attitude.

Patting Miko on the back he says, “My friend here tells me that you are famous for your tarts and I have come to see if he was correct.”

Beaming, the lady responds, “We do have the best tarts in town. Many of the nobles will only purchase from us because of the superior quality in all that we do.” She reaches behind her and takes a tart with red filling slightly oozing from one corner. Breaking it in two, she gives each of them half. Biting into it, James is impressed with the rich berry flavor of the filling and the flakiness of the crust.

Seeing that she is waiting expectantly for a response, he says, "This is a very good tart." Looking over at Miko, he sees him nodding his head approvingly. "Give us a mixed variety of a dozen please," he tells her.

Beaming with pride, she turns back to the counter and takes a sack, placing thirteen tarts of varying color and size inside. She then turns back to the counter and hands him the sack saying that it will be a silver and three coppers.

Miko nudges James in the side, who looks down. Miko mouths 'Haggle' silently.

James looks back at the lady and says, "Eighteen coppers." Miko nods approvingly.

"A silver two coppers," counters the lady.

"A silver," James offers.

"Done," the lady agrees. Handing over the silver, James and Miko leave the shop eating their tarts.

"Did I do it right?" James asks Miko.

"You did okay," admits Miko, "with a little practice you can get them down even further." Finishing off his first tart, Miko looks at James obviously wanting more so he gives him another. Saving the rest for later, he puts them in his backpack.

They stroll down the street eating their tarts, when James sees coming down the street toward them, a group of boys a little older than Miko. Feeling a tug on his sleeve, he looks at Miko who says, "C'mon, let's go this way," and begins dragging him down a side alley.

As they enter the ally, Miko glances around the corner at the group of boys worriedly. "What's wrong," James asks.

"Nothing," replies Miko. Seeing the boys still coming in their direction, he takes James by the hand and hurries him down the alley.

"Then why are we moving quickly down this dirty alley?" he wonders, doing his best to keep up.

"It's a shortcut," replies Miko, his voice belying his attempt to appear casual.

"To where?" persists James.

"Wherever you're going," insists Miko.

As luck would have it, the group of boys enters the alley behind them. Seeing the boys coming up behind them, Miko breaks into a run as he releases James' hand. James runs along behind Miko, not sure what is going on.

“There’s that sewer rat!” James hears from one of the boys behind them. Looking back he sees the group break into a run, racing after them.

“You’re dead, Miko!” shouts another.

“Friends of yours?” asks James as he breaks into a run, trying to keep pace with the rapidly accelerating Miko.

“No and we don’t want them to catch us either,” says Miko as he turns and leads James into another, much narrower alley. By this time Miko is in a dead run and James is doing his best to keep up but he’s never been very athletic. Dodging around corners, they try to lose them, but James realizes that they will never be able to shake them.

Racing around another corner, Miko abruptly comes to a stop. They’ve run into a dead end. A door in the left wall stands ajar; Miko pushes through it with James right behind. James glances back as he passes through the doorway and sees the boys turning into the alley, almost upon them. Slamming the door shut, he puts his weight against it to keep it closed. He no sooner gets the door closed then feels the weight of the boys slamming against it on the other side. It groaned under the impact, but held.

Looking around the dirty little room, he sees nothing that will help him with keeping the door shut. Miko has already rushed through the opposite door, leaving James in there alone. It doesn’t take him long to realize that he’ll not be able to hold the door very long against the weight of the boys.

“Open that door!” one of them yells.

“You’re not getting away from us,” another screams.

James frantically presses his weight against the door with all his might. Cracks begin forming in the wood of the door from the relentless pounding of the boys on the other side.

An idea comes to him. He concentrates and then says:

***Door of wood have the strength of steel,
Allow no entry for those who would kill.***

James feels the now familiar surge of power as he completes his spell. Maintaining his concentration and visualization of his desired affects, he gradually reduces the pressure he’s exerting on the door. Once he’s confident his spell is in affect and holding, he turns and practically trips over Miko, almost causing him to lose his concentration.

Miko is staring at him wide eyed and a little fearful. “You a mage!” he exclaims.

“Save it for later,” James insists. “This isn’t going to hold for long. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

As they leave the room through the other door, James says, “I thought you ran out on me.”

Looking hurt, Miko replies “I didn’t realize you weren’t following me. When I did, I came back.”

Passing through the doorway, they enter a smaller room, dirty and smelling like an outhouse. James realizes with trepidation that there is neither a window nor a door except for the one they just come through.

“Over here,” Miko hollers at him. He begins moving garbage out of the way and opens a trap door that had been concealed by the garbage covering the floor. The smell that fills the room when the trap door opens leaves little doubt as to where it leads. Miko begins to descend the ladder down into the hole when he looks over at James, almost laughing at the expression on his face. “Do you want to stay up here?” he asks.

“No,” replies James, doing his best not to breathe through his nose as he moves closer to the opening. When Miko climbs to the bottom, James begins his descent into the dark opening of the sewers.

Chapter Eight

The odors emerging from the entrance to the sewer assaulted James’ senses. His eyes begin watering and could barely breathe. Only the threat of the boys trying to break in the door and possibly doing them bodily harm convinces him of the wisdom to climb down. He sets a foot on the uppermost rung of the ladder that descends into the sewers. His foot slips a little on the slime coating the rung, making it slippery and treacherous.

Using great caution, he slowly makes his way down to the floor of the sewer, his hands becoming slick as the slime from the rungs coating them. Upon reaching the bottom, he steps onto the sewer floor only to slip on a slick, slimy patch. Losing his balance he tumbles backward into the stinking, oozing muck slowly making its way through the sewer.

The fall into the stream of nastiness breaks his concentration, causing the spell holding the door closed to fail. The sound of breaking wood filters its way through the opening above as Miko helps him to his feet. They proceed quickly down the dark sewer tunnel putting distance between themselves and the entrance. Thoroughly nauseated, James tries to scrape as much of the filth off him as he can while hurrying down the tunnel.

They proceed along the stream of filth for a ways before taking a moment to turn and see if pursuit materializes. James watches the faint light coming through the trapdoor they so recently fled through. He is sure that by now the boys would have found the sewer entrance and should be descending after them. They remain quiet for several seconds but don't see or hear anything other than the constant dripping of water coming out of several ducts in the wall, spilling into the main flow of the sewer.

"I don't think they followed us down here," he whispers to Miko.

"No, I didn't think they would," replies Miko in a low voice. "Not many come here who are not invited."

"Invited?" questions James.

"Yeah, there's a gang that claims the sewers as their own and anyone else who comes down here is fair game. Everyone knows not to come down here."

"So why did we?" he asks with exasperation. He tries to scrape more of the sewer muck off but only ends up spreading it further. Giving it up as a lost cause, he stops trying.

"It seemed the better choice at the time," replies Miko.

Grabbing Miko, James asks "And just who were we running from anyway?"

"They're a bunch of petty thugs. They think I fingered them on a job they pulled last month," Miko explains. "I didn't but word got around that I was the one and they've had it in for me ever since."

"I see," he says. "Anyway, we need to find our way out of here." He casts his light spell and the glowing orb appears, bringing a startled gasp from Miko. Using the orb to illuminate their way, he

says, "Let's go," as he indicates Miko to lead them further down the sewer tunnel.

They come to a junction where a smaller branch of the main sewer enters from the left. James decides to continue following the main passage after pausing only a moment to look down the other. After another hundred feet they come to a ladder leading into the darkness above.

Grabbing Miko, he pulls him close to the rungs and says, "Look, these rungs are clean which means they must be used regularly. It could be a way out." Gesturing toward the ladder he says, "Climb up there and see where it leads."

"There's only one group of people who would be using these rungs regularly," Miko tells him, "and they don't like unexpected guests."

"Maybe. But we need to get out of here before they discover us," he insists.

Nodding understandingly, but not too happy about it, Miko goes up the rungs. He returns shortly and says, "There's a trapdoor but I can't get it to open. It must be barred or locked from the other side."

"Alright, let's go down a little further and see if there's another way out," James says as he turns and continues making his way down the main sewer passage. They pass several lesser passages, but after giving each a cursory glance, continues following the main one.

Further down they come to where the water flowing through the sewer begins growing progressively deeper and soon has risen to their calves. They slosh their way through the water and other floating debris until they come to the blockage that's obstructing the sewer and causing it to back up. As they draw near to the obstruction, James begins to realize just what it is that's blocking the water's flow.

It's a body and by the looks of it, has been here for a while. The flesh is in an advanced state of decay with maggots crawling all over it. A couple of rats are having a meal on the corpse's exposed thigh. They squeal and scamper away at their approach. Other debris has wedged itself around the dead body which has only added to the blockage.

Feeling like he's about ready to throw up, James steps over the corpse and hurries down the tunnel. Once they've put some distance between them and the corpse, he begins to recover some of his composure, but still feels a little green.

“I hear you see a lot of that down here,” Miko tells him. “People come up missing and their bodies come out through the sewer’s outflow into the river.”

“Let’s hope the next ones won’t be ours,” states James.

Continuing down the passage, they pass two more offshoots, the smallest ones thus far. The second one is barely wide enough to squeeze through. Not much more than a wide crack in the wall. Looks like it may have been created during an earthquake or something similar.

They travel a short distance further past the small passages before discerning a light coming toward them from up ahead. James quickly cancels his light spell, plunging them into complete darkness. They start backing up the way they had come.

As they back up, James runs his hand along the wall until he encounters the smallest passage, the one that’s not more than a crack in the wall. He stops Miko and says, “I think we can squeeze through here and hide until they pass.”

Miko goes in first and then he follows, squeezing in until he’s a few feet from the tunnel. The approaching light steadily grows brighter as it draws nearer. It’s not long before they hear the approaching footsteps of several men.

As the men pass by the crack they’re hiding in, James discovers that the light is coming from a torch one of them is carrying.

“...saw something down here,” James hears one of them say.

“You’re seeing things, Dink,” another adds.

“Keep quiet and look sharp,” still another commands.

As the group passes by, James counts five men, the one in the lead carrying the torch. The men continue further down the sewer and soon the light fades until only darkness remains.

After it has been dark a minute or two, James cautiously makes his way back out of the crack to the sewer tunnel. He looks down the way the men had gone and discovers the light is no longer visible. Taking the chance that no one will be able to see, his orb springs to life on his palm. It’s then that he realizes Miko has not followed him back out into the sewer. Holding his light close to the opening, he whispers, “Miko, come on. They’re gone.”

From the opening he hears Miko’s voice, “James, there’s a room in here and another passage leading from it.” Pausing momentarily, he continues, “It may lead to another way out, away from trouble.”

“All right, I’m coming in,” he says and begins to squeeze back through. At one point he starts panicking when the crack narrows

and he becomes stuck. But then he manages to wriggle past the narrow section and at last comes through to the room Miko has found.

The illumination from his orb shows that the room is small and looks like it had once been used as a storage room long ago. There are several barrels as well as a couple boxes stacked around the room, all of which have a thick layer of dust coating them. Examining the floor, he sees the only footprints disturbing the dust are the ones he and Miko have made. The single exit is a small, narrow hallway leading away into darkness.

“Doesn’t look like anyone has been in here for a long time,” observes James.

“Yeah, I wonder who used to use it,” adds Miko. He pokes into several of the boxes and barrels that are still intact but fails to come up with anything worthwhile, just old clothes long past the time when they were serviceable. Looking at James he says, “Nothing of any use here.”

Finding an old lantern in a box, James takes it and places his glowing orb inside. Now the light from the orb illuminates even better. He crosses the room to the hallway opening and shines the light down it, discovering a simple hallway which extends further than the light can reach.

“Wonder how far it goes?” Miko asks from behind him.

“Don’t know,” he replies as he moves into the hallway. The hallway continues for well over a hundred feet before ending at a flight of stone steps leading up. He directs the light toward the top and sees where it ends at a trapdoor in the ceiling.

He makes his way up the stairs to the trapdoor. Putting his shoulder against it, he pushes and manages to raise it a crack. Amazed at how much strength it took to raise it even that far, he sets the lantern down on a step and braces himself for a second try.

This time lifting with all his strength, he manages to raise the trapdoor far enough to allow light from his lantern to illuminate what lies beyond. Beyond is another small room, this one as untouched as the one below had been. No one has been in this area for a very long time.

Then letting out with a grunt of exertion, he raises the trapdoor several more inches, just enough for Miko to scramble through. Holding it open, he says, “Go through and help lift it from the other side.”

Miko scrambles up the steps and while James holds the trapdoor open, wriggles on through.

James' strength is about to fail when he feels the weight ease up as Miko takes hold from the other side. When it's open far enough that Miko can hold it by himself, James picks up the lantern and hurries through to the room beyond. Now he can see why the trapdoor was so heavy, a barrel was firmly attached to it. Perhaps in order to hide its existence and keep this way secret. He sets the lantern down on the floor and helps Miko to carefully close the trapdoor. They don't want it slamming down hard and alerting whoever may be around. Just because this area has remained unused for a long time, doesn't mean a nearby area is likewise deserted.

After the trapdoor is once more closed, he picks up the lantern and pans the light around the room. The room has stone walls on three of its sides, with a wooden one on the fourth. A door stands closed in the wooden wall. Around the room are more dust covered barrels and boxes. A quick search shows that there is nothing of interest in any of them, only some old cloth that has long since deteriorated.

Intrigued by the hidden rooms, James wonders where the end of it will lead. He goes over to the door and puts his ear to it. Not hearing anything, he cautiously opens the door and finds that it opens onto a dark, narrow passageway extending both to the right and the left. Shining the light on the floor reveals footprints in the dust, an indication that there has been someone through here recently. Upon closer examination, he finds the foot prints head in both directions.

Entering the hallway, he shines his light first down to the right, then the left. It looks as if they are standing in what could be a secret passage that might connect to several rooms. Miko enters the hallway behind him and shuts the door. That's when James notices that he can't tell where the opening of the door they just came through is. It looks like a solid wooden wall with no apparent openings.

Whispering, he says to Miko, "Now I can understand why those rooms have been unused for so long. This secret door must have been forgotten. Let's see if we can figure out how to open it before we go any further. I'd hate to not have a way out of here if things go bad."

Nodding his agreement, Miko takes the lantern and keeps watch for anyone approaching while James feels around to see if he can

find the opening mechanism. He searches the wooden wall, feeling for any grooves or indentations that might indicate a trigger, also checking the floor for any loose boards. Returning his attention to the wall, this time taking more care in his search, he discovers a small knothole in the wall that is a little loose, but doesn't move when pressed. He also finds two others that are loose as well and tries pressing them all at the same time. As he applies pressure, all three simultaneously sink into the wall about a quarter of an inch and a barely perceptible click is heard as the door swings open on a silent hinge.

"How'd you figure that out?" asks an incredulous Miko.

Smiling with great satisfaction, James replies, "I've read stories about stuff like this. It isn't too hard if you know what to look for." *Also, years of role playing games and designing dungeons doesn't hurt either*, he adds to himself in satisfaction.

Shutting the door again, he turns and heads down the right hand passage, one direction being as good as another. Keeping the light as dim as he can while still being able to see, he tries to locate cracks of light coming through the walls which may indicate other secret doors. Ten feet further down, the passage turns sharply to the left and after another six feet they reach a juncture where they are faced with the choice of continuing straight or taking a very narrow stairway up.

James inspects the footprints in the dust and sees that the majority of the tracks follow the corridor straight ahead, while only a small portion continues up the stairs. Deciding that following the main body of tracks will most likely lead to a main exit, he continues down the passage past the stairs.

After another ten feet or so, he detects a faint outline of light in the shape of a door on the left wall. Pointing it out to Miko, he whispers "Looks like another secret door."

Nodding in agreement, Miko says, "Look," as he points to the tracks they've been following. "Most of the tracks end here. This looks like a well used entrance to the secret passage."

"I think you are correct," agrees James. Using the lamp to inspect the wall, he finds a simple latch keeping the door closed. He pauses momentarily as he places his ear to the door. Not hearing anything from the other side, he slowly lifts the latch and opens the door just far enough for him to be able to see through to the other side.

He cautiously looks out and takes a quick look around. Finding the room empty, James opens the door wider and steps into the room, signaling for Miko to follow. As Miko passes through he closes the door behind him.

The room looks to be a richly furnished den. The door they came through turns out to be a life sized portrait of a man that has been hinged to the wall, concealing the secret entrance. A large mahogany desk and chair dominate the room, with a large picture window in the wall behind it. Across the room from the desk sits a brick fireplace, now cold and unused. Several shelves line the walls containing many books and other knickknacks. From the looks of this room, the owner is a very rich individual indeed.

The only exit from the room, other than the one they came through, is a door to the left of the portrait. Nodding to the door, he whispers to Miko, "See if you can see or hear anything." While he checks the door, James walks across the room to the window behind the desk to see if it can be opened. He finds it held closed with a simple lock and can easily be opened. Glancing out the window, he sees an expansive lawn area extending from the house to a high stone wall which looks to surround the grounds of the estate. At the moment there doesn't appear to be anyone in the vicinity. He whispers over to Miko who is still peering out the door, "Anything?"

Shaking his head no, Miko says, "Nothing. All seems to be quiet."

"Good," he replies with relief. "Maybe we can get out of here before we're discovered."

"I'm for that," agrees Miko. "They would take us for thieves for sure."

Waving Miko over to him he says, "There's no one out in the yard so perhaps we could make it over the wall before anyone realizes we've been here."

"Maybe," agrees Miko as he gauges the distance between the window and the wall. It's at least a hundred feet of open lawn. "But that's a long run to the wall."

"Look over there," James points toward the right, over by the wall.

Miko looks and sees where a tree is growing close to the wall. "Maybe we could climb that tree and get over the wall?" he asks.

"That's what I'm thinking," nods James.

Taking one more look to make sure that the area between the window and the wall remains clear, he opens the window and helps Miko through to the ground below. Thank goodness they are on the ground floor. He then follows Miko out the window and closes it quickly once he's down beside him. They crouch in the bushes beneath the window momentarily as they scan the area for people. Once they ascertain the area is clear, they head out quickly and quietly for the tree.

They take no more than three steps when from above them on the second floor, a voice cries out, "Guards! Intruders!"

Looking up, James sees a well dressed man staring at him from an upper story window. Their eyes lock for just a second before he returns to the business at hand and bolts for the tree.

"Guards!" the man hollers again, "they're heading for the wall!"

No longer worrying about stealth, James and Miko make a mad dash across the grounds. Two guards bearing drawn swords emerge at a run around the corner of the house and upon seeing them racing for the wall, move to intercept. "Stop!" yells one.

Miko makes the tree first and jumps for a lower limb. Grabbing it, he swings himself up into the tree. James throws his backpack over the wall and not being as nimble, has difficulty getting into the tree.

Reaching his hand down for James to grab, Miko yells, "Take my hand!"

Seeing the proffered hand, James reaches up and takes hold of it. With Miko's help, he's able to get up into the tree. They make their way through the lower limbs to the top of the wall just at the guards reach the base of the tree.

Swords strike at them as they pass from the tree to the wall, but they're too far up and the blows are ineffective. Swinging over the wall, they drop down to the street below and James begins looking around for his backpack.

A small boy stands not two feet away with his back to them. He has the backpack and is rummaging through it.

James comes up behind him and grabs the boy by the shoulder. Startled, the boy drops the backpack as he jumps a foot in the air. Turning, he sees James and Miko standing there. Before James can say a word, the boy bolts and disappears into the crowd.

James picks his backpack off the ground and turns to Miko, "Get us out of here!"

“This way,” Miko says then races off into the crowd with James close behind. The people around them continue going about their business, as if two men climbing over a wall were an everyday occurrence. James expected at least one of the bystanders would have tried to hinder their escape or at the very least to have shouted a warning to a constable that something odd was occurring. But no cry arises from anyone and they make it out of the area.

Finding a quiet alley, they duck inside and stop for a moment to catch their breath. “Do you think they’ll send the watch after us?” James asks. Standing at the mouth of the alley, he peers around the corner for any sign of pursuit.

“I don’t think we have to worry about the town watch getting involved,” replies Miko. “That was Lord Colerain’s estate we were in. In fact, it was Lord Colerain who was shouting out the window for the guards.”

“Why wouldn’t he call for the town watch?” he asks.

“He has his own guards and nobles like to take care of things themselves,” he replies. “It would be a loss of face if he were to come to the town watch for help. Since we didn’t take anything and there was no damage, it’s unlikely that he’ll do anything. Of course, if he comes across us, then he may seek revenge.”

“Alright,” says James. “Let’s just get back to the Flying Swan.”

Leading the way, Miko soon has them back at the inn. It’s a tribute to the lack of sanitation of this world that they can come into an inn from the sewers and no one says anything. James tells one of the workers that he’d like two tubs sent to his room, then he and Miko go on up.

“Two tubs?” Miko asks apprehensively as they begin climbing the stairs.

“Yes, two tubs,” answers James. “You smell like the sewer.”

“Actually, I wasn’t the one to fall in, remember?” he reminds him, smiling.

James replies, “Try it, you may never get another chance.”

“Alright, but I’m not going to like it.”

James empties out his backpack and lays the contents on the floor by the bed. A knock at the door heralds the arrival of two tubs carried in by four young boys. It doesn’t take the staff long to have them filled with steaming hot water. One servant brings in two small bowls of a powdery substance, setting one by each of the tubs. When James looks questioningly at it, he’s told that its soap and it’ll help to remove the grime. He tells one of the workers to come back

in a few minutes to pick up his clothes and the backpack. That he wants to have them cleaned along with his other clothes they picked up earlier.

After the workers leave, he strips off his clothes and climbs into one of the tubs. The water is hot but not uncomfortable. Leaning back, he relaxes and lets the tensions of the day melt away. Settling in, he looks over to Miko and says, "Come on, it feels really good." Reaching down, he scoops out some of the soap and proceeds to scrub the sewer gunk off.

Not looking convinced, Miko gets undressed and comes over to the tub hesitantly. He gingerly sticks one foot into the water and then pulls it out again fast, "It's hot!" he says.

"Of course it's hot," he replies, slightly amused. "Being hot just makes it relax you more. Once you get in you'll get use to it."

Putting a toe in the water once again, he cautiously works the rest of his foot and then his leg in. Realizing the water is not going to scald him, he puts the other foot in and slowly immerses himself the rest of the way in. He sits there for a minute, at first not happy with it. Then as he becomes accustomed to the water's temperature, he relaxes and begins to enjoy the experience.

Shortly, one of the workers returns to take James' clothes and backpack, also dropping off two large towels so they may dry themselves when they are finished. James asks him if the clothes could be done by nightfall as he plans to leave in the morning. The worker tells him that they will rush it through.

Grabbing more soap, he continues scrubbing himself clean. *This is the first bath I've had in a week*, he thinks to himself. He had always liked baths. Back home he would at times soak in one until the water was cold and his skin the texture of prunes.

He looks over to Miko and finds that he's beginning to relax and even seems to be enjoying it. Seeing the way James uses the soap, Miko scoops some out and copies him, rubbing it over his skin.

Knock! Knock!

"Come in," James shouts through the door.

One of the workers at the Inn brings in a package. "This was just dropped off for you from Brockman's," the man says. Placing the package on the table, he turns and goes back out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"What do you need that stuff for anyway?" asks Miko, referring to the writing materials.

“I plan on keeping a journal,” he replies. “And who knows how else it may come in handy.” *Like a spell book*, he adds silently. He has long since come to the conclusion that he needs to create spells so in an emergency he will have ready access to them and won’t have to take the time to think one up.

He stays in the tub until the water begins to cool, then gets out and dries himself with one of the towels. Miko gets out as well and soon they are both dressed once more. James is in the last of his clean clothes and Miko dons his dirty old ones again.

“That wasn’t so bad, now was it?” James asks him.

“It was pretty good, actually,” Miko replies with a grin. “I could get to like it.”

Miko walks over to the bed and leans over the pile of items on the floor, curious about the stuff from James’ backpack. He picks up the homemade compass that James had fashioned earlier in Trendle during his search for Hern. Holding it up, he looks over to James and asks, “What is this thing?”

Glancing over and seeing what Miko is holding, he replies, “Just something I made a while back. I used it to find something.”

“How does it work?” he inquires.

“I use a spell and it shows the direction of whatever I ask it to find,” James explains. Taking it from Miko, he points out the charcoal line and says, “This line will point in the direction of what I am trying to find.”

“Wow,” says Miko. “Can you have it find something right now?”

“No,” he answers as he lays the compass back on the floor. “Magic is not something you should do just for amusement.”

Disappointed, Miko gives him a regretful look.

Grabbing his coin pouch, James pulls out two silvers and hands them to Miko. “Here, take these,” he says. “You really helped me today and I appreciate it. Let’s go downstairs and I’ll buy you dinner before you leave.”

Miko is opening the door when he hears James says, “Here, you can have these as well.” Turning, he sees James handing him the bag of tarts.

“Thanks,” he says gratefully, as he puts the small sack inside his shirt for safekeeping.

Together they go down to the common room and find a good table situated near the rear. They only have to wait a minute or two before the girl comes over to see what they would like. It’s still an

hour or so before dark, so the evening crowd hasn't yet come in. Naught but a couple of people share the room with them. Once they give her their order, she returns to the kitchen.

"So, where are you going from here?" asks Miko.

"I'm planning on heading south, maybe as far as Castle Cardri," he explains. The girl returns shortly with their food and a bottle of the mulberry wine that James had liked so much the night before. Tonight however, he plans to limit himself to only one bottle. He has no desire to experience another hangover. The memory of the one he woke to this morning forestalls any such attempt.

It doesn't take long for the room to begin filling up. The bard from the night before returns and takes his place on the stage to a roar of applause and shouts of joy. After a short bow to the audience, he begins playing a rollicking song that soon has the crowd clapping along with the rhythm. James enjoys the music as much as he did the night before and seeing how Miko is listening with rapt attention, can tell he's enjoying it too.

The next song is a slow, sad ballad of two lovers torn apart due to the difference in their social standings and the story ultimately ends in tragedy. Miko finishes eating and sits back as they enjoy the show for a while.

They sit there for several hours listening to the music and talking about the events of the day before James begins finding it hard to keep his eyes open. The exertions of the day are at last taking their toll. "Miko my friend," James says through a yawn, "I've really enjoyed your company, but I'm off for bed."

Getting up, Miko says, "Good night then. If you ever pass this way again, ask the boys by the gate for me and I'll show up."

Offering his hand, James responds, "I will."

Miko takes his hand, giving it a shake and then heads for the door, making his way through the crowded room.

James watches Miko until he exits through the door before getting to his feet. Moving to the stairs, he goes up to his darkened room. Lighting the candle on the table with his spell, the wick ignites and fills the room with a soft glow. He finds that the clothes and backpack the staff had taken to be cleaned have already been returned and placed on the table. He takes all the items on the floor by the bed and places them once again into the freshly cleaned backpack. Giving the pack a sniff, he can only faintly detect the odor of the sewer. He repacks all his clothes and when his belongings are ready for travel, removes his clothes and blows out

the candle before crawling into bed. It's not long before he falls asleep.

Chapter Nine

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Insistent and unrelenting pounding upon the door awakens James in the dead of night. Half asleep, he gets out of bed and stumbles his way through the dark shadows of his room to the door.

Knock! Knock!

Just as he reaches the door, from the other side he hears Miko say in a loud whisper "James, wake up." There's a tightness and sense of urgency in his voice. "Wake up and open the door!"

Undoing the lock, James opens the door and steps back as Miko rushes into the room. The boy quickly shuts the door and throws the bolt closed. Turning to James he says, "You gotta get out of here!"

"Why?" he asks still not quite awake.

"Remember, I said that nobles like to settle things themselves?" asks Miko as he paces back and forth nervously.

Nodding his head, James replies, "Yeah, I remember."

"It seems that Lord Colerain, whose estate we were chased out of this morning, has somehow discovered who it was that was at his estate today and where you are staying," he explains. "I overheard a conversation between an agent of Lord Colerain and a group of men who hire out for this type of job. He wants you taken so he can find out why you were at his estate."

"When?" Moving to where his clothes lay, he hurriedly begins to get dressed.

"I didn't wait to find out," explains Miko. "I came here as fast as I could to warn you. It'll be soon though." He paces impatiently by the door while James finishes getting dressed.

"I had better get out of the city now," he decides. "I planned on leaving in the morning anyway." Once he's dressed, he grabs his backpack and hands his other pack to Miko. Moving carefully in the

dark he makes his way over to the door where he slides back the bolt. Opening it slowly, he peers down the hallway in both directions.

The hallway is dark and quiet as a tomb. Leaving the room, they make their way to the stairs and descend quickly and quietly to the ground floor. There they find the common room dark and deserted, the small amount of light coming in through the windows casts an eerie pall to the place. The floor boards creak as they make their way silently across the room to the door leading to the stables.

Upon reaching the door, James pauses a moment to look out a window to the rear courtyard. About to open the door, he stops when he sees shadows moving near the stables. Part of them break off and approach the inn, heading for the door near which he's standing. Only the dark of night prevents him from being seen by those approaching. Turning about, he silently indicates to Miko that they should leave through the front door. He takes but two steps toward the front door before it slowly begins to open.

James immediately ducks under one of the tables, pulling Miko down under it with him. Staying as quiet as they can, they watch as several shadows enter through the front door while two more come in through the door to the stables.

The two groups meet at the base of the stairs. James can hear whispers but is unable to make out any of the words. Four of the shadows head up the stairs after pausing only momentarily, while two of them remain in the common room, just a few feet from where James and Miko are hiding.

From upstairs comes the sound of a door opening, then the inn is silent for a few seconds before the door closes once again. The four shadows return down the stairs and cross to where their two fellows are waiting near James and Miko. "He's not up there," one of them whispers.

"We can't stay here," another responds.

"Rolin," the first one says, "tell the boys at the stables we're out of here."

"Right," James hears the reply. One of the shadows detaches itself from the others and makes its way out the back door.

"Let's go," the first voice says, "we'll find him eventually." The shadows then turn and walk quietly out the front door.

James waits for several minutes to be sure they will not be coming back before he emerges out from under the table. "Check the front door," he says quietly to Miko.

Miko gets up and goes over to peer through a window by the front door while James checks the back.

James doesn't see anybody out in the courtyard by the stables so he quietly goes and checks with Miko.

"Anything?" he whispers when he reaches Miko's side.

"They left in two parties, one to the right and another to the left," replies Miko. "I think two of them went into that alley across the street. They may be there as a lookout to see if we show up."

"Probably," James agrees as he stares out into the street.

"How are we going to get out of here?" asks Miko, nervousness evident in his voice.

"I'm thinking," he says. Considering the situation for a moment he comes up with a plan.

Pulling Miko close so his voice won't carry far, he says, "When I tell you to, I want you to close your eyes tight and keep them closed until I tell you to open them again. Do you understand?"

"Why?" Miko asks.

Sounding impatient, he says "Just do it! I don't have time to explain, okay?"

"Alright," agrees Miko, though he doesn't sound very sure that he does.

James begins casting a spell and directs Miko to look down the street. A small, dimly glowing ball, appears. It rolls down the street toward the alley where the men are waiting and comes to rest in front of the alley. They see the two men detach themselves from the darkness of the alley as they come to inspect it.

"Close your eyes," James whispers. James silently counts to himself, "One, two, three..." and then closes his own eyes, turning his head away. The glowing ball suddenly flashes into a blinding brilliance, lasting only a second.

"I'm blind!" can be heard coming from the ally.

When the light disappears, James says, "You can open your eyes now, let's go." They hurry through the front door and leave the inn, turning down the lane to the right. Even though their eyes were closed, spots still swim in their vision.

The two men who were across the street continue to cry out and one has even fallen to the ground, holding his eyes.

"What did you do to them?" asks Miko, a slightly awed tone to his voice.

"I just ruined their night vision is all," chuckles James. "Maybe given them a headache as well, I'm not sure. They should realize

that nothing serious was done to them when their vision readjusts again to the dark. I don't think I did anything permanent, though it's possible." Pausing for a moment he asks, "Now, what's the best way out of town at night?"

"The main gates will most likely be watched," Miko tells him. "Maybe the river. We could take a boat and drift downstream till we were out of sight of the walls."

"I don't like stealing but we may have no choice," James says. "To the river then."

Miko leads the way quickly with James close on his heels. It isn't long before they hear the sound of several men coming up quickly behind them. Picking up their speed, James and Miko break into a run, making with all speed for the river.

The pursuit is gaining but they still have a lead over them. Miko cuts across one street and then quickly darts down another. Glancing back over his shoulder, James sees that the men are gaining. The outlines of those in the lead are now more pronounced. A glint of metal reveals a naked blade in the hands of one.

From up ahead Miko shouts, "Come on, I found a boat."

Looking forward to where Miko called, he sees moonlight reflecting off the water. Near a shack situated close to the river's edge, Miko stands beside a small boat. As James approaches the boat where Miko waits, the door to the nearby shack opens and two men emerge. Both men are wielding clubs.

"Get away from our boat!" one of the two men yells as they advance.

"We'll kill you if you try to take it," the other threatens. Brandishing his club, he menaces James and Miko with it.

Seeing their pursuers coming up fast, James says, "I'll buy it!"

The club wielding men pause as they draw close to James. One of the two men asks, "How much?"

"Ten golds," James offers as he pulls out his pouch.

"Ten golds!" one man exclaims incredulously. "You've got yourself a boat." They lower their clubs and one holds out his hand for the money.

Miko jumps into the boat and grabs the oars, preparing to row. James doesn't even bother to take the time to count out the exact amount, merely throws the money pouch at the two men and then pushes the boat into the water before jumping in. Once the boat clears the sandy bottom, Miko pulls hard on the oars to put as much distance between them and the shore as he can.

The two men start congratulating themselves on their good fortune, that is until they see James and Miko's pursuers, swords gleaming in the starlight. Turning fast, they race back to their shack where they slam the door shut.

Thunk!

Something embeds itself into the side of the boat, "Get down!" James yells. They both crouch down in the boat, trying to stay below the edge for protection. He peers over the side and finds the tail end of a crossbow bolt protruding out of the wood. Somewhere on the shore the crossbowman takes aim again, but this time the bolt splashed into the water several feet away.

Their boat continues drifting toward the middle of the river as they put more distance between them and the men on the shore. A glance over the boat's side reveals several of the men running along the shore attempting to keep pace with the boat. Suddenly, one of their number breaks away from the group and races up a side street heading back into town. The boat continues to slowly outdistance the men as it's carried along in the fast current.

When the threat from the crossbowman disappears behind them, James has Miko move out of the way and takes his place between the oars. "I think we made it," he says with relief as he commences to row.

"Maybe," doubts Miko, "but we're not out of the city yet." He reaches over and pulls the crossbow bolt out of the side of the boat.

"That was close," he says as he shows it to James.

Nodding agreement, James puts his back into it and rows with great diligence.

Between James' efforts with the oars and the current, they steadily pull away from the men on the shore. When the men realize they are not going to be able to catch the boat, they give up the chase and disappear up a side street, quickly disappearing back into the city.

"Think they've given up?" James asks.

"Doubt it," answers Miko, "they are probably heading for their horses to continue the chase."

"You're probably right," he agrees.

Suddenly the boat turns and begins to pull over toward the opposite side of the river, heading for the shore. "What are you doing?" asks Miko.

“I’m letting you out,” explains James. “There is no point in you continuing on. They are after me, not you. I wouldn’t want you to get hurt on my account.”

“No way,” objects Miko, “I’m coming with you. Besides, it won’t take them long to figure out that someone had to warn you about them coming for you. Who else in this city could have done it but me? I’m dead once they make the connection. I’ve gotta come!”

“You could end up in far more danger being with me,” warns James.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“It’s kind of hard to explain,” James says.

“Look,” pleads Miko, “I’ve got nothing here. I beg for a living, take menial jobs for little pay, life with you can’t be any worse than what I have already lived through so far.”

James can hear the desperation in the boy’s voice. Using the oars, he turns the boat to head once more out toward the middle of the river, signaling that he’s made the decision to take Miko with him.

“Thank you,” Miko says.

James can hear the relief in his voice. “Well, we’ll see if you are still thanking me later on,” he replies as he continues rowing downstream.

When the river takes them to a large span of wall arching over the water, Miko informs him that they are almost out of the city. The wall extends several yards into the river on either side before arching overhead. When the boat gets close to the wall, they both become very quiet and still, not wanting to draw attention to themselves should anyone be around. Remaining motionless, they slowly drift under the wall.

From the wall above them comes the sound of someone walking, their footfalls echoing in the tunnel through which the river flows. As they pass through to the other side, James glances up to find it to be one of the city guards. He has a heart stopping moment when the guard pauses and glances their way. But he must not have seen them for he soon turns to continue his beat along the wall.

Sighing quietly with relief, James watches the guard atop the wall until the current draws them away and the guard disappears in the night. He waits until they’ve floated far enough for the lights of the city to begin to fade behind them before taking his place back on

the bench. With an oar again in each hand, he maintains a rhythm that has them speeding along.

He and Miko alternate rowing in hour intervals throughout the rest of the night until daybreak, each trying to catch some sleep while the other rows. When the sky begins to brighten with the rising of the sun, James awakens to find Miko no longer rowing. Instead, the boy's slouched upon the bench fast asleep with the oars still gripped in his hands. Despite the lack of human direction, their boat has managed to maintain its position near the middle of the river. He glances to Miko just as a loud snore escapes the boy and smiles. He doesn't bother waking him, instead he scans the surroundings for any sign of their pursuers.

On the east bank of the river lays a road paralleling the shoreline. To the west he finds the land to be primarily farmland, with the occasional orchard of fruit bearing trees. A grove of trees approaches up ahead which looks to be apples or some similar kind of red fruit. Hungry, James slips one of the oars from out of Miko's hand and uses it as a rudder to bring them to the shore.

The motion of the boat changing direction awakens Miko and James points out the approaching fruit trees. "Thought we could do with a little breakfast," he tells him.

Squinting to see through the morning sun's glare, Miko grunts agreement. James does a good job in directing the boat, beaching it after only passing a few of the trees. He hops out of the boat and secures it to a fallen log with a rope that was coiled in the bottom. Miko joins him and they make a quick search of the immediate area. When no other person turns up, they help themselves to some fruit.

Hanging from the first tree he comes to, James locates an apple-like fruit that appears to be ripe and removes it from the branch. Biting into it, he finds the fruit has a taste similar to that of apples, though the skin is slightly thicker. He begins filling his backpack with more of the fruit as he eats the first one and soon has it filled to capacity.

Miko picks an armful of the fruit and takes them down to the boat to dump them in the bottom. As he nears the boat, motion from across the river draws his attention. "James!"

Turning, he finds Miko running back toward where he stands at the edge of the orchard.

When Miko sees him looking, he comes to a halt and points across the river. James looks to find a single horseman watching them from atop his horse. In the man's hands is a deadly looking

crossbow. Not far further south down the west bank, seven other riders were riding with all speed downriver.

Looking at the departing riders, James says, "They must be heading for a bridge to cross further south. Any idea how far it would be?"

Shaking his head no, Miko replies "Got no idea. I don't know much of what lies outside of Bearn."

"Doesn't matter I guess," he says. "They'll be over here soon enough."

James watches the departing riders until they pass out of sight. He then looks to the road and makes sure there are no travelers approaching from either direction. Grabbing an apple, he walks over to the edge of the river.

"You don't think you're going to hit him, do you?" Miko asks incredulously.

Smiling, James says, "Just watch." He cocks his arm back and throws the apple while casting a variation of his stone spell.

Miko is amazed to see the apple arc through the air and actually pick up speed. Even though the man tries to move out of the way, the apple alters its course and nails him in the side of the head. With bits of apple flying in all directions, Miko is stunned to watch the man tumble from his horse. A thud is heard as the rider hits the ground.

James waits for several seconds to see if the man is going to get up or not. When he remains unmoving on the ground, he turns to head for the boat. "Let's hurry," he says, motioning for Miko to get back into the boat.

"Hurry where?" asks Miko as he comes over and climbs in. Careful not to step upon the apples lying across the bottom, he takes his seat.

Pointing to the opposite shore, James replies, "Over there." He then grabs the side of the boat and pushes it out into the river, jumping in once the bottom is free of the sandy shore. Taking the oars, he rows hard and attempts to reach the shore not too far down from where the unconscious man lies.

When the boat grounds onto the opposite shore, he says to Miko, "See if he's alive and if so, tie him up. Also, make sure the horse doesn't get away, we'll need it."

"What are you going to do?" asks Miko.

"I'm going to hide our trail," he replies and begins unloading their boat.

Miko goes over to the man and discovers that he's not dead, just unconscious. Finding rope on the horse, he binds the man at the ankles and wrists. By the time he's finished, James has unloaded their things from the boat and is standing motionless at the water's edge. About to ask a question, he stops when he realizes James is staring at the boat and in the process of casting a spell. Taking the reins of the horse, Miko walks quietly over to see what he's doing.

As he approaches he's startled when the boat suddenly rocks on the beach. Then, even more shocking, the boat begins moving off the shore and into the water on its own. Being quiet so as not to break James' concentration, he continues watching in wonder as the boat floats across the river toward the opposite shore. Inexplicably moving against the current, it finally beaches itself on the other side and continues moving up the beach until it's far enough away from the water that the river won't pull it back in. When the boat comes to a stop, James stops the spell and abruptly sits down.

"You okay?" Miko asks as he comes closer to his new found friend.

James looks up sees the concern on his face. Smiling to reassure the boy, he says, "Magic isn't easy you know, it takes a lot out of you. I'll be fine, just need to rest a bit." Nodding over to the man, he asks, "How's our friend over there doing?"

"You knocked him out with that apple and he'll probably have a big bruise on his temple for a while, but I think he'll make it." Taking a water bottle off the horse, he hands it over to James, "Thirsty?"

"Yeah," James says, taking the bottle and having a long drink. When he's drunk his fill, he hands it back. "Fill it up again, we need to get going."

Miko takes the bottle over to the river and refills it. Finished, he returns and gestures to their captive. "What shall we do with him?" he asks. "Kill him?"

"Good heavens no," James exclaims. "I don't kill people unless my life depends on it. We'll have to take him with us for a ways then let him go."

"Why do we have to take him with us?" he asks as he secures the bottle to the saddle.

"We can't leave him here to tell his friends we're on this side of the river," explains James. "When they return and find the boat still on the other side, I'm hoping they will believe that we are still on that side, perhaps trying to escape cross country."

Hearing a groan from their captive, James goes over to the man and squats down next to him.

The captive opens his eyes and takes in James and Miko squatting next to him. He flashes Miko an ugly look and tries to move but finds that his arms and legs have been tied. Testing his bonds, he soon realizes he can't get free so settles back down on the ground, all the while keeping an eye on his captors.

"Not sure what to do with you," James tells the man.

"Not sure where to dump my body you mean," the captive says with scorn.

"You're not going to die today," James reassures the man, "at least not by my hand." The man doesn't look convinced that he'll be permitted to live.

"We know that Lord Colerain hired you and your friends to catch me, perhaps even kill me," James informs him. Seeing no change in their captive's expression, he continues, "Just what were you going to do to me if you would have caught me?"

"Why should I tell you anything?" their captive retorts.

"Your cooperation could mean the difference from being left where someone can easily find you, and being put somewhere..." James pauses for effect before saying, "remote."

"Come on Torin," Miko says, "what difference could it make now? We know you're after us and who hired you, so you might as well tell."

Turning his attention to Miko his face turns grim. "I always knew you to be a squealer Miko, ever since you ratted out Harry's bunch."

Turning indignant, Miko replies, "I never ratted him out! I didn't even know what was going down until the news hit the streets."

"Yeah, yeah, you've been singing that tune just so Harry wouldn't kill ya," Torin says derisively.

Breaking in, James says, "It doesn't matter anyway. Miko, secure our equipment on his horse and let's get out of here before trouble comes back."

Miko gets up and begins the process of securing their baggage onto the horse.

James takes out his knife and leans closer to Torin. Torin's eyes widen in expectation of being stabbed or cut. James grabs the rope binding Torin's legs, cuts the rope in two and then throws the pieces over to Miko who puts them in a bag on the horse.

“You’re going to have to walk,” James explains to Torin. When he makes no move to rise, James adds, “Unless you would rather to be dragged behind the horse? Your choice.” Torin nods and James helps him to his feet.

Removing another long rope from the saddle, James secures one end around the rope binding Torin’s wrists and the other end to the saddle. Miko takes up position behind Torin with the knife, just in case. Grabbing the reins, James leads the horse over to the road and they make their way south.

They don’t travel far before a small grove of trees appears off the road a ways to the east. Deciding this might be a good secluded place to leave Torin, he leaves the road and heads over to the grove. There he unties Torin from the horse and has him sit with his back to one of the trees, using the long rope to secure him to it. He tears off a strip of cloth from Torin’s shirt and uses it for a gag, securing it with another piece of rope.

Once Torin is secured to the tree, James tells him, “Don’t worry, I plan to let someone know that you are here, but not until nightfall, tomorrow at the latest. If I were you, I would hope your friends don’t ‘delay’ me. You should be free sometime tomorrow.”

Getting up, he says to Miko, “Let’s go.” James takes the reins again and leads the horse back to the road.

A little over an hour later, several buildings begin to appear over by the river. As they come closer they see where a thick rope spans the water where it ends at another set of buildings on the far side. In the middle of the river they see a flat ferry with four men and three horses. One man is pulling on the rope, slowly moving the ferry to their side of the river.

“James,” Miko says, “that’s Torin’s buddies. Your trick with the boat must not have fooled them, they’re coming back.”

Waiting near the cluster of buildings on the other side are the rest of their pursuers, awaiting their turn to cross. Sure that the men on the ferry have not yet seen them, James leads the horse off the road to the east. Once out of sight of the ferry upon the water, he reaches down a hand and helps Miko up behind him. Getting the horse up to a fast run they cut cross country, quickly leaving the ferry behind.

Cutting eastward through an open field, James continues for a little over a mile before turning the horse more to the south. Pretty sure that they have moved beyond the ferry and have put distance between themselves and the men hunting them, he slows their pace.

So as not to tire their horse, they dismount and James once again takes the reins, leading the horse at a walk.

They continue south while steadily angling their way west, hopping to eventually intersect with the road. When the road finally comes into view again, they are relieved to find it deserted and head toward it.

“How long do you think they will continue the chase?” he asks Miko.

“I doubt if they’ll continue very far,” Miko responds. “They’re just local ruffians. Like me, they’ve seldom been out of the city.”

“Let’s hope so,” James says. He reaches into his backpack and pulls out a couple apples, tossing one over to Miko. Once they reach the road, they continue south all the while eating apples and casting glances over their shoulders for sign of pursuit. Just what he would have done should pursuit have materialized, James didn’t know and was glad he didn’t have to find out.

As nightfall approaches, they discover a likely place to make camp for the night sheltered within a small copse of trees near the river. Within lies a small, cleared area within which half a dozen men could camp comfortably. “I guess this spot must be used quite frequently,” he says to Miko, indicating a ring of stones encircling the charred remnants of an old campfire.

“Must be,” Miko agrees.

Tying the horse to a low branch, James turns to Miko. “Get a fire going and I’ll see if I can’t scare up some fish for dinner.”

“How?” Miko asks.

“How are you going to make the fire or how will I scare up some fish?” quips James.

“How are you going to scare up some fish?” Miko clarifies.

James reaches down and grabs a fallen branch from off the ground and says, “I’ll just go out to the river and get one.” He takes out his knife and begins sharpening one end.

“Oh,” Miko says. “Uh, good luck.”

“Thanks,” James replies. On the way to the river he tries to remember the spell he used to catch fish the last time.

Miko gets the fire started and soon has a fair blaze going. Looking out to the river he finds James standing motionless in waist deep water, with the point of the stick held a few inches above the water. Seconds passed. Then, with a quick downward thrust, James plunges the stick into the water and holds it there for several

seconds. When he brings the stick back out of the water, a large fish wriggles impaled upon the end.

Seeing Miko watching him, he raises the fish and flashes him a grin. Then he makes his way back to camp where the fish is soon prepped and roasting over the fire. By the time it's cooked and they've consumed a goodly portion, night has fallen.

Satiated and content, James lays near the fire and gazing up at the stars in the sky. He never noticed it before, but the constellations that he knew back home are no longer up there. He lets out a big sigh as the realization sinks in that he is truly a long way from home.

"What are you thinking about James," Miko asks from where he too lies next to the fire.

"Just that I'm a long way from home," he responds wistfully. "And I may not be back for a long time, if ever."

"How far away are you?" Miko inquires.

"I don't know, farther than you can imagine," he answers, a little sad.

Turning toward James, Miko asks, "What made you leave?"

"I didn't realize I was until it was too late," he replies.

"What do you mean?" asks Miko.

Before he can answer, the quiet of their camp is disturbed by the sound of a rider approaching from the road.

"Hello the fire," a man's voice cries out. "Can a weary traveler share your fire this evening?"

Coming to his feet, James tries to pierce the dark veil of night to better see who it is that approaches. "If you mean no trouble," he shouts back, "then you are welcome, stranger."

As the horse and rider enter the light from the campfire, James discovers the man to be the bard they so enjoyed from the Flying Swan.

"A bard is always welcome," James says.

"I've found that to be true, yes," the bard agrees as he dismounts. James comes over and offers to help him with removing the saddle and tack but the man refuses, saying that he shall do it himself. Once he's done, he secures his horse near theirs and joins them by the fire. He sits down next to the fire and James offers him some of the fish left over from their dinner.

Taking the fish, the bard says, "Thank you sir, my name is Perrilin."

“I’m James,” he replies, “and this is Miko. I enjoyed your music at the Flying Swan last night and the night before. You’re an excellent musician and singer.”

“Thank you, it’s always good to make the acquaintance of someone who appreciates music,” Perrilin says. He takes a bite of the fish and finding it to be acceptable, takes several more. The bard then reaches into his tunic and pulls out a flask. After taking a long drink, he offers it to James who declines. Miko doesn’t turn down the flask when it is offered to him and takes a small sip before giving it back.

“Where are you heading?” James asks.

“I have an engagement at an inn in Cardri,” replies Perrilin as he continues eating the fish.

“We’re heading to Cardri as well, would you like to accompany us?” offers James.

“I’d like to,” he says, “but my engagement starts the day after tomorrow and I don’t think you will be able to keep up with me since you only have the one horse between you.”

“Perhaps not,” agrees James.

“Which inn will you be performing at?” Miko asks.

“The Inn of the Silver Bells,” Perrilin responds, “I’ll be there for a week at least. After that, who knows?” He continues eating the fish and soon has gleaned every bit of flesh from the bones. Sitting back he grabs his mandolin and asks if anyone would mind if he practices. James shakes his head no, that he wouldn’t mind. Miko of course was eager to hear him play. As Perrilin begins by tuning his instrument, James places a couple more pieces of wood on the fire to keep it bright and cheery.

The first song he plays is a fun and lively song with a quick tempo. James is soon tapping his knee and by the end of the song is singing along with the chorus. The next song is slower and a bit sad, “This one is usually for the ladies,” he explains. As the song progresses, James can see why. There’s a lot of stuff about love and sorrow, things ladies like to cry about.

When that song is over Perrilin says, “Now, how about one of you singing a song and I will accompany you?”

Miko shakes his head no and seems to shrink within himself.

James considers the request and then says, “I doubt if you would know any of the songs I do.”

Perrilin reaches into his pocket and pulls out a silver, “I know one thousand, four hundred and thirty five songs. If you can sing me a complete song that I do not know, I shall give you this.”

Smiling, James says, “You’re on.” Settling back, he takes a couple deep breathes then begins to sing:

*“Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam and the deer
and the antelope play. Where seldom is heard, a
discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all day.”*

After the first verse and chorus, Perrilin begins to accompany James on his instrument and by the third, he’s singing along with the chorus. When James finishes the song, Perrilin tosses him the sliver, saying, “Here you go, I have never heard that song before. Would you mind if I give it a try?”

Flattered, James says, “Sure, go ahead.”

Perrilin begins to sing and from the first note uttered puts the rendition James had done to shame. He sings it straight through, never once faltering and uses the same inflections and melody that James had used with only slight modifications. When the last note fades into the night he asks, “How did it sound?”

Miko said, “You were great.”

“You are truly a great bard,” James exclaims. “I can’t believe you are able to repeat back the song after only one hearing.”

“Part of the job,” Perrilin says. “Now, I’ve got just a couple of questions.”

“Yeah?” asks James.

“Just what are buffalo and antelope anyway?” he asks.

Smiling, James begins to explain what they are and also clarifies the other different words in the song that are unfamiliar to him. All the while their discussion is going on, Miko lays down near the fire and drifts off to sleep. They continue well into the night and he tries not to let on to Perrilin that he comes from a different world, just from a far away land.

When Perrilin is finally satisfied that he understands the song, including all the words and phrases, he puts his instrument away and says, “I think it’s time for me to call it a night. Thank you for the song, maybe I’ll use it from time to time.” He lies down near the fire and soon the soft sounds of contented snoring reaches James just before he, too nods off to sleep.

Chapter Ten

The sun rising over the horizon awakens James to another beautiful, summer day. The spot where Perrilin slept stood empty, apparently the bard had already awoke and went on his way. Waking Miko, they begin to get their things packed and ready for travel.

Miko takes out an apple and eats it while he's getting ready. "He sure left early this morning," he says, referring to Perrilin. His words are barely understood through the oversized chunk of apple wedged in his mouth.

"I guess he was in a hurry to make Cardri this evening," responds James. "And don't talk with your mouth full, I can hardly understand you."

"Sorry," Miko says as he swallows the last of the now much reduced piece of apple. "Hope we can make it there tonight too," he wishes.

"Well, from what he told us," explains James, "I don't think we'll make it before tomorrow at the earliest. Maybe if we had another horse we might, but not by foot."

It doesn't take them very long before they are ready to continue on to Cardri. Taking the reins of the horse, James exits the copse of trees with Miko right behind and they make their way back onto the road, heading south.

Miko isn't very happy at the prospect of walking for another two days, but is resigned to it as he has little choice. The day is nice, at least the weather has been cooperating, and their spirits are high since it seems pursuit is not forthcoming. It would seem that Miko had been correct about their pursuers' unwillingness to stray too far from Bearn.

As the morning progresses, the sun steadily climbs higher into the sky and the temperature begins to rise, forecasting the approach of a very hot summer day. Much to James' delight, a breeze

manifests out of the southwest and allays the worst of the summer heat.

Throughout the morning they make good time, pressing onward with only one short rest break. The road is rather deserted and the only other souls they encounter are one lone traveler driving a wagon drawn by a pair of mules passes by on his way north and a couple fast riders that overtook them on their way south.

A little after noon the skyline of another fair size town on the opposite side of the river begins to appear up ahead on the horizon. As they draw nearer, they come to an aged bridge spanning the river allowing traffic to cross to the town. Asking a traveler that had just crossed over the bridge, they discover the name of the city is Collington. Not having any money left after buying the boat back in Bearn, they continue past and Collington soon disappears behind them.

Evening finds them still on the road with no inn in sight, nor are there even a few trees growing closely together to give their camp some shelter. So with the waning of the sun, they find a spot near the river and make camp. While Miko gets the fire ready, James searches for a stick he can use for fishing. Finally tearing off a long branch from a tree, he sharpens one end before wading into the river. Twice he enters the river and twice he emerges with a fair sized fish wriggling impaled upon the end of the stick.

James and Miko eat one fish entirely while saving most of the second for a meal in the morning. Wrapping the left over fish in some leaves, James puts it into his backpack for safe keeping. They munch on a few apples as well, making sure to leave a couple for the next day. Hopefully they will make it to Cardri before nightfall and will be able to stay at an inn.

As day gives way to night, another campfire springs to life some two hundred feet further north on their side of the river. A short time later, another one appears across the water, fifty feet or so to the south.

“Must be common to make camp along the river,” states James. Straining to see who the ones on their side of the river might be, he peers through the deepening dusk but can’t quite make them out. He can tell there are more than one, perhaps six in all.

Miko nods. “Even near Bearn,” he replies. “Some would rather avoid paying for inns.”

“Not me,” James says, turning back to his young companion. “I would have to be pretty desperate, or short on coins, to give up the comfort of a bed.”

Laughing, Miko gives him a grin. “I wouldn’t trade a bed for the ground if given the choice either.”

James chuckles and returns to the fire where he and Miko spend time relaxing and getting to know one another better. “What was it like growing up on the streets?” he asks the boy.

Miko’s face loses much of its joviality as painful memories surface. “It wasn’t easy,” he replies. “Always being hungry, the older boys would take what you have and leave you with nothing. After a while you know who your friends are, who you can count on to watch your back.” Growing quiet, he stares into the fire for several seconds then says, “You also know who to avoid.”

“Like those boys who chased us into the sewer?” prompts James.

Miko nods. “Yeah. You get on the bad side of the wrong people, and you’re dead.” Grabbing an end of a small stick sticking out from the base of their fire, he begins poking at the coals. “What about you?” he asks. “What’s it like where you come from?”

“Like here for the most part,” he replies. *What can I tell him that he would believe?* “People are people no matter where you go.”

“I suppose so,” Miko said.

Another hour is spent on trading tales of their past and James discovers that he is growing to like this lad from the streets of Bearn. As he takes turn relating tidbits of his past, James speaks of his grandparents, parents, Haveston, and school. Talking of home doesn’t elicit feelings of homesickness as it had before. Rather, they comfort and bring him peace. When the fire burns itself down to coals, they ready themselves for sleep.

The night passes uneventfully and both wake in the morning a little stiff from sleeping on the ground but all in all well rested. James gets up and walks around, trying to work the kinks out of his back and fervently hopes that come this evening he may be in a bed at an inn. Sleeping on the ground is starting to get a little old. Every time during the night when he thought he found a comfortable position, a new rock would make itself known, forcing him to change position yet again.

As they prepare to travel, a long caravan trundles into view on its way north from Cardri. James counts fifteen wagons passing by

in the early morning light with a dozen mounted guards accompanying it.

Miko gets the horse ready while he goes to the river to refill the water bottle. He puts the bottle in the water and while he waits for the bottle to fill he glances upriver. Not far from where he squats filling his water bottle, several people stand in the water, by the looks of it doing their morning business. A feeling of revulsion overcomes him as he looks at the river flowing past those people, toward him and into his water bottle. With visions of dysentery running through his mind, he stands up completely disgusted and pours out the water.

Looking down and across the river, he finds another group of travelers filling several earthen jugs with the river's water, water that could very well be carrying bacteria and waste products from the people and animals further up the river. He comes to the realization that any and all water, or for that matter all things drinkable, could originate in just the same unsanitary and possibly parasitic infested place.

Remembering a special he saw on the Discovery Channel about parasites and how they get into your system and take up housekeeping, he decides he has do something about this.

Miko walks over to where he stands in the water and asks "Are you ready?"

Looking at him in disgust, James replies, "Ready for what? Diarrhea?"

"Diarrhea? What are you talking about?" asks a confused Miko. "No, are you ready to get going?"

"I'm not going anywhere until I can figure out how to get some clean water," James responds.

Looking at the river, Miko says "The river is clean. Look, you can see all the way to the rocks on the bottom." In truth, the water was flowing smoothly and the riverbed was clearly visible beneath.

James points upstream, Miko looks in the direction he indicates and sees the people getting out of the water. "They just fouled it, and look," he says pointing at the people filling water bottles and jugs downstream, "those people down there are unaware of the contamination that may be making its way into their drinking water."

"Contamination?" asks Miko. "What do you mean?" He looks at James and his expression shows that he doesn't understand what James is trying to say.

“It’s hard to explain,” James says. “Let’s just say that contamination is something that can make you sick.”

“If you say so,” Miko says uncertainly.

James once again fills the bottle with water from the river, then finds a spot several feet away from the water’s edge and sits down, resting the water bottle on the ground before him. Miko sits opposite him and waits quietly to see what he’s up to.

A minute or so goes by then James begins casting a spell, all the while concentrating on the purity of the water and for the impurities within the water to collect on the sand beside the bottle. Miko watches and is astonished when a wet spot forms on the ground next to the bottle. An almost miniscule lump of brownish goop forms on the wet spot, giving off an unpleasant odor. When James finishes the spell, he brings the bottle up to his nose and sniffs. Seeming to be satisfied he takes a sip and a smile crosses his face. He hands the bottle to Miko who hesitantly brings it to his mouth and takes a small drink. Eyes widening, he says “Never tasted water like that before.” Taking another drink he exclaims, “Best water I ever had!”

“I doubt if anyone around here has had water like this,” remarks James. “That’s the way water where I come from tastes, most of the time anyway.”

James takes a small stick and pokes the brown goop. “This is what was in the water, the stuff that makes you sick,” he explains to Miko. “There are several ways to do this without magic but we don’t have the time or facilities to do it properly.” Taking the bottle from Miko he takes a long drink, emptying it.

James returns to the river and fills the bottle once more, then sits back down and purifies it with his spell. Miko watches in wonder as the brown goop forms once more on the ground.

When he’s finished, he packs the water bottle away and they return to the road, heading south once more.

As the day progresses there are more and more people on the road traveling in both directions. Many are simple farmers going about their daily routines, hardly noticing those around them.

Hours later, Miko suddenly asks, “What’s that smell?” He looks sidelong at James.

“It’s not me you smell,” James informs him, “that’s the sea.” The salty smell of the sea had been growing steadily stronger over the last hour but now is quite noticeable though they still are unable to see it. The terrain has become slightly hilly and for the last

several miles James has been expecting to see the sea whenever they crest a hill.

Close to midday they top a rise and there laid out before them, is Cardri. Beyond the city stretched a great expanse of ocean extending to the horizon. Cardri is by far the largest city that James has seen since coming to this world. It must stretch a mile or two on both sides of the river.

On a hill a little inland from the harbor, but still within the city proper, rises a great castle. Shining white in the morning sun, it is an imposing sight, several towers and a great keep surrounded by a high formidable wall. Atop the highest spire of the tallest tower a flag bearing the crest of the Cardri line flutters in the breeze coming off the sea.

James looks to Miko and chuckles. Miko is standing there with his mouth hanging open, in obvious awe of the place. He reaches over and closes Miko's mouth which snaps him out of it. He looks over at James and smiles, a little embarrassed.

"Pretty impressive, eh?" James asks him as they head down the hill toward the town.

"I'll say," Miko responds, "I always heard it was big, but I had no idea. I always thought of Bearn as a big city, but this makes Bearn look like a farming village."

"It's the capital," explains James, "and I'm sure it's also a major center of trade for the entire region. It would have to be big."

Moored at the docks of the harbor were dozens of ships of varying sizes, many with a buzz of activity surrounding them as sailors and porters load and unload their cargo.

They reach the outlying buildings a good two hundred yards before they even get to the outer wall that surrounds the city. Cardri has three defensive walls dividing up sections of the city. One encircles the castle proper and several large buildings which comprise the Castle Area. The second encompasses a much larger area and protects the homes and businesses of many merchants and wealthy individuals. The third is the outer wall and the primary defense for the city. Almost two miles in circumference, it boasts many towers spaced at regular intervals. Half seem to have some sort of siege equipment such as catapults sitting atop them for defense.

Though despite the awe inspiring length of the outer wall, it still isn't large enough to encompass Cardri in its entirety. Originally it may have, but over the years, buildings have sprung up along the

outside. Primarily comprised of poorer dwellings by the looks of them, many are obviously taverns and inns catering to those in need of accommodations, but the poor and slovenly appearance of most of them would keep James away unless he was very desperate.

The gate through which the road passes holds two portals, one larger than the other to accommodate wagons and merchants, the smaller being for people on foot or horse. James and Miko move to the line at the gate for people and are soon approaching the entrance.

Lining the road are many poor beggars who plead with all to give, most having lost limbs, eyes, or bore some other deformity. James is saddened by them and feels bad that he has to reject their pleadings for help.

As the line continues drawing closer to the gate, James notices that unlike Bearn, the guards here are not asking questions of travelers before they pass through. This allowed the line of people waiting to get in to advance quickly. They took notice of everyone however, but beyond that scrutiny allowed all to enter unchallenged. The wall itself is about fifteen feet thick and as he passes through, discovers murder holes in the ceiling where defenders would be able to drop rocks or oil on anyone unfortunate enough to be caught inside.

Once through the walls into the city proper, the state of the buildings improves somewhat over those outside, though they are still on the poorer side in James' opinion. That made sense actually since the closer to the castle usually meant a higher social standing.

Miko noticeably becomes more relaxed in these surroundings. As a city boy, he had been out of his element on the road. But now that he is once more within a city, feels at home. Walking down the street it seems almost as if he can feel the heartbeat of the city, the ebb and flow of its life.

As they make their way through the crowded and noisy streets, James observes that the majority of the buildings in the outer ring are businesses with attached living areas. Inns and taverns are most apparent closer to the gate although some were still scattered about here and there as they moved deeper into Cardri.

They continue following the main street until James finds what he's looking for, a two story building with a sign hanging beside the door depicting three stacks of coins sitting on a table. He recognizes the symbol as being the same as the one that hung outside Alexander's shop in Trendle.

He goes up to the building and secures the horse to the post and then turns to Miko. "I've got some business inside," he tells him, "you better stay here and keep an eye on our stuff till I'm done."

"Sure thing," he says, taking a seat on the steps.

James goes up to the door and enters. A bell attached to the door announces his arrival as the door opens. The interior of the shop is remarkably similar to that of Alexander's in Trendle. There are several guards in the room and they turn their attention to him when he enters. Not seeing James as a threat, they go back to being disinterested, though they remain aware of his actions.

A man pokes his head out of the window in the far wall and smiles when he sees James entering his establishment. James is startled for the man is the spitting image of Alexander.

"Good afternoon my good sir," greets the man. "My name is Thelonius and how may I help you today?"

Coming to the window, James takes out his letter of account from Alexander and hands it to Thelonius. At the same time he asks, "Are you the brother of Alexander who lives a ways north in Trendle?"

His face brightening, Thelonius replies, "Why, yes I am. Do you know him?"

"I did have the pleasure of meeting him on two occasions," he answers. "When he gave me that letter he asked me to tell you that 'all is well here'."

"Ah, that is kind of you to deliver his message," Thelonius says as he briefly scans the letter from his brother. "I am assuming that you wish to open an account here?"

"Yes, I would," replies James. "I also would like some coins as my trip down took all I had brought with me."

"Have you decided how much you will require?" inquires Thelonius.

"I was thinking perhaps fifty golds," James replies. "Say, five broken into lesser currency."

"Very good," he replies. "I'll be right back with your coins and the papers for you to sign to set up your account." He then ducks his head back into the room and a minute, returns with a sack full of coins and several papers.

Thelonius empties the sack onto the counter and together they count the coins, making sure the total equals fifty golds. Once counted and they are both satisfied as to the count, James takes the

papers which are identical to the ones he signed back in Trenderle. He signs his name and then hands them back to Thelonius.

Taking the papers, Thelonius asks, "Now, is there anything else I may help you with?"

"As a matter of fact there is," James says. "Could you perhaps direct me to the Inn of the Silver Bells?"

"The Silver Bells, eh?" Thelonius responds. "You can find it further toward the castle, past the second wall on Long Street. However, you may wish to stay elsewhere, it's pretty expensive. It caters mainly to visiting nobles and the wealthy."

"Could you recommend one that would be nice but not too dear?" James asks him.

Thelonius gestures to the right, "There is one down the street called the Dancing Squirrel," he replies. "The place is kept well and the rooms are fairly priced."

Extending his hand, James says "Thank you Thelonius."

Taking James' hand, he shakes it warmly, "You are welcome," he says. "Should you ever need my assistance in the future, please call again."

James tucks the sack of coins within his shirt and exits out the front. Miko still sits upon the steps, idling away the time by watching the people passing by on the street.

Hearing the door open, he turns his head and comes to his feet when he sees James coming out.

"There's an inn down the street that the fellow inside said would be a good place for us to stay," James informs him. Untying the horse, he leads them down the street to the right. They don't have very far to walk before James spies the inn bearing a sign depicting a dancing squirrel.

James has Miko wait outside with the horse again while he goes inside to see about getting a room. The door opens onto the common room, and off to the side sits a long bar running half the length of the wall behind it. To James' surprise and amusement, he finds a rather large, fat man standing on top of the bar, trying to coax a yellow cat down out of the rafters.

"Come on kitty, kitty," the man on the bar says to the cat. He has a bowl in his right hand and is passing it under the cat as if to entice it down for a treat.

"Ahem," James clears his throat to make his presence known.

Startled, the fat man drops the bowl. It hits the edge of the counter and falls to the floor on the far side. The sound of shattering

pottery tells its fate. The man turns with face turning red in embarrassment to find James standing there. Giving the cat a last look of exasperation, the portly man climbs down off the bar and comes over.

“How may I help you today?” he asks as he approaches.

Looking up at the cat, James says, “I was about to ask you that same question.”

“Oh, that damn cat,” he curses. “She always gets up there and then expects me to get her back down. Sometimes I think she does it just to annoy me.”

“Cats are that way I understand,” James replies sympathetically and slightly amused.

“Yes, well, I’ll deal with her later. How can I help you?” he asks again.

“I was hoping you might have a room available for me and my companion,” he explains. “Thelonius down the street said this would be a good place to stay.”

“He did, did he?” the innkeeper asks. “I do have a couple of rooms available. How long were you planning on staying?”

“Perhaps a couple days, maybe longer,” James tells him. “I also need a stall for my horse.”

“It’ll be two silvers a night for a room on the bottom,” he says, “an additional two coppers for one on the second floor. For your horse, another three coppers a day and that includes food and exercise.”

Amazed at how expensive it is, he says, “I’ll take the one on the second floor.” Pulling out his pouch, he removes seven silvers and hands them over. “I’ll take the room for three days and let you know if I need to stay longer.”

The man takes the money and walks with James over to the bar where he opens a cupboard on the wall behind it. Inside are rows of hooks with room keys. He pulls out one of the keys and hands it to James, “You are in seventeen, top of the stairs and fourth on the left.”

Taking the key, James says, “Thank you,” and then walks over to the door. Before leaving, he glances back to find the man starting to climb back up on the bar to once again attempt coaxing his cat down out of the rafters.

Chuckling to himself, he goes outside and tells Miko they’ll be staying here for a few days. Untying the horse, he and Miko head around back to the stables.

A large, muscular man is back by the stable shoeing a horse. When he sees them walking toward him he says, "Just a minute." He takes another shoe nail and hammers it into the hoof of the horse, securing the shoe in place. The man then puts down the hammer and inspects the shoe, making sure it's on secure and even. When he's satisfied with it, he lets the hoof go and turns toward James and Miko.

"Yeah?" he asks them in a surly tone. "Something I can help you with?"

James shows him the room key and says, "Just need a stall for my horse."

"Got one," he says as he gestures over his shoulder, "second from the front." As if that ended the conversation, he turns back to the horse he had been shoeing. Taking the other fore hoof and a file from off a nearby worktable, he begins evening out the hoof's rough edges.

James leads his horse into the stable and finds the stall, second from the front. It's a clean and roomy stall with shelves lining the rear wall. It takes them little time to get the horse settled in. Once the horse has been properly taken care of, they grab their things and exit the stable, making for the door to the inn. Outside, the man is still shoeing the horse and pays them no mind whatsoever.

They enter the inn and go upstairs, finding room seventeen. Entering the room they are pleased to discover two beds, which brings a smile to Miko's face.

"No floor tonight," he says to James as he places the bags on the room's small table. He then crosses over and lies down on the bed closest to the door, "I could get to like this."

Taking the bed closer to the window, James places his backpack in the corner next to his bed, then lies down and literally sinks three inches into downy softness. "You're right," he says to Miko, "I could get to like this too. It's far superior to any bed I've slept in for quite a while."

Before growing too comfortable and loses the ability to get back out of the bed, he gets up and goes over to the window. From their room they have a good view of the inner city and spires of the castle. The castle is very majestic, it reminds James of castles he's read about and saw on documentaries. He seriously doubts if there are any tours of this castle he could take.

Judging by the position of the sun, he figures they have close to two more hours till dark. Turning to Miko he says, "I'm going to go

explore the town before dinner, want to go?" He sees Miko has already fallen asleep on the bed so decides to just let him sleep as he heads off on his own.

Coming down the stairs he sees the innkeeper sitting at a table with the cat in his lap, stroking its back. "Finally got her down I see," he says to him as he approaches.

"She drives me crazy at times," he says as he continues to pet the cat, "but I don't know what I'd do without her. She was my wife's you know, before she died. She's all I have left to remind me of her."

"By the way," James says as he gets close, "My name is James."

"I'm Inius, and this is Furball," he replies as he continues petting the cat.

"I'm going to see some of the city before dinner," he tells Inius. "If my friend Miko should wake up, could you tell him where I've gone?"

"If I see him, I'll let him know," Inius replies.

"Thank you," James says then heads for the door.

Outside, the street remains fairly crowded with many people hurrying about their business. Figuring one direction is as good as another, he takes off down the road to the right, gazing at all the sights and goods being offered by the various merchants.

The shops lining the street have selections of their wares displayed on tables out front in the hopes of enticing those passing into buying. And if that wasn't enough, most of them have a very loud spokesman, shouting the merits of whatever it is they are trying to sell.

One such place is a seller of amulets. The man is portraying his amulets as powerful magics, each with a special property. Some to ward off evil, some to cure warts, and even ones to entice the charms of the one you love.

James slows down as he looks over the various amulets displayed by the merchant. He soon realizes his mistake as the man, seeing that James has even the slightest interest in his amulets, comes over and attaches himself like a giant leech.

"Sir, you've come to the right place," he says, moving into such a position that James is forced to stop or run into the man. Holding up a small, well worn amulet he continues, "This amulet was charmed by an ancient wizard, it will keep evil spirits from causing you harm."

“No?” he says when he sees that James is not interested in that one. Holding up another, this one in the shape of a heart, he says, “This charm will make any lady you desire fall madly in love with you.”

Looking closer at the amulet, James thinks he can make out teeth marks indenting one edge of the heart. “No thank you,” he replies. As the man begins to extol the virtues of yet another of his amulets, James holds up his hand, causing the man to cease in the praising of his wares and to listen to what he is about to say.

James reaches into his shirt and pulls out the medallion the creature gave him back in Trendle and asks, “Have you ever seen one with a design like this before?”

Taking a close look at the medallion, the man shakes his head, “No sir, I have not.” Then he grabs another one of his amulets that he says will bring great wealth to whoever wears it.

Disappointed, he puts the medallion back inside his shirt. Realizing he’s not likely to get away without buying one, he points to an amulet at random, a plain circular one of metal, bearing three dots forming the points of a triangle with connecting lines.

Seeing the amulet that James has pointed to, the merchant says, “That one is indeed precious. It comes from very far away and is said to have been the property of a powerful sorceress,” he says with conviction as he holds it up for a better view. “It was said that this amulet protected her from harm for as long as she wore it.”

“What happened to her?” James asks.

“Her lover tricked her into taking it off and then killed her,” he explains. “Only two silvers good sir and you too will be protected as she had been.”

“Five coppers,” James counters, “and I’m just buying it to get away from you.”

“Sir,” the merchant exclaims tragically, “you would ruin me, starving my wife and children. Surely an amulet as powerful as this must be worth a silver and twelve coppers.”

“Perhaps, ten coppers,” James offers, “and hopefully it won’t turn my skin green or give me a rash.”

“How can you possibly put a price on such wonderful protection,” the man protests vigorously. “A silver six coppers, and that will bring curses upon my head from my wife for having given it away.”

“Seventeen coppers,” James says, “and I’m getting ready to walk.” Beginning to back away, he spies the man’s face turning frantic at the possible loss of a sale.

“A silver, good sir,” he pleads, practically screeching as he stretches the hand that is holding the amulet across the table as if to keep him from leaving. “Surely the protection must be worth at least a silver!”

Pausing as if to think, he says, “A silver it is then.” Reaching into his pouch, he produces a silver and places it on the table.

Snatching the coin so fast that the eye had a hard time seeing the move, the man hands over the amulet to James. With a friendly grin, the man gives a slight bow and says, “Thank you good sir and may a thousand blessings be upon you.”

James takes the amulet and puts it in his pocket. “You’re welcome,” he tells the merchant as he walks away from the stall.

He hasn’t taken two steps before the voice of the amulet seller once again joins the cacophony of his fellow merchants, each trying to out shout the others in the hopes of enticing those passing by to their stalls.

As he leaves the cacophony of merchants behind, James heads further into the city where the types of businesses gradually begin to change. Where the ones closer to the entrance into the city were noisy and boisterous, the ones further away from the outer gate are calmer. These are the businesses that the people of the city use on a more regular basis.

There are chandlers, butchers, and shops for every need. These do not require a loud spokesman to try to persuade prospective buyers to enter. These are well established, long time businesses known by the locals, so don’t need all the noise to attract customers. Enjoying the more peaceful environment, James strolls down the street, no longer afraid to window shop. Here there is no fear of having someone attach themselves to him like what he experienced back with the amulet merchant.

One sign draws his attention. It depicted a large pie with steam radiating off it. *Must be a bakery*, he thinks to himself. *Maybe they have tarts*. Remembering how delicious they had been in Bearn, he walks over and opens the door. His stomach begins to growl as a mouth watering aroma wafts through the open door.

A young man greets him upon entering. “Hello,” he says as he puts down a broom and comes over to the counter. “What can I do for you this evening good sir?”

“I was wondering if you have any tarts?” he asks.

“As a matter of fact we do,” the young man says. “My father makes really good tarts. Today we have some apple tarts that are especially good.”

“Okay, I’ll take six of those,” James says. Wanting some variety he asks, “Would you have a specialty, something that you do better than anybody else?”

“Yes we do sir,” the young man replies as he begins taking apple tarts from behind the counter and places them into a bag. “We are especially proud of our crumb cakes. It’s a secret recipe handed down from father to son that’s been in our family for generations. Would you like to try one?”

“Sure,” agrees James. “How big is it?”

“Wait a moment and I’ll show you one,” the young man says. He sets the sack of tarts down onto the counter and then passes through a door into the back. After a few seconds he returns with a medium sized cake, which to James reminds him of a cinnamon swirl crumb cake that his grandmother used to make. “It’s a silver for the cake and another six coppers for the tarts.”

Taking out his purse he hands over two silvers and the young man gives him his change. He’s glad Miko isn’t here to get on him about not haggling. He just doesn’t like doing it, unless of course it’s with someone he doesn’t care for. Hating to admit it, he did have fun with the amulet merchant.

While James waits for the boy to put the cake in a box, he looks around the shop at all the other delectables and then glances outside. Through the window he spies a very nice carriage beginning to pass by, drawn by two identical white horses. Intrigued, he comes closer to the window to get a closer look at it as it passes.

“Oh my god,” he whispers to himself as he feels a shiver run up his spine. For there in the window of the coach is the face of the man that had been yelling at them when they were being chased from Lord Colerain’s estate. Lord Colerain is here in Cardri!

Ducking away from the window so as not to be seen, he waits until the carriage passes then goes over to the counter and collects his baked goods. With a quick goodbye he leaves the bakery and hurries back down the street toward the Dancing Squirrel.

The light is beginning to fade as the sun nears the horizon. The street is not nearly as crowded as before, though many are still out and about. He steps quickly, but doesn’t run as he wants to avoid drawing attention to himself. It doesn’t take him long to reach the

inn, and as he enters the common room, turns toward the stairs and races up to the second floor.

Going down the hallway to his room, he opens the door and finds Miko lying bound and gagged on the bed. Dropping his sacks of tarts on the floor he rushes over, drawing his knife to cut the bonds. Miko is on the bed, eyes wide and trying desperately to say something.

“Hang on Miko,” James says as he reaches the bed. “I’ll have you free in a second.”

Just as he brings the knife close to cut Miko’s bonds, he hears a floorboard creak behind him just before something cracks him in the back of the head. His knees buckle as darkness takes him.

Chapter Eleven

Groaning with pain, James returns to consciousness. The pain throbbing in the back of his skull beats a steady rhythm. Lying on what feels like a cold dirt floor, he opens his eyes, or at least he thinks he does as there is nothing to see but darkness. He attempts to rise but discovers his legs and arms are bound, and is able to do little more than wriggle about. Slowly, so as not to aggravate his headache, he looks around to see if there may be a crack of light that would indicate a door, but none are to be found. *Either I’m blind or in a hole in the ground*, he thinks to himself.

“Miko,” he whispers. “Are you here?”

“Oh, thank god James,” somewhat muffled, Miko’s voice comes to him from the dark. “I feared you might be dead. You were out for a long time.”

“Where are we?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” Miko replies. “They put a hood over my head before they took us out of our room. After that, we were loaded in a wagon and I think they covered us up. I was told to be quiet or they would slit my throat.” He paused a moment before saying, “I’m not sure how long they had us in the wagon before we stopped. I am

pretty sure we were brought inside a building. They brought us down some stairs and then dumped us in here. That was hours ago. I tried to wake you when we got here, but you didn't respond."

"Were they the ones who we encountered after leaving Bearn?" James asks.

"No, I didn't recognize any of them," he answers. "Why?"

"I was coming back to tell you that I saw Lord Colerain here in Cardri," James explains. "Perhaps our being here and his being in Cardri are related. I can't think of any other reason for us to be in this situation."

"You're probably right," agrees Miko. "What are we going to do?"

"Did you mention to them that I can do magic?" he asks.

"No, I haven't said anything since they surprised me back in our room," Miko replies.

"Then let's hope they don't find out. It may be the edge we'll need to get out of here." James concentrates and casts his light spell, the effort of doing even so little magic causing the pain throbbing in his head to increase. When the light appears, he discovers they are lying in what looks to be a root cellar. Sacks, along with several boxes, are stacked against all the walls save one. That one has an old wooden door, apparently the only way out.

He looks over at Miko who's bound like himself, with the hood still covering his head. Scanning the room, he sees what looks like a little hand trowel, similar to what his grandmother used in her garden, wedged in between two of the sacks. He slowly wriggles his way over to it and maneuvers himself to grab the handle with his fingers. Holding it as tight as his position allows, he twists his body sharply and rolls away from the sack in an attempt to dislodge it. But it's wedged in there too tightly and the handle slips from his fingers.

Twisting around again, he lies on his back and places his feet against one of the sacks trapping the trowel and pushes with all his strength. The sack topples over and spills grain as it hits the ground, causing several rats to scurry away. He leans upon one elbow and is relieved to find the trowel lying loosely upon the ground. Wriggling his way over to it, James tries using it to saw through his bonds. The thought of doing magic to break the ropes binding him makes his head ache.

"What's going on?" asks Miko who is unable to see what James is doing because of the hood.

Groaning with the effort to apply proper pressure to saw through the rope binding his hands tied behind his back, he replies, "I found something that may cut the rope."

"Can't you use magic?" Miko asks.

In dire need of an aspirin, James says, "I'd rather not if I don't have to."

The trowel isn't very sharp and having his hands tied behind his back doesn't give him much leverage to be very effective. He works at it for several long minutes before managing to saw through the bindings.

"Got it!" he exclaims when the rope finally comes apart.

With his hands free it's much easier to sever the rope binding his legs. Once his legs are free, he comes to his feet and goes over to remove Miko's hood.

"Thank you," he says to James once the hood comes off. "It was getting hard to breathe in there."

"No problem," James replies as he begins using the trowel to saw through Miko's bindings. Once he frees Miko, he goes over to the door. He's not surprised to find it locked. Using his orb of light, he examines the door closely. He can't really tell anything about the locking mechanism as it is located on the other side, so he decides to try prying the lock up. Using the trowel which is fairly flat, he slides it between the door and the door jamb and very cautiously slides it up until he feels resistance. Giving it a little more pressure, he hears a faint click as the trowel pushes the latch up. He presses lightly on the door and it begins to swing open.

Opening the door a bare crack, he sees nothing but darkness on the other side. Pulling the door closed, but not far enough for the lock to secure itself again, he turns back to the room and Miko.

He takes Miko's hood and puts the glowing orb in it, leaving only a small opening which will allow only a very dim light to escape. Signaling for Miko to remain quiet, he opens the door slowly and the light coming from the hood reveals a flight of wooden steps on the other side leading up to another door. The door at the top of the steps has light radiating through the cracks around it.

"Looks like they're up there," he says to Miko who nods. "How many of them were there?"

"I only saw four before the hood was put on me," replies Miko.

"Let's hope they didn't invite any friends along and maybe we can get out of here," he says as he slowly starts to climb the stairs.

Turning back to Miko he says, “Stay down here for a second, I’m going up there and see if I can tell how many we have to deal with.”

Miko nods understandingly and remains by the foot of the steps.

James takes the steps slowly, trying to minimize their creaking by placing his feet as close to the edge of the wooden steps as possible. Cautiously, he makes it to the top where an old, cracked wooden door stands closed. Leaning close to the door, he hears several voices coming from the other side.

“Just how long are we supposed to wait?” one whiney voice asks impatiently.

“We were told to wait and wait is what we’re gonna do!” another voice commandingly tells the first.

“Yeah, stop yer whining Elz,” another adds derisively. “We’re making enough off of this.”

“Alright, alright,” Elz says, “I’ll wait.”

The sound of cards being shuffled comes from the other room. Listening for a while, he determines there are just the three of them playing cards. He then returns back down to where Miko waits and tells him what he overheard.

“I don’t like this James,” Miko says. “If there are three up there, then where’s the fourth and is he the one they’re waiting for?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t want to be here when whomever they are waiting for arrives,” he replies.

“I agree,” Miko says, “we better get out of here fast.”

James returns to the cellar where they had been dumped, and takes a quick inventory but finds little of use, just grains and seeds. The boxes however give him an idea and he pries three small boards off of one that’s broken. Using the trowel again, he sharpens one end of each. It’s not very effective for this sort of thing but it’s all he has. Once the boards are sharpened, he hands the trowel and the hood with the glowing orb still inside, to Miko. Then he carries the sharpened sticks with him as he again climbs to the door at the top of the steps.

He pauses a moment to listen at the door until he again hears the three men talking as they play cards. The door is being kept closed by a sliding bar. Fortunately, the sliding bar has a handle on this side of the door. Taking hold of the handle, he slides it very slowly until the end comes free from the door jamb.

Thinking about what he is about to attempt makes the throbbing in his head worsen. He takes a moment to calm himself, and the

throbbing settles back down to a dull ache. *Okay James*, he says to himself, *you can do this*. Readying his sticks, he begins formulating the spell he plans to use. Once he has it, he nods to Miko who nods back that he's ready. One final calming breath, then he kicks the door open.

The slamming of the door against the wall startles the three men, causing them to leap from their seats and turn in surprise to see him framed in the doorway. One begins to draw a sword, the other two, knives.

Not giving the men a chance to react, James takes the three sharpened boards, and as he throws them in their direction, the words of a version of his spear spell issue forth. Magic surges out of him and takes hold of the sticks. With incredible speed and accuracy, they impale each of the three men in the chest. James has a momentary satisfaction of seeing them fall before the pain in his head erupts to a point where it causes him to black out.

As James bursts through the door and casts his spell, Miko follows him into the room. He carries the trowel in one hand as a weapon and holds the hood containing the glowing orb in the other. Movement from across the room catches his eye as James launches the three sharpened sticks toward the men at the table. A man who had been resting upon a cot gets quickly to his feet. Wearing nothing but a shirt and pants, he draws a sword from the sword belt that had been looped around the back of a nearby chair and begins advancing toward them.

Before the man has the chance to take two steps, he comes to an abrupt halt when his partners are struck down by the sticks. Fearing to face one who can do such a thing, he turns for the door, ready to flee. But then he sees James succumb to the affects of casting the spell and collapse to the floor. Now with only Miko left to deal with, the man stops his flight and advances once again toward Miko, sword at the ready.

Miko holds the trowel out before him threateningly. In a voice filled with fear, he says to the man, "I...I am a great wizard too! A...and if you don't throw down your weapon, I...I....I will cast the fires of hell at you."

Smiling, the man continues advancing toward him and says, "Go ahead kid, burn me. I dare you." When he takes another two steps and Miko has done nothing but stand there menacing him with the trowel, he says, "Thought not."

As he comes close, Miko grabs the open end of the hood with his left hand, the one holding the trowel. With his other hand, he holds the other end and says with all his might, "Fires of hell, burn him!" He swings the hood toward the man and lets go with his left hand. Stopping the hood's forward motion with a jerk of his right hand, the hood suddenly opens and the glowing orb sails out of the hood, straight toward the man's head.

Holding his arms up and screaming as if the fires of hell truly were coming for him, the man stops and backpedals quickly, trying to avoid the orb.

Knowing he only has a few seconds, Miko advances with speed and strikes with the trowel, just as the orb hits the man in the head and bounces harmlessly off. With the strength of desperation, Miko thrusts the trowel into the man's belly cutting through the shirt, and opening up a long gash from which the man's intestines began spilling out. Tripping over his own guts the man falls to the floor. Not dead, but in a great deal of pain, he stares at Miko who is now approaching him after having appropriated a knife from one of the fallen men at the table.

"If you tell me who hired you I'll make it quick," he tells the man.

The man replies weakly, "I don't know who it was." He nods over to one of the dead men, "Carl over there made the arrangement. He said that someone wanted you captured alive. Once we had you, he went and made contact to find out what they wanted us to do with you. When he came back, he said that someone would be coming this evening to collect you and that we'd get paid when he arrived. That's all I know, I swear!"

True to his word, Miko makes it quick and the man's pain ended quickly. Wiping the knife on the dead man's pants, he gets up and returns to where James lies on the floor. He checks to make sure he's breathing and is relieved to find that James is still alive, if unconscious.

Shaking him gently, Miko says, "James, are you okay?"

Coming to, James gasps from the pain throbbing in his head. "What?" he asks dazedly.

"James, we need to get out of here," Miko urges.

Realization of where he is and what's been going on suddenly comes back to him. "Help me up," he says, lifting an arm so Miko can assist him to his feet. The effort to stand leaves him with black

spots circling in front of his eyes. But with Miko's help, he makes it over to a chair and sits down.

"See if there's something around here to drink, it may help my head," he tells him. Pain rips through his head and he feels as if he's about to black out again. Closing his eyes, he takes a few slow, deep breaths which seem to have an affect.

As Miko searches the room, James gets the pain in his head to subside a little then looks over at the three dead men with pieces of boards sticking out of them. Then he notices the other man, throat slit and entangled in his own intestines, lying on the floor.

"Found some ale by the looks of it," Miko says as he returns. He holds out a bottle and James takes it, hesitantly sniffs it and then drinks some. It is ale, if a bit stale and it does help to further ease the headache.

"Thanks, that helped," he says. "You do that?" he asks Miko, nodding toward the man on the floor.

"Yeah," Miko replies, smiling with pride.

"Good work," James congratulates him. "We need to get out of here, but not before we take care of some things." He gets up and moves toward the men he killed with the sharpened boards.

Removing the board from the closest dead man's chest, he says, "I don't want anyone to know I can do magic. Collect the other two and put them in a sack with the trowel, we're taking them with us."

"Why bother?" Miko asks as he grabs a sack. He takes the one blood stained board from James, then begins removing the boards from the other dead men and placing them in with the one already in the sack.

James goes over and picks up the sword that belonged to the gutted man, and stabs one of the other three through the place where the stick had impaled him. "I want anyone who sees this to think that we were rescued, that we didn't get out by ourselves. That way in the future we may have an edge in a similar situation." Going over to the other two he stabs them in a similar matter. "I doubt if forensic science has evolved very far around here for someone to be able to tell that they were not killed by a sword."

"Forensic science?" asks a confused Miko. He stands there watching James, the sack with the sticks and trowel in hand.

"It means the study of a crime to tell what actually happened," he replies.

"Oh," responds Miko. "Why would that be important?"

James walks over and then places the sword back into the hand of the man on the ground. Seeing the orb on the ground he cancels the spell, causing it to disappear.

“Knowledge is power,” he says as he proceeds to each of the four men, searching their pockets. Some coins and two small gems and his pouch they had taken from him are in the pocket of one man at the table. Around the neck of another he finds the medallion the little creature had given him. His other amulet he finds in the man’s pouch with several coins.

He puts the medallion around his neck and tucks it inside his shirt. His other amulet, coins and the other valuables go into his pouch. Turning to Miko he says, “What people know will determine what they will do. The better your information, the more effective your course of action will be. And if your information is wrong, it could lead you into actions which may be a waste of time or even cause you problems. Understand?”

“I think so,” he replies, not sounding very convinced.

“Regardless, let’s get out of here before someone comes by.” James moves to the door leading outside and opens it slowly, peering out. It’s still very dark, the street outside is illuminated mainly by the light spilling past him through the door. The street appears deserted so he steps out into the night, quickly closing the door after Miko exits. Once again the street is plunged into darkness.

After proceeding down the street a little ways, they come across a refuse pile heaped against the wall of a building. Making sure no one is watching, they pry up a portion of the pile and place the sack with the sticks within before covering it back up again. Satisfied that the evidence is well hidden, at least for the time being, they continue on down the street.

A shadow watches from the darkness as they make their way from the refuse pile. Once they move off a suitable distance, the shadow disengages itself from the dark and crosses over to the refuse pile where it digs until it finds the sack with the bloody boards. The shadow then removes the sack and takes it with it as it hurries down the road after James and Miko.

They don’t travel long before James realizes that they are on the outside of the outer wall, in the poor sector. Moving down the road at a quick pace, they are soon approaching the gate leading back

into the city. The smaller gate for travelers stands open and is brightly illuminated by several torches. The two guards standing watch suddenly turn and look through the gate at the sound of an approaching horse. Shortly a rider appears and nods to the guards as he leaves the city.

James and Miko stay hidden in the shadows as the rider makes his appearance. James feels Miko's hand grip his arm as he points to the rider passing through the gate. "James, that's one of the guards who chased us from Lord Colerain's estate."

"Are you sure?" he asks.

"Very sure," replies Miko.

They watch the rider come through the gate and turn down the lane they had just vacated.

James starts for the gate when Miko suddenly stops him. Turning toward Miko he hears him say, "If we go through the gate now, and should Lord Colerain's men later question the guards about those who entered tonight, then they will know we're back in the city."

Considering the possibility a moment, James says, "Good thinking, I wouldn't have thought of that. What do you propose we do?"

"Find someplace to hole up for the night and then come in with the crowd in the morning," whispers Miko.

"Where do you suggest we go that won't leave us robbed or dead by morning?" he asks.

"Out of town a ways," he suggests. "Perhaps down by the river."

"Alright," agrees James, "let's do it." He leads Miko down the street again until they come to a junction with a road heading away from town. They turn down that road and continue for another half hour until they've left the outer buildings of Cardri far behind. At that point they look for a spot to hole up for the night. Off the road to the west sits a field of tall grass, James leads them out into it where they lodge some of it to make a camp of sorts.

Lying down under the stars, they settle in and soon fall asleep. The shadow watches from the road, and once it's sure they are down for the night, leaves and heads back to town.

Morning dawns another sunny and soon to be warm day. James' head still throbs, but nothing like last night. He can still feel a tender

lump on the back of his head when he gingerly checks it with his fingers.

Looking over the tall grass, they see the road to Cardri is already beginning to swell with the traffic of the day. They get up and join the people entering through the gates. The guards pay them no notice, they are simply another set of anonymous faces entering the city.

Making their way through the streets they arrive at the Dancing Squirrel. Going up to their room, they find most of their belongings still there except of course for the tarts and crumb cake that their captors had taken with them.

“What do we do now?” asks Miko as he settles down on one of the beds.

“We do what we came here to do and get out as soon as possible,” replies James.

“Exactly what are we here for?” he asks.

James takes out his medallion and shows it to him. Indicating the design on the face of it he says, “I want to find out if this design has any special meaning.”

Looking closely at it, Miko asks, “Why, what’s so special about it?”

“I can’t really explain, but let’s just say it’s something I think I need to do,” James explains. “I also want to keep the fact that we’re investigating this medallion a secret, okay?”

“Sure, I understand,” Miko agrees, intrigued by all the secrecy. “If you like, I could go out in the street and see if there is any place around here where you could do that. Someone like me could get around without arousing suspicion, I’m just another of the street brats.”

“Okay, but be very careful,” James cautions as he begins to gather the rest of their baggage. “Lord Colerain may yet have other plans in the works for capturing us. I still can’t believe he’s still after us just because we were trespassing.”

“That’s the way with some nobles,” explains Miko. “Especially, Lord Colerain. I once heard of a boy who on a dare from some of his friends, threw a tomato at his carriage as it was passing through town. Two days later, the boy disappeared and was never seen again. It was never proven that Lord Colerain was the one who took the boy, but that’s the general belief.”

“Sounds like someone we need to stay clear of,” he says. “I’m planning on moving us to the Silver Bells, the inn where Perrilin

said he was engaged to play. When you find out anything, meet me there.”

“Alright,” says Miko as he opens the door. “I’ll see you there.”

Once Miko leaves, James changes into a clean set of clothes and then finishes gathering the rest of his things. Going down to the common room he finds Inius there sitting by the front window looking out into the street.

He turns as James approaches, a sad look on his face. “What’s wrong?” James asks.

“Furball is missing,” he says. “She was around last night when I locked up, but I haven’t seen her since.”

“That’s too bad,” consoles James. “I’m sure she’ll turn up.”

“I hope so,” Inius says, “she’s all I have left of my Eliena. Of course, I have grown fond of her too.” He sees that James is carrying his belongings and says, “Leaving us today?”

“Afraid so,” James replies as he hands over the room key. “Something’s come up and I need to go. You can go ahead and keep the advance for the next two days, I really enjoyed your inn and your people.”

“Thank you,” he says. “If you are ever in Cardri again, I hope you will stay with us.”

“I’m sure I will,” he assures him. “And if I should see Furball, I’ll get her back to you.”

“I would appreciate that,” Inius says as he turns back and continues staring out the window.

Exiting out the back, James goes over to the stable and finds that his horse has been well cared for, the straw in the stall looking clean and fresh. He comes over and pats him on the side, “They treating you well, boy?”

“Of course they are,” a voice answers from behind him.

Turning, he sees the surly stableman from yesterday, the man’s disposition apparently little improved. In his hands the man carries a bale of fresh straw.

“Good day to you,” James greets cheerfully, stepping aside as the man brushes past on his way to deposit the straw in the next stall.

“I suppose it may be,” the man replies. “You leavin’?” he asks as he grabs a pitchfork and spreads the straw evenly across the floor.

“Yes, heading out today,” he answers as he continues readying his horse.

The man looks at James over the stall wall, makes a grunting noise and then walks back out the front.

“Friendly sort of chap, eh?” he asks his horse. The horse just snorts for an answer. “I agree,” he says as he finishes up with securing all his bags to, and around, the saddle. He then mounts and rides from the stable, keeping an eye out for anyone who might be taking a special interest in him. Since last night he intends to keep on his guard, watching for anyone that may be following him.

When he arrives at Cardri’s middle wall, he finds but a single, wide gate giving entry here where there had been two in the outer wall. The gate is quite busy with many people passing through, though not nearly the crowd that had bottlenecked the outer one. As James approaches the gate, the guards visually inspect him as he rides by, but make no attempt to approach him.

On the other side he finds the streets to be much cleaner, and once you get past the immediate area of the gate, the buildings slowly make way for residences and estates. A broad thoroughfare runs left and right from the gate, extending further into the city. Seeing a man walk by with several packages, most likely making deliveries by the modest way he’s dressed, James hails him, “Excuse me sir.”

The man turns and sees James to be the one hailing him. “Yes sir?” the man asks as he stops to see what he wants.

“I was wondering if you could tell me where I might find the Silver Bells?” James asks him.

Pointing down the street to the right, he says “Follow the road that way, you can’t miss it.”

“Thank you,” James says as the man once again resumes his progress.

Turning his horse, James makes his way down the road to the right. The buildings are very well kept up and the businesses are of a higher quality as well. Instead of the taverns and more mundane shops prevalent in the outer area, here there are more of the craftsmen type shops, i.e. goldsmiths, artisans, etc.

After several blocks, he comes upon a very nice, three story building. Instead of a sign as seems to be the norm, this one has a set of four bells hanging out front which look to be made of silver. They make a melodious sound when the breeze hits them just right. *This must be the Silver Bells*, he thinks to himself. *Can’t be real silver or they would have been stolen by now.* He ties his horse to

the post out front, grabs his backpack and then climbs the four steps to the door standing open at the top.

Walking inside, he can immediately see that this is an upscale establishment. There are several pictures hanging on the walls, also various pieces of sculpture set in small alcoves around the common room. The tables all have linen tablecloths and are set with plates and silverware.

A man sees him enter and comes over, "Can I help you sir?"

"I hope so," James replies. "I am looking for a bard by the name of Perrilin. He said he might be engaged here."

"He was," the man says.

"Was?" asks James. "He told me he would be here for about a week."

"Yes, he was going to be" the man explains. "But the city watch came in last night and took him away in the middle of his performance. You can probably find him at the city jail."

"Do you know why they took him?" he asks.

"No, they didn't bother to inform us," the man replies. "Miss Gilena was very put out that they disrupted her place in such a way. They didn't even wait until he was finished," the man continues, "just came up and took him off the stage right in the middle of a song."

"Too bad," says James. "I happen to be in need of a room and a stall for my horse. I have a boy with me, he'll be by after a while."

"The rooms are a gold a night," the man explains, "and another silver for your horse. Meals are extra." Gesturing over to the far side where a lady is stacking glasses, he says "That is Miss Gilena, she can get you set up."

"Thanks for the help," he says gratefully and then walks over to where Miss Gilena is busily stacking glasses.

"Excuse me ma'am," James says as he approaches her.

Turning around she says, "Yes, how may I help you?"

"Looking for a room and a stall for my horse," he tells her.

Looking him up and down with an expression bordering on snooty, she says, "It'll be a gold a night and another silver for your horse." The expression on her face clearly says that she doesn't think he will take the room, much less be able to afford it.

James reaches in and pulls out two golds and two silvers, handing them over to her.

Upon seeing the money, her mood completely changes. Where disdain once reigned supreme, now smiles and cheerfulness rule.

Snatching the money from his hand, she says, “Welcome to the Silver Bells good sir.” Reaching under the counter, she brings forth a room key and hands it to James. “We have one room left. It’s on the third floor, top of the stairs, all the way at the end on the right.”

Taking the key, he replies, “That will be just fine, thank you.”

“The stables are out back,” she says, gesturing to a door at the back of the common room. “Gunther should be out there and he’ll find a stall for your horse.”

“Thank you,” he says gratefully. “There is a young boy with me by the name of Miko who will be coming by a little later. Could you direct him to my room when he gets here?” Seeing her nod yes, he turns and goes back out the front for his horse. Miss Gilena returns to her glasses, placing the last one upon the stack.

James takes his horse around to the back and finds Gunther who soon has his horse settled in. Taking his belongings, he returns to the inn where a boy comes over to show him to his room. Taking his bags from him, the boy carries them as he leads him up the stairs to the third floor. At the top of the stairs, he proceeds down the hallway to the last door on the right and holds it open, allowing James to enter first.

The boy then brings in the bags and sets them down by the bed. He stands there looking at James, not making any move to leave. Understanding dawns and James pulls out a couple coppers, handing them to the boy who pockets them and promptly leaves, shutting the door behind him.

James settles down on one of the beds just as he breaks into a big yawn. Realizing just how tired he is, he decides to relax and rest until Miko arrives. He lays there for a time worrying about how Miko is making out, but soon exhaustion overcomes him and falls asleep.

Chapter Twelve

Miko opens the door to find James fast asleep. Keeping quiet, he begins to close the door slowly until a mischievous grin spreads across his face. Realizing such an opportunity may never repeat itself, he opens the door wider and slams it shut with all his might.

Wham!

He watches in amusement as James jumps two inches off the bed and proceeds to fall over the side where he lands on the floor with a thud. Smiling and chuckling quietly to himself, he goes over and sits at the table while a startled James flashes quick glances around the room.

When his gaze settles upon Miko and the way the boy's grinning, his eyes narrow. "Did you have to do that?" he asks angrily.

"No," replies Miko before his grin turns into a full blown smile. "I guess I didn't, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity."

"Don't ever do that again," James says sternly, then mellows out and can't help but smile himself. It was pretty funny.

"I've got good news," says Miko, "and bad news."

"What's the good news?" James asks.

"There is an archive located near the castle, past the inner wall. Supposedly it has hundreds of books scholars come from near and far to research."

Now off the floor, James comes over to the table and takes a seat. "And the bad news?"

"There may be a small problem with gaining access to it," explains Miko.

"What sort of problem," James asks.

"Well first of all," Miko begins, "only those with business in the castle area are allowed within the castle area. If you try, they will at best turn you away, at worst take you in for questioning."

"I see," says James. "What else?"

"Since the Empire has attacked Madoc, their security has been doubled. Anyone caught there without a reason will be treated as a spy and taken to the castle's dungeon for questioning."

"Alright," James says, "it sounds like this is the place I need to go. Any ideas on how to get in there?"

"No," replies Miko shaking his head. "Maybe Perrilin will have an idea."

"That's another problem," James explains. "He was taken by the city watch last night and most likely is in jail."

“Great,” says Miko, “now what are we to do?”

“After lunch, I plan to go down to the city jail and find out what is going on. Until then, I suggest we adjourn to the common room and see what there is to eat.”

Never one to turn down food, Miko quickly agrees and head downstairs with James who is carrying the ever present backpack. Coming into the common room, they find an empty table next to a window overlooking the street. It isn't long before a girl comes over to take their order. In less than a minute, she returns with two big steaming bowls filled with chicken stew, a loaf of bread, and two foaming mugs of ale.

Miko eats with his regular gusto, while James takes his time, savoring each bite. Between, and during, mouthfuls of stew Miko offers to ferret out what those on the streets may know about Lord Colerain's presence in the city, while James finds out about Perrilin.

“Try to draw as little attention to yourself as possible,” James cautions. “We don't need any more surprises.”

“Not to worry,” Miko assures him as he puts a last bite of stew soaked bread into his mouth, “I'll be careful.” Getting up, he hurries across the common room and soon has disappeared out the door.

James finishes the last of his lunch while he gazes out the window, watching Miko walk down the street until he's lost amidst the crowd of people. After downing the remaining dregs of ale he scoots his chair back and comes to his feet. Shouldering his backpack he makes for the door. Once outside he heads further into the city in the hopes of finding the jail and discovering what has happened to Perrilin. It's not long before he spots one of the city's constables and questions him as to the whereabouts of the city jail. The constable gives him directions and he's quickly on his way.

The city jail lies within the second wall near the gate leading into the castle, not far from where he is now. The jail as it turns out is an imposing three story building with only the barest slits passing for windows on the ground floor. A very solid door stands ajar at the top of three steps, so he goes on up and walks inside.

Entering a large room, he sees a man wearing a constable's uniform sitting behind a desk reading one of many papers stacked neatly before him. The sound of James entering draws his attention. As James approaches, the man sets the paper down and asks, “Can I help you?”

“Yes,” replies James as he comes to stand before the desk. “A friend of mine was brought in by the city watch last night and I was wondering if it would be possible to talk with him?”

Setting the paper aside, the constable looks him up and down then asks, “And just who might your friend be?”

“His name is Perrilin, a bard,” James answers.

“There’s been no one brought in with that name,” replies the constable.

“But I heard that several constables came to the Silver Bells last night and dragged him out right in the middle of his performance,” he protested.

“Yeah, I heard about that,” the constable replies. “Nevertheless, he’s not here, sorry.”

“Where can I find him?” he asks.

“Don’t know,” the constable replies. He holds up a hand to forestall any more questions. “I am not privy to all that goes on. I just know he’s not here and I don’t know where he would be.”

James looks at the constable in quiet frustration. He can tell there will be no more help forthcoming. After a moment, he turns about and leaves the jail.

He walks across the street to an alley and takes a moment to make sure he won’t be observed. Reaching into his backpack, he draws out the compass he made earlier in Trendle. Using a variation of the spell he used while looking for Hern, he watches in surprise as the pointer turns and indicates a direction down the street. He had thought for sure it would point toward the jail.

Stepping back out of the alley, he turns in the direction indicated by the compass and proceeds down the street. Trying to maintain a course as true as possible to the direction indicated by the compass, he eventually comes to a dead end against the inner surface of Cardri’s middle protective wall.

The pointer continues indicating Perrilin’s position to be somewhere on the other side. James quickly makes his way to the gate and passes through Cardri’s middle wall and enters its outer ring. From there he once again allows the compass to lead the way.

Down several streets and passing around various buildings, his search comes to a stop again as he comes up against the inner surface of the outer wall. There is no denying the truth of what the compass is telling: Perrilin lies somewhere outside of Cardri. Making his way to Cardri’s main gates, James leaves the city.

The compass leads him through the buildings built outside the city's protective wall, to the outskirts of Cardri. When he reaches the last building before entering the countryside, the compass still directs him on.

James contemplates returning to the inn for his horse, but discards that idea. Moving out, he enters the countryside with the plan to continue on until an hour before nightfall. If he doesn't come across the bard by then, he'll return to the inn and set out on horseback the following day.

Now that he no longer has to wend his way through crowded streets and around buildings, he's able to progress much faster. Hours of trudging through fields later finds him cresting one of the many rolling hills dotting the area. He pauses when a farmhouse comes into view on the far side of the hill. A glance to the compass reveals the pointer directing him straight toward the abandoned looking building.

The farmhouse has seen better days. One side of the roof sags in precariously and the front door sits slightly askew, with only the lower hinge still attaching it to the door frame. The ground surrounding the house is choked with weeds and appears not to have been tended by anyone for quite a while. Behind the house sits a barn which is in slightly better shape, though still bears the appearance of disuse.

Despite the look of abandonment, a small plume of smoke makes its way from the farmhouse's chimney. The faint sound of horses can also be heard coming from the barn. James quickly returns back down the hill until he no longer casts a silhouette against the afternoon sky. He then keeps low as he carefully makes his way around the farm, doing his best not to be observed by anyone that may be in the house or barn. As he circles around the farmhouse, he keeps an eye on the compass. As he moves, so does the compass, continuously pointing toward the structure.

Satisfied that he knows where Perrilin is, he finds a place amidst tall grass from where he can keep an eye on the house yet remain unobserved should anyone be about. The sun is low in the sky, he hadn't realized that his trek out here had taken so much time, but it seems that sunset is only an hour or so away. He settles into his hiding place and waits for the coming of dark. If Perrilin is in that farmhouse then it can only mean that he's in trouble and when darkness comes he'll see what he can do. Guards on business of the

city would have taken him to the jail. The fact that he was taken here could only bode ill.

He keeps an eye on the farmhouse for the next hour until the sun sets and the light begins to fade. Just as the sun dips below the horizon, a man emerges through the front door of the farmhouse and makes his way toward the barn. *This is no farmer!* The man has the look of a street tough and carries a sword at his hip. James watches through the tall grass as the man crosses to, and then enters, the barn. Before James can make up his mind whether or not to investigate what the man is doing, the barn door swings open and the man heads back toward the farmhouse.

What is going on? he wonders. And should he even get involved? If it wasn't for the need he felt to enter the Royal Archives, he would turn around and get out of there. But, he needed information and it appeared Perrilin may be his only avenue through which he could get it. Plus, he liked the bard. During the evening they spent together on the road he found him to be a friendly, and good-natured individual. He couldn't leave without finding out what was going on, things did not feel right. Settling down in the grass once more, he waited for the coming of night at which time he would find out what was going on. Making himself comfortable, he waited.

The barn was quiet as he approached under the cover of darkness. Peering through an open window, he discovered six horses occupying the stalls. Except for the horses the barn was deserted, their owners must be within the farmhouse. Leaving the barn, he carefully makes his way to the side of the farmhouse, doing his best not to stumble over anything in the dark. Coming to one of the windows through which light was emerging, he carefully looks through.

On the other side he sees an empty room with a single doorway on the opposite wall. The light coming through the window originates from the room on the other side of the doorway. It looks to be the main room of the house. Four men are taking their ease on a couch and a couple of chairs. A fifth man stands in the middle of the room with his back to James.

The man stands there for several seconds before stepping to the side. James gasps in shock to discover the man had been standing in front of a chair. And bound to the chair is the object of his search. Perrilin.

The bard looks the worse for wear. His left eye is swollen shut and what's left of his shirt is red with blood. James watches while the four men joke and laugh but can't make out what is being said. The fifth man returns to stand before Perrilin and says something to him. Perrilin doesn't respond, simply sits there and stares at him with a defiant look. The man says something else then strikes the bard across the face, snapping his head to the side.

Perrilin brings his head back up and continues staring defiantly back at his tormentor while blood drips from the corner of his mouth. The man who struck Perrilin walks over to the fireplace and pulls out a red hot poker lying amongst the coals. He then turns and walks back to stand in front of Perrilin where he holds the poker a few inches from the bard's face. After giving Perrilin a moment to contemplate the implied threat the poker poses, the man begins speaking once more.

Not waiting to see more, James hurries to the front door and picks up several stones along the way. Steeling himself for what he plans to do, he pauses a moment as he reaches the door. Taking a few deep, calming breaths, he lays his hand upon the door. Words issue forth as he casts a spell, and at the utterance of the final word, the door explodes inward, shards of wood flying everywhere.

The men turn as one to see James standing framed within the doorway as pieces of the door fly about them. He casts another spell and two stones fly with magic induced speed, striking two of the captors in the chest before the men have time to react. Exploding out their backs in a grisly display, the stones embed themselves into the wall.

The one who had been questioning Perrilin reacts first and throws the hot poker at James. He then draws his sword and advances upon him. The remaining two break for other rooms of the house and are soon out of sight.

Jumping to the side to avoid the thrown poker, James takes his last stone and cast his spell as he throws it at the approaching man. By a stroke of ill fated luck, the man moves his sword at just the right time and the stone strikes the blade snapping it in two. Throwing his broken sword to the ground, the man draws his dagger and charges.

Not wanting to stay and withstand the charge of this bull of a man coming straight at him, James turns and runs back out into the dark. When he reaches a point where he is no longer illuminated by

the light coming through the door, he turns abruptly and quickly makes his way back toward the side of the house.

He reaches the side of the house just as the man emerges at a run through the doorway. Glancing around, the man tries to determine where James has gone, but his eyes have yet to adjust to the dark. James' breath freezes in his lungs as the man's eyes rove over the very spot where he hides. Then the man abruptly turns in the opposite direction of where James stands motionless and runs around the side of the house.

Not able to believe his luck at not being seen, James begins backing away from the door, all the while keeping against the side of the house as he plans his next move. To cast a spell would require him to give away his position as he spoke the words. But he may not have much choice if he wants to survive this encounter.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps comes toward him from out of the dark. He holds still against the side of the house and remains absolutely quiet, hardly daring to breathe.

In the dark not more than a foot away, he discerns a shadow in the form of a man's silhouette. The shadow slowly makes his way past where James hides in the dark, the light from the stars reflecting off the bare blade of the sword the shadow holds. The man comes to a stop, his head cocking first to one side and then the other as if he's listening for something.

Then without warning the sword strikes. Dodging the blow, James jumps to the side as the blade comes to within inches of where his head had been but a split second before. Losing his balance, he hits the ground and rolls quickly away. The man turns toward the sound of him rolling on the ground and advances upon him quickly with sword poised to strike.

James rolls several more times, then comes to a stop on his back. Looking up, he sees the man almost upon him, the moonlight glinting off the bare metal raised to end his life. In a moment of panic he thrusts his hand toward the man, and as a mental picture flashes through of the man flying through the air away from him, he shouts "Away!" Feeling a surge of power, the man is picked up by a force of air and flung away from him. Striking the side of the house, the man smashes through to the other side. The force of the impact shatters bones and pulps flesh.

The jagged hole in the side of the house spills light onto where James lies on the ground. As he begins getting to his feet, a crossbow bolt embeds itself in the ground where his chest had just

been. He looks around and sees the man who had been interrogating Perrilin framed in a window to the right, winding a crossbow to fire again. Placing another bolt in place, he then swings it to bear once more at James.

Picturing the crossbow in his mind, he envisions its crosswire snapping. This time without even vocalizing the words of a spell, he lets thought guide the magic as he lets loose a surge of power. *Twang!* The crosswire breaks. Snapping back, it catches the man across the right side of his face. Crying out in pain, the man lets fall the crossbow as he disappears back into the house.

A quick scan reveals no other men in sight. Moving stealthily, James makes his way over to the hole in the wall and peers in around the edge. Nothing but the dead man is visible. Ever so carefully he climbs through the hole and makes his way into the room. There he comes to the dead man's side and takes his knife. Now with the added confidence of having a blade in hand, he cautiously approaches the doorway leading to the main room wherein Perrilin is being held.

He looks in to find Perrilin still bound in the chair. Head lolled forward, the bard looks dead but for the gentle rise and fall of his chest. Not seeing anyone else in the room, James waits for a second as he tries to ascertain where the other two men are.

A noise behind him causes him to turn to see one of the captors climbing in through the hole in the wall, sword at the ready and coming at him.

James visualizes the knife flying and striking the man. Letting loose with the power, he throws. Guided by magic, the knife sails through the air and strikes the man in the center of the chest, puncturing his heart. His sword falls from his lifeless hand as his body lurches backward out of the hole in the wall, coming to land on the ground outside.

Verging on the brink of exhaustion due to all the magic he's been throwing around, James leans against the wall for a second to catch his breath, all the while keeping an eye out for the remaining captor. Then from outside he hears the sound of a galloping horse. Rushing to the hole in the wall, he looks out just in time to see the remaining captor racing past the house. As he rides past, their eyes lock and James sees a red welt oozing blood running from his hairline to his jaw, crossing over the right eye. Their gazes lock for a moment longer before the man is swallowed by the night.

James returns to the main room and comes over to Perrilin. "Are you alright?" he asks as he starts untying Perrilin's bonds.

Perrilin raises his head to see who is talking to him and is surprised when he realizes who it is. "No," he replies, "but I'll live."

"Who were these guys?" James asks. Removing the rest of the bonds, he helps Perrilin to his feet. A little unsteady, he requires James' help to remain upright.

Perrilin doesn't answer right away. Instead he looks over the men lying dead on the floor. "Did you get them all?" he asks.

"No, one got away on horseback," James replies. "It was the man who had been questioning you."

"Then we need to get out of here before he brings back others," Perrilin manages to say just as his knees buckle and he once again sinks into unconsciousness.

Taking the man in his arms, James struggles to carry him out to the barn where he lays him down in the straw while he saddles two of the horses. Once he has them saddled, he attempts to rouse Perrilin, but is unsuccessful. He lifts him from the straw and places him across the saddle on his stomach, then proceeds to secure him with rope to keep him from falling off on their return to Cardri. Once he's sure Perrilin is secured, he mounts the other horse and takes the reins of Perrilin's. Leading the other horse from the barn, he heads in the general direction of Cardri.

It doesn't take nearly as long to return to town as it had when he left in search of Perrilin. As the lights of the city begin to appear in the distance ahead, a groan comes from the bard. A glance reveals Perrilin is beginning to stir. Bringing the horses to a stop, he dismounts and goes over to discover Perrilin is once again conscious with eyes open. "Can you ride?" James asks. Perrilin nods affirmatively.

Taking a moment, he unties Perrilin and helps him upright into the saddle. Once he's sure Perrilin is coherent enough to remain erect and isn't likely to fall off, he remounts and they continue on into Cardri.

During their approach to the outskirts of Cardri, James realizes he's in a dilemma. How will he get Perrilin into Cardri without anyone knowing? If the guards at the gate recognize Perrilin, or just report that someone in his condition passed through, then the hunt may be on.

He slows his horse's pace as he ponders the situation. They reach the outlying buildings, and after traversing several blocks, the gate comes into view. It is well lit and two guards stand vigil.

Agonizing over how to get in, he suddenly hears the sound of drunken singing coming from the intersection of streets ahead of them. James reins up some distance away and waits to see what's going on. Around the corner appear four rather drunken men, singing and sharing bottles as they stagger up the street. Their destination seems to be the gate into the city which gives him an idea.

"Oh my god, Reggie," one of the guards says to his partner as he looks at the men coming up the road toward them. "Would you look at what's coming down the street?"

"Looks like they had a good one tonight," Reggie says.

"Yeah, so much so that one of them can't even walk," the first guard laughs.

The two guards look on in amusement as the six men, one who needs to be supported by two of his companions, come staggering up and then through the gate into the city. They watch as the group meanders away down the street and are soon out of sight but not out of hearing as their off key caterwauling echoes through the night.

Once past the guards and out of sight, James quickly disengages himself and Perrilin from the drunks. They make their way through the streets to the second gate, ducking into alleys whenever a patrol of the city watch comes by.

They finally reach the second gate and find two guards on duty. Both are looking rather bored but otherwise alert. James watches from the shadows of an alley for a while, but no opportunity presents itself they can take advantage of to get through the gate unnoticed. Perrilin rests with eyes closed against the wall of the alley, passing from being conscious to unconscious and back again as James considers his options.

Afraid of trying something like this, but unable to think of any other way, he scans the area to make sure no one is approaching before he begins. He concentrates on a visualization of the guards becoming tired, then drifting off to sleep. The power wells up and flows toward the men. The flow of power is small and subtle, taking a small amount of time to work its affect. Soon, the men begin

yawning and their eyes start to blink. First one then the other slumps down and drift off to sleep.

Helping Perrilin up, James bears much of the bard's weight as they make their way through the gate, passing within a foot of the sleeping guards. Once they are past and far enough from the gate so as not to be noticed, James stops the spell but the guards fail to reawaken. Not wanting them to get into trouble on his account, he leaves Perrilin sitting against the side of a candle maker's shop while he returns to the gate. Stopping some distance away, he picks up a small rock and tosses it toward the sleeping guards. It bangs into the wall then ricochets off the head of one. Startled, the guard wakes up, suddenly realizing that he had been asleep and gets up fast. Then he notices his partner lying nearby and kicks him in the leg to wake him. Satisfied they won't get into trouble because of him, he returns to Perrilin and with the bard still leaning heavily upon him, head for the Silver Bells.

When they reach the inn, James can hear that the common room is still packed with the evening crowd. Above the voices and the occasional laughter wafts the sound of a bard or minstrel. Going around to the back, he finds an area steep in shadow where he leaves Perrilin.

"I won't be but a moment," he tells the bard. The only reply Perrilin gives is a nod.

Moving as unobtrusively as possible, he walks in through the back door and quickly makes his way to the stairs and then up to his room.

Opening the door, he finds Miko lying atop one of the beds fast asleep. Coming over to him, James shakes his shoulder. "Wake up, I need your help."

Startled to wakefulness, the boy bolts upright only to relax when he sees James standing over him. "I was getting worried about you," he says.

"Sorry about that," James replies. "I found Perrilin and he's downstairs." Holding up a finger he says, "No time for questions, I need your help getting him up here. He's pretty badly hurt." As he leads Miko from the room he adds, "We need to get him up here without letting anyone know that he's here."

"How are we to do that?" Miko asks.

"Just follow my lead," James tells him.

Miko gives him an affirmative nod and then follows him down the stairs and through the back door. James is relieved to find the

bard where he left him. He and Miko manage to get Perrilin to a standing position, and with an arm around each of their necks, help him to and then through the back door.

As they enter, Miss Gilena just happens to walk by. She stops when she spies them, her face turning into a frown. Wearing a disapproving look, she moves toward them and asks, "What is going on?" Her expression seems to indicate suspicion that they are up to something.

"Just a friend who got the tar beat out of him is all," James explains.

She turns her gaze first onto James, then Miko. When her eyes turned on the man between them, her expression changed from one of suspicion to that of shock. "Is that...?" Having been discovered, James can only nod. She looks around and finding nobody nearby says, "Hurry and get him to your room. I'll be up in a few minutes with some food and water."

"Thank you," he says.

She only nods in reply then hurries to the kitchen. They help Perrilin up the stairs and into their room, laying him in the bed furthest from the door. Miko lights the candle on the table giving the room a little light. They pull the covers to his chin to better hide him should someone come in unexpectedly. They were just finishing with Perrilin when a single knock sounded on the door followed right after by Miss Gilena entering the room. Bearing a tray of food and a pitcher of water, along with several towels tucked under one arm, she snags the door closed with the heel of her foot.

"What happened to him?" she asks as she comes to where he lies. Handing Miko the tray of food, she then pours some of the water into a nearby basin and wets the end of a towel. Coming to sit on the bed next to Perrilin, she uses the damp towel to begin cleaning the dried blood off his face.

"I found him being held in a farmhouse several miles out of town," James explains. "They were beating him up pretty good and were about to begin using a hot poker. That's when I came along and managed to get him out of there."

"I thought he was arrested by the city watch?" she asks.

"Apparently not," he explains. "I went by the jail first, but they said he was never brought in."

They both turn their gaze toward the sleeping bard. James wonders what Perrilin has gotten himself into.

After cleaning him up fairly well she says, “You will need to get him out of those dirty clothes and clean the rest of him as well. In the morning, I will bring clean clothes for him.” Getting up off the bed she says, “If he wakes, try to get him to eat and drink, at least drink if nothing else. I need to be downstairs and if you should require anything, send the boy down to *me*,” she emphasizes by pointing to herself, “and I shall get you what you need. Understand?”

“Yes ma’am,” James replies.

“Good. Now I’ll leave you to it,” Miss Gilena states as she returns to the door and leaves the room.

“What now?” Miko asks after the door closes behind her.

“I guess we better get his clothes off and get him cleaned up like she said,” James answers as he proceeds to remove Perrilin’s shirt.

“No, I mean about gaining access to the Royal Archives,” clarifies Miko.

When he removes the shirt, he looks with anger at the many shallow cuts and bruises dotting the bard’s chest and back. The cuts are obviously the source of the blood staining his shirt.

“They sure did a number on him, didn’t they?” Miko asks as he too examines the extent of his injuries.

“Yes they did,” agrees James. He takes another of the towels and dips it into the basin. Being careful so as not to reopen the wounds which have already begun to heal, he gingerly works to remove the rest of the blood and dirt.

“I think we will need to wait until he wakes before we do anything further about the Archives,” James says. “We’ll lay low until tomorrow and then when he awakens see if he can help us. Hopefully he will be awake by then.” Once he’s finished cleaning the wounds, James lays him back into the bed and places the covers once more up to his chin. Then he comes over and sits with Miko at the table.

Miko looks longingly at the food piled upon the tray and James says, “We may as well eat it, though let’s leave some for him should he awaken.”

As they eat, James asks Miko if he found out anything about Lord Colerain’s business in Cardri.

“It seems not much is known around here about Lord Colerain,” he explains between bites of food. “However, I did find out some things about a Lord Kindering.” Seeing the lack of understanding on

James' face he explains, "Lord Kindering is who Lord Colerain is staying with while he's in town. I did find out that much."

"Ah, okay," James says understandingly, "go on."

"Apparently, Lord Kindering is very wealthy. He has many different trading concerns all over Cardri and some even extending into the various kingdoms neighboring us." Looking at James he says, "He even has businesses inside the Empire, or so it's said."

"Interesting. Did you find out what his connection with Lord Colerain is?" James asks.

"No, nobody seems to know much about that," Miko answers. "However, some that I talked with seem to think that this Lord Kindering is on the shady side. Rumors are surfacing about dealings he's had with slavers and smugglers."

"Oh?" prompts James as he finishes the last of his share of the meal.

"Couldn't find out the particulars, but it seems he is not one you would wish to cross," he warns.

"Sounds that way," James concludes. Seeing that Miko is done with his dinner, he says, "Why don't you take the other bed, I'm going to be up for a while."

Miko doesn't argue, just goes over and plops down on the bed. As he lies there, he watches James as he takes the traveling case with the writing material in it and places it on the table. "What are ya gonna do?" he asks.

Opening the case, James removes a piece of paper, an inkwell, and one of the finely pointed quills. "I'm going to jot down some notes about what's going on and different things. Just go to sleep and don't worry about it."

"No problem there," he says sleepily. He lies there awhile watching James until finally drifting off to sleep.

James opens the inkwell and places it near his paper. Grabbing the quill he dips it into the inkwell and then brings it to the paper to begin writing. When the quill touches the paper, a big glob of ink flows off the quill and onto the paper making a great big mess.

This may be harder than I thought, he thinks. He dips the quill into the ink again, this time scraping the excess off before bringing it over to the paper. This time when he tries to write, he takes his time and manages to do a fair job of it. Though the letters are a bit smudged and fatter than they should be, he's able to make out what is written. He spends a little more time practicing making various letters and shapes until he's satisfied that he has the gist of it.

He then takes his practice sheet and puts it to the side. Taking out a fresh sheet, he proceeds to make notes on magic and the various spells he has tried along with their effects. How the magic made him feel, the effect it had on him, etc.

...It would seem that I don't really need to use rhyme and meter to produce magical effects. I simply need to have a mental picture and a willingness to do magic, and then it happens. Perhaps the words are simply to help the novice practitioner maintain the mental picture as you do magic. Then once you grow in ability...

...the spells that continue in their effect, like the orb, seem to need a continual draw of energy from the castor in order to maintain the effect. Once you stop the flow, it ends. I have also noted that if you cast a continually active spell, yet don't want the continual draw or the required mental concentration to maintain it, then the power used is much greater, and much more physically draining than the others. I believe this is due because it draws all the magic required for the duration of the spell at the time you initially cast it. Need to find a way to lessen the impact of those types...

When his eyes begin to droop and the yawns come with greater frequency, he sets the quill down. He inspects his writing and is satisfied even though it's uneven and the letters are not formed properly. At least it's legible. With more practice, he is sure to get better. More yawns escape him while he closes the inkwell, cleans his quills, and lays out his manuscripts to dry. He then comes over to the bed that Miko is lying upon and settles down beside him, nudging him to move him further over onto the other side of the bed. When he at last has enough room, he reaches over to the table, snuffs out the candle and quickly succumbs to sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

James is the first one awake despite having been the last one to bed. Miko's snoring two inches from his ear was too much for him to take and once it grew light enough, decided to get up. At the table he takes one of the notes he made the night before and inspects his handiwork. Aside from a few globular letters his inexperience with ink and quill had produced, he is quite satisfied. A tentative touch reveals the ink has fully dried and so gathers the rest of his notes. He places them back into the traveling case along with the rest of the writing materials he used last night. Letting both Miko and Perrilin continue to sleep, he goes down to the common room where he finds one of the serving girls and arranges for their breakfast to be sent to their room. He then returns upstairs and enters quietly so as not to awaken the others.

Crossing the room to the bed, he moves to Perrilin's side and lowers himself gently to sit next to the bard. Despite his best efforts, the motion of his sitting upon the bed awakens Perrilin. "Good morning," James says. "How are you feeling this morning?"

Perrilin looks around the room, a little disoriented, unsure as to where exactly he is. Not sensing any immediate threat, he considers James' question. "I'm alive," he replies. "Other than that, not too good."

"They did quite a number on you last night," James informs him. "You are lucky I came along when I did." Lifting the blankets to inspect the bard's injuries, he finds some in the process of healing properly while others are a little red and inflamed. Using a clean towel and some water from the basin, he gently begins to wipe away the little bit of blood that has oozed overnight from several of the cuts.

"I'm glad you did," he says, flinching slightly in pain as James ministers to his wounds. "How did you happen to be there?"

"I was looking for you," he explains. "When I was told you had been arrested, I went to the jail only to be told you had never been brought in. Did some looking around and wound up where you were being held."

Perrilin digested that for a moment then asked, "How did you find out where I was?"

"Well, let's just say that lately I've been fairly good at finding people when I need to," he replies, avoiding all mention of magic.

From the look on Perrilin's face, he can tell the bard is not entirely satisfied with his response but seems to be willing to accept it at face value for now. "What did they want with you anyway?" James asks. "It looked as if they were interrogating you and were even going to begin using torture to get what they wanted." Once the dried blood has been removed from around the wounds, he uses a dry towel and gingerly dries him off before pulling the blanket back up to cover his chest and neck.

"I think you will be okay," he assures Perrilin. "May need a few days rest to heal properly."

Perrilin looks at him for a second before asking, "Why did you need to find me?"

"I was hoping you could help me with something," James says as he gets up and places the towels and basin back on the table.

"Like what?" he asks.

"I was hoping you could help me gain access to the Royal Archives," he explains.

Surprised, Perrilin asks, "Why?"

Pulling the medallion out from beneath his shirt, he shows the design to Perrilin. "I want to discover if there is any significance to this design," he explains. "I have been led to believe that it may be important in some way. I don't suppose you recognize it?" Taking it from around his neck, he hands the medallion to Perrilin.

Holding it close, Perrilin takes a good look at the design before handing it back to James. Shaking his head no, he replies, "I'm sorry, no. I don't recognize it."

James replaces the medallion back around his neck and tucks it inside his shirt. Just then someone knocks on the door, which startles Miko awake. James glances over to him as he sits up in bed, rubbing his eyes. Coming to his feet, he walks over to the door, opening it just a crack to find two serving girls, one bearing a tray with several plates of food, and the other carrying a pitcher and two mugs.

He tells them to remain in the hall as he first takes the tray and places it on the table, then returns for the pitcher and mugs, setting them on the table beside the tray. He then returns once more to the door and gives them each a copper for their help. "Thank you," he says as they turn to leave. As their footsteps disappear toward the head of the stairs, he closes the door.

Turning from the door, he finds Perrilin sitting up in bed and Miko already sitting at the table heaping a plate full of food. "I hope

that's for him." he says to his young companion, gesturing over to Perrilin with a stern look on his face.

"Uh, of course it is," he replies a little embarrassed. Getting up from the table he walks over and hands the heaping plate to Perrilin. Casting James a sheepish look, he goes back to the table and begins to fill another for himself.

James comes to the table and sits down, then starts piling food on his plate.

Perrilin takes several bites and then says, "As to whether or not I can help you gain access to the Royal Archives, I am sure I can help you with that. You see, the Archive Custodian is a friend of mine and I am sure that if I request it, he will permit you to research that design. He may even help you if he's not otherwise occupied. After all, I do owe you my life and I always repay my debts."

Looking intrigued, James asks, "How would we go about it?"

"I shall write a letter of introduction explaining what you wish to do," he explains then gestures over to Miko. "Your young friend there would then need to run it to the gate leading into the castle area." To Miko he says, "Tell the guards that you have a letter for the Archive Custodian and then either they will escort you to him, or more likely have you wait while they send someone to the Archives with the letter. Then it would be up to Ellinwyrd, that is my friend, to decide whether or not to grant you access."

Excited at the prospect of possibly being granted access to ancient tomes, he quickly finishes his breakfast and clears a spot on the table where he places his travel case. Opening it up, he removes a piece of paper, quill and an inkwell, then closes the case once more and sets it aside.

He waits as patiently as he can while Perrilin finishes his meal, then removes his plate once he's finished. James then brings over the traveling case to act as a lap table and the writing materials so Perrilin can write the letter to his friend.

He sits and waits as Perrilin writes out the letter, anxious to get this going. When Perrilin finishes, he requests some wax with which to seal the letter. James lights the candle on the table and brings it over to him. Taking the candle, Perrilin holds it at an angle so the melting wax will drip onto the letter. When he has applied the desired amount he gives the candle back to James. He then takes one of his rings and makes an imprint of it in the wax.

Handing it to James, he says, "Here you go." Then to Miko he says, "Make sure you do not break the seal. Once you reach the gates, do whatever the guards tell you to do."

"I understand," Miko says as he takes the letter from James.

"Be careful," James says to him.

Nodding understanding, Miko leaves the room and shuts the door behind him.

The door hadn't been shut for two seconds before they hear a knock which is immediately followed by the door swinging open to admit Miss Gilena. It doesn't seem she feels the need to await the okay to enter.

Bustling into the room, her eyes zero in on the bed wherein Perrilin lays and with concern in her voice asks, "How are you feeling?" Then she makes her way to his bedside, the promised clothes tucked under one arm.

Smiling a reassuring smile as she approaches, he says, "I will live, though I'm sore from head to toe. James has been very helpful."

Turning to James, she says, "Thank you for rescuing him last night." Then hands him Perrilin's clothes.

"It was a pleasure, I don't much care for those who use torture," he replies, taking them and setting them upon the table.

Looking at Perrilin with worry in her voice she asks, "Torture?"

Perrilin pats her hand as he calms her worries, "They were just about to start when James arrived and got me out of there."

"Thank goodness you came along just when you did," she says. Pulling down his covers with not so much as a 'by your leave', she inspects the injuries marring his chest. Perrilin feels a little uncomfortable at her mothering, especially in front of James. Satisfied that they look to be healing properly, she replaces the covers and comes to her feet. "It looks as if your wounds will heal fine in a couple of days," she announces, relief that they were not worse evident in her voice. "I can't stay, simply wanted to check and see how you were doing. If you need anything, let me know." That last question was directed more toward James than the injured bard.

Perrilin responds, "We will and don't worry, I'll be fine."

"I always worry about you," Miss Gilena says before returning to the door. She casts one more worried look in his direction and then quickly leaves the room.

Looking over to James, Perrilin says, “She’s a good woman, but she frets too much at times.”

“That’s probably true of most women when they care about someone,” he remarks.

“Care about? Me?” Perrilin says as if such a thought had never occurred to him. An odd expression passes over his face as he considers the possibility. Soon though, the demands of his healing body assert themselves and his eyes close as he drifts back to sleep.

James sits at the table while the bard sleeps, bored and restless as he waits for the return of Miko. He moves a chair over by the window and idles the time away while looking out over the town and down to the people passing on the street below. He reminisces about the times his grandmother, while waiting for someone at the airport would like to do nothing more than sit and watch people. She would make up the most outlandish stories about who they were and what they were about.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Snapped out of his reverie by the knocking, he gets up and walks over to open the door. One of the workers from downstairs stands before him holding a long, thin box.

Holding forward the box, the boy says, “This was just delivered for you.”

“Thank you,” James says as he takes the box, wondering who could possibly be sending him something here.

Once James has the box, the boy turns and walks back down the hallway. James closes the door and places the package on the table then stands there a moment staring at it, thinking.

“Is something wrong?” Perrilin asks from the bed, the knocking having awoken him.

“This package was just delivered to me,” he explains, “but I haven’t bought or ordered anything that would be delivered.”

“Interesting,” comments Perrilin. Intrigued, he pulls back the covers and slowly brings his legs over so he’s sitting on the edge of the bed. Despite the pain the change of position caused, he was more interested in this unknown and inexplicable package.

James takes a seat at the table then takes the package and opens it. Inside he finds something long wrapped in a dirty cloth. Unwrapping the cloth, his eyes widen and an audible gasp escapes him. To his complete shock, he discovers what was concealed

within the cloth is one of the boards that he used to kill their captors the other night. The ones they had hidden in a pile of refuse.

Seeing the expression on James' face, Perrilin asks, "What is it?"

He holds the blood stained board up for Perrilin to see, "I don't know how they found this, or even how they could've possibly connected it to me."

"What does it mean?" he asks.

"It's a long story but I guess we have the time," James begins. He then relates the events starting with being chased into the sewers of Bearn and then the string of events culminating with the battle in the house where they escaped their capture. He avoided mentioning magic and told only the bare bones of the attack culminating with three dead men with boards protruding from their chests.

"As we left, we hid these boards in a pile of garbage. I was sure no one was around, I guess I was wrong. Somehow, someone must have seen us put them there, took them, and now has tracked us here."

"That's quite a story," Perrilin says. "I have heard of Lord Colerain, though have never met him. He is rumored to be a nasty one to cross."

"Yeah," he agrees, "I've heard that too." Removing the cloth from out of the box, he searches for a note, or anything else that might shed some light on all this. "Question is, what is it that they want?" After searching the box thoroughly, he says, "They didn't leave a note."

The cloth which had been used to wrap the board lies on the floor next to the table. Perrilin notices something and says, "James, look at the cloth itself." Picking it up, he uses both hands and spreads it out. There *is* writing on it.

Where these were buried, one hour

It's written in what looks to be charcoal. He shows it to Perrilin.

"I guess they want to meet you where you buried them, in one hour," Perrilin assumes.

"That's how I see it too," agrees James.

"Are you going to meet with them?" he asks.

"I think I should," he replies. "If their desire had been to cause me trouble with the city watch, guards would have been here instead. I should be alright, I hope." He wraps the board with the

cloth and then puts it back inside the box. "If Miko returns before I do, have him wait until I get back," he tells Perrilin as he comes to his feet.

"I will," Perrilin assures him, "and be careful."

"I have learned a lot about being careful since coming here," states James. Not taking the backpack with him this time, he leaves the room and goes downstairs. Miss Gilena is in the common room straightening chairs and he takes a moment to go over to talk with her.

She turns at his approach and says in a worried tone, "Nothing is wrong, is it?"

"Everything is fine," James says reassuringly. "I just need to step out for a short while, I left him upstairs and he's sleeping again."

"Rest is the best thing for him right now." She looks somewhat more relaxed knowing Perrilin is doing fine.

"There was a package delivered to my room a few minutes ago," he tells her. "You wouldn't have seen who dropped it off?"

"No, it was probably given to one of the staff," she answers. "They wouldn't have bothered me for something like that. Why?"

"Just curious is all. Thank you for your time," he says and then turns to walk out the door.

"Goodbye to you James," Miss Gilena says as he walks away from her.

He leaves the inn and begins the trek through the city and out into the poorer section. *Hope I can remember where I buried them*, he worries to himself. *It was pretty dark and I was preoccupied at the time.*

One street looks pretty much like any other. He finally comes across a refuse pile in an area looking somewhat familiar. He isn't sure if he has found the right spot or not, but he thinks so. The area he's in is fairly run down, lots of bums and beggars hanging around up and down the street. After a few minutes of waiting, he begins to feel very self conscious, a stranger standing all by himself in such an area. He definitely stands out among all the other residents and is beginning to draw the attention of some of them.

Three young men eye him from down the street where they stand together talking. Being under scrutiny like this is starting to wear on his nerves, making him jumpy. He definitely does not feel safe there. The three young men seem to have come to a decision, for James sees them begin walking in his direction.

Nervous but needing to meet that person, he stands his ground and waits while the men come over to him. He has his magic if nothing else.

As they approach, two of the young men fan out, leaving the third to approach while they move to flank him.

“Can I help you gentlemen?” James asks, trying to keep his voice calm.

“Maybe,” one says as he pulls out a knife, “you could help by giving us all your coins.” The other two draw their knives as well and gesture menacingly with them toward him. James suddenly realizes that the many people who had been loitering in the area earlier have all but disappeared. Other than a few here and there, he and the three toughs are the only ones remaining on the street, which can’t be a good sign.

James backs away until his back presses against a wall.

“Look man, we don’t want to hurt you, we just want your gold,” another one tells him.

“You don’t want his money,” a voice comes from behind them. The three toughs turn to see a well dressed man in his middle years approaching with sword drawn.

“We don’t want any trouble with you,” the first tough tells the newcomer, menacing him with his knife.

“Then you better leave before I come over there,” the man says unimpressed. All the while he still maintains the same steady pace forward.

The three toughs look to each other, realizing their knives will be no match for a swordsman and then make a break for it down the road. The newcomer comes over to James and sheathes his sword.

“Thank you stranger,” James says with relief when the man draws near.

Waving away the comment, he says, “Are you here to meet someone?”

“Yes I am,” he answers.

“Then follow me,” the man says as he turns to return back the way he came. “This isn’t where I expected to find you. You are lucky you weren’t killed, this is no area for strangers.”

“Yeah, I gathered that,” James replies. “Where are we going?”

“Someone wants to meet with you, just be quiet and follow me.” The man continues down the street and then turns down another to the left. They soon come to a dilapidated looking building where the

man walks up to the door, opens it, and then gestures for James to precede him inside the building.

He enters a poorly lit hallway and the man tells him to continue on down to the second door on the left. James reaches the door and is directed to open it and enter.

When he opens the door, light from the other side bathes the hallway. Passing through, he enters a well lit room wherein he finds three people, two being most likely guards since they are dressed similar to the man whom had escorted him. The third man is sitting behind a table with a single, empty chair situated across from him. He gestures for James to come in and sit in the empty chair.

James nervously crosses the room, taking a seat in the chair as he looks around. He hears the door close behind him and glances back at the two guards taking up positions around the room while the man who had brought him there remains by the door.

He returns his attention to the man sitting across from him. Appearing to be middle aged with hair just beginning to grey about the temples the man holds an air of command the single scar running along his left jawbone doing little to diminish it. Reaching down to the floor beside him, the man brings up the hood containing the remaining boards. "You know about these?" he asks.

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't," James replies nervously.

"It would seem that the other night, four people died in a house not far from here. Two others were seen leaving that very same house around that time. Those same people were also observed to go and bury these in a refuse pile not too far from here. Interesting wouldn't you say?" The man sits back in his chair and looks at the reaction his words are having on him.

James shifts nervously in his chair, eyes flicking from the man, to the boards and back again, but doesn't say anything.

The man continues, "Now, we know that the people who died in the house were working under the orders of someone working on behalf of a Lord Colerain from Bearn, whether they knew it themselves or not. What we want to know is why Lord Colerain has an interest in you?"

"You're not with the city guards?" James asks.

Laughing, the man replies, "If we were, you wouldn't be here now would you?"

"No, I suppose not. Why this interest in me?" he asks.

"Anything of interest to Lord Colerain, interests us," the man answers.

Gesturing to the boards, James asks, "What do you plan to do with those?"

"Probably throw them away," he replies. "They were merely instrumental in gaining your attention. Now, why this interest in you?"

"I really don't know," James explains. "For some reason he's been after me since Bearn. I was unfortunate enough to accidentally be on his estate several days ago. He saw me there and ever since has been trying to get hold of me."

"So he is after you because you are a trespasser?" he asks with disbelief. "You don't really expect me to believe that do you?"

"As far as I know, that is the reason," James repeats emphatically. "I swear it!"

The guard who escorted James crosses over and whispers into the man's ear. The man's eyes widen slightly and then slowly nods. He sits back a moment and appears to be considering something. "I believe you."

"Just who are you guys?" James asks, more confident now that it seems they mean him no harm.

"Who we are is no concern of yours," the man says. "How did you manage to kill those men?"

"Me and my friend took them by surprise and killed them," replies James.

"Hmmm..." the man says, "doesn't seem likely, but then again, they are dead and you are here. You can go," he tells James. "Just be careful, Lord Colerain wants you in a bad way it would seem." Motioning to the guard who brought James in, he says, "Orrin, see that James is escorted to the city gates."

James gets up to go and suddenly realizes the man said his name. *How does he know me?*

"Yes, sir," Orrin says then comes over to James and says, "Let's go."

Once they left the building, James asks Orrin, "Who was that?"

Orrin doesn't offer a reply, simply escorts him down the road toward the gates into the city proper. He tries several times to engage Orrin in conversation but the man remains quiet, failing to respond to any of James' questions or comments.

Just before they arrive at the gate, Orrin says, "This is where I leave you," then abruptly turns about and returns back the way they had come without so much as a goodbye.

"Bye Orrin," James says as Orrin goes down the road.

James enters through the gate and follows the now somewhat familiar street, through the middle wall, until he once again is back at the Silver Bells. When he enters the room discovers Miko has already returned.

Miko hands James a letter, “When I got to the gate, they had me wait while a guard delivered Perrilin’s letter to the Archive Custodian. I sat there and waited for about an hour before they returned with this letter and told me to get out of there.”

Turning the letter over, James sees that it has a wax seal bearing the imprint of a feather. Perrilin glances at it when James shows him the seal and says, “That’s his seal alright, no one else would dare to use it but him. Go ahead and open it.”

James breaks the seal and they quietly wait as he reads the letter. “He says to come this afternoon to the Archives for a meeting,” he announces, then looks up at the bard.

“You will find him a very nice fellow,” Perrilin says, “if a bit of a stickler where his books are concerned.”

Smiling, James adds, “Yeah, I know someone that’s like that too.”

“Did you meet with whoever sent the package?” Perrilin asks.

“Something going on?” Miko interjects.

Turning to Miko, James explains, “Just after you left, a package was delivered. Within it was one of the boards that I used to kill those guys the other night.”

“How did someone get those?” Miko asks anxiously.

James summarizes his meeting with the man for Miko and Perrilin. “So I am not too sure just who they are, or why they are concerned with the goings on of Lord Colerain. At least they seem to hold no ill will toward me however, for which I am grateful.” Just then his stomach rumbles loudly and he realizes he is quite hungry.

“Miko, go downstairs and have them send up some food for us. I’m starving and want to eat before I go meet with Ellinwyrd,” he tells him.

“Alright,” Miko replies, “I’ll be right back.” He gets up and goes out the door, closing it as he leaves.

“So what do you plan to do about Lord Colerain?” Perrilin asks.

“I don’t know,” he replies. “Hopefully I’ll find out what I need to know at the Archives and then can get out of here before he locates me again. I wish I knew why he is so interested in me. If I did then maybe I could get him off my back.”

The door opens as Miko returns. "They will send it up in a few minutes," he tells them then takes a seat at the table.

"Thanks," James says to him. Turning back to Perrilin, he says, "Speaking of troubles, just what kind of trouble did I save you from last night?"

"I was wondering if you were going to ask me about that again," he says. "As much as I owe you, there are simply some things better left unsaid. Suffice it to say that those men from whose hands you rescued me are not interested in anything or anybody other than themselves and their own concerns." When he sees the look in James' eye he goes on, "What you don't know can't be tortured out of you."

"I think I understand," he assures him. "Are you still in danger from them?"

"If they knew where I was, perhaps," he says. "They most likely wouldn't try anything again so soon, especially since you wiped out that group."

"I didn't get all of them," James admits. "Unfortunately, one of them escaped on horse back."

"At least you got me out of there alive," he says.

Just then a knock is heard at the door, Miko goes over and takes the food from the server, not letting him come in so as to preserve the secrecy of Perrilin's presence at the Silver Bells. He then closes the door and places the tray upon the table. Taking one of the plates, he puts several pieces of baked chicken and some bread on it before taking it over to Perrilin. He then returns and starts in on his own share.

Not much is said over lunch, each being deep in thought about recent events. When James finishes eating he gets up and grabs his backpack. Miko comes to his feet as well and starts getting ready to accompany him.

Placing a hand on Miko's shoulder, James says, "I need you to stay here and take care of Perrilin. I'm sure I'll be fine by myself."

Miko is obviously disappointed at not being allowed to go to the Archives. He says, "Okay," but is none too happy about it.

"Bye, Perrilin," he says as he opens the door. "You too Miko. I'll see you when I get back." Then he walks out the door and closes it behind him.

With the letter in his pocket he travels down the road and it doesn't take him very long to reach the gates to the castle area.

As he approaches the gates one of the guards on duty sees him coming and says, “Halt! Declare your business.”

James shows him the letter from Ellinwyrd. The guard takes notice of the symbol of the Archive Custodian at the bottom and says, “Wait here a moment.” Turning to a younger guard he says, “Run and see if the Archive Custodian is expecting a visitor.” As the other guard runs off, the first one turns back to James and says, “Just be a moment sir, can’t let anyone in without authorization.”

“I understand,” he replies. While he waits for permission to enter, he looks out over the castle complex, excited about being so close to a real live castle. He sees several buildings bordering the street leading from the gatehouse wherein he waits, and through the opening between the buildings, the castle itself. Majestic and grand are what come to mind when he sees it. Tall, shining towers and an imposing central keep, quite impressive.

The guard returns in the company of a boy wearing a tabard bearing the king’s coat of arms. The guard says, “If you will follow the page, sir, he shall lead you to the Archives.”

“Okay, and thank you,” James tells the guard who only nods in reply. Turning, he follows the page as he is led into the castle area.

Chapter Fourteen

He marvels at the majestic buildings by which the page leads him. Tall, impressive, he is completely in awe at being in their presence. For one who had long desired to visit England and the castles of the British Isles, this was a dream come true. In stark contrast to the imposing edifices, the people they encounter were rather ordinary. Perhaps he had inflated expectations for those residing in such places, but their clothing aside, men and women alike were rather ordinary in their appearance. Not the bigger than life aura about them the movie industry led one to believe they possess.

He nods to several, even offering a ‘hello’ to one grim looking individual wearing richly attire. But all that was given back was indifference, if they even took the time to glance his way that is. Despite the cold reception, he is ecstatic at being in such close proximity to a real, bona fide, castle!

Their path takes them down a short lane passing between two stone structures which had to have been at least four stories tall where it opened onto a courtyard with a magnificent four tiered fountain amidst many beautifully flowering plants and bushes. Situated upon pedestals, statues and sculptures rose above the flowering bushes about the area. James takes note of several young ladies talking and laughing as they take their ease on a pair of benches placed near the fountain. One girl in particular, with flowing auburn hair, makes James’ heart skip a beat when he spies her standing there by the fountains with naught but her profile visible to him. But what a vision of beauty that profile was. His eyes lingered on her for a second too long, for she turns and their eyes meet. About to turn his gaze away, he stops when she gives him a smile and waves at him as he passes through.

James waves back, feeling a little weak in the knees and awkwardly stumbles into a bush bordering the walkway. The unexpected obstruction causes him to trip and tumble to the ground. Red-faced and feeling the fool, he quickly gets back to his feet. The laughter of the girls by the fountain only worsens the feeling of embarrassment. He turns to find them pointing over toward him, laughing. Ears burning and feeling for all the world like curling up and dying right there, he hesitantly looks to the auburn haired girl only to find her smiling. But such is the manner in which she smiles that his pride is at least in a small portion restored. Giving her a quick, shy smile, he hurries to catch up with the page who has almost reached the other side of the courtyard.

Catching up with him he asks, “Who was that girl by the fountain?”

The page pauses and turns his head to glance back at the group by the fountain, “Which girl?”

Pointing, he says, “That one.”

“Oh, that is the Princess Allende,” the page replies as he continues toward the edge of the courtyard.

A Princess! A real honest to goodness princess, and she smiled at me! Reaching the edge of the courtyard, he looks back before he leaves and sees Princess Allende still watching him. Seeing that he

is looking, she waves at him one more time. Smiling a crooked smile, he waves back and then leaves the courtyard hurrying after the page.

Once out of the courtyard, he's led down another avenue until arriving at a medium sized building made of stone, with a single large wooden door standing open at the top of several steps. Leading James up the steps and in through the door, the page takes him down a hallway, past several doors until coming to a pair of double wooden doors at the end. Upon each of the doors is engraved the same symbol that had sealed the letter Ellinwyrd sent. The page taps upon the door and from within comes a muffled, "Enter!" at which the page opens the door and steps to the side, motioning for James to enter the room.

The room is cluttered, papers and books lining every surface including the floor, not at all what he had expected of a place called the Royal Archives. An elderly man sits behind a table, bent over a large book laid out before him. A shaft of sunlight streams in over his shoulder from the window behind him illuminating the pages of the book. Hearing the door open and glancing up to see James enter he says, "Thank you Berin, you may go now." The page bows to Ellinwyrd, for that is who this man must be, and then leaves, closing the door behind him.

Ellinwyrd motions for James to come forward and sit in the chair opposite him saying, "Please, sit down."

James walks over toward the table, having to step carefully around several books lying abandoned on the floor and then sits in the chair. "Thank you sir, for taking time to see me," he says.

Ellinwyrd closes the book in front of him and sits back in his chair. "The letter that was delivered to me did not give any names but bore the seal of a friend." He looks intently at James and asks, "Can you name him?"

"Perrilin the bard wrote that letter on my behalf," he answers.

Nodding agreement, Ellinwyrd says, "I heard that he was taken by the city watch the other night. How is it that he is with you now?"

"I came across him in an abandoned house outside of town," he explains. "There were several men there who had him tied to a chair and were beating him pretty badly. I stopped them and brought him back to town."

"Is he okay now?" Ellinwyrd asks, obviously concerned.

“He’s still sore from his ordeal,” James answers, “but claims he will live. He’s resting in a room at the Silver Bells even as we speak.”

Ellinwyrd chuckles, “That sounds like him. We’ve been friends a long time now and I hate seeing him get into these situations.”

“Situations?” he asks.

“Always something happening when he is around,” Ellinwyrd says. Waving his hand dismissively he continues, “But enough about him, what is it that you think I can help you with? The letter stated you thought there was something in which my help may be needed?”

James removes the medallion from around his neck and hands it across the table to Ellinwyrd. “I was hoping you might know if this design has any sort of significance?”

Taking the medallion, Ellinwyrd brings it close and takes a good look. After a minute of examination, he glances up to James and says, “It looks familiar, but I can’t quite remember why.” He contemplates the design a moment longer before turning it over and examines the smooth back side, rubbing it with his thumb. “What can you tell me about it?”

“Not much really,” he answers, hoping he won’t have to tell him exactly the circumstances by which he acquired it.

“Hmmm...” Ellinwyrd gets to his feet and walks over to one of the many shelves in the room with the medallion still in hand. He picks up one book, flips through the pages briefly before returning it to the shelf and then chooses another. “It seems that I remember seeing this in one of the older tomes, perhaps one dealing with...” he begins to explain before trailing off. Removing a tome with aged, yellow bindings and cracked by the march of time, he nods his head then brings it back to the table. “This may be it. This tome relates the history of various religious orders in the area, both those currently popular and others that have fallen out of favor,” he says to James as he returns to his seat and lays the book between them. Carefully opening it, he says. “There used to be other religions around than there are now, but for one reason or another have disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” James asks. “How can a religion just disappear?”

“Perhaps disappear is an over generalization,” he replies, looking up from the book and glancing across the table at him. “But some religions are no longer sought after by the common man. Over

time their temples close, people no longer wish to be priests of that religion, so the religion, sad to say, fades away.” He returns his attention to the book, and continues flipping through the pages. Every once in a while he would pause when he came to a drawing, stopping only long enough to compare the diagram on the medallion to the one that’s in the book. When it proves not to be a match, he continues on.

“Have there been many religion’s to fade away?” asks James.

“I would think so,” he says. “Though how many is hard to say.” He turns to another page and again brings the medallion up close for a comparison. “I think we may have found it.”

“Really?” says James excitedly, leaning across the table in an effort to get a better look at the picture. “What does it say?”

Ellinwyrd hands the medallion back to James and silently reads the section in the book relating to the design depicted on the page. “There is not very much here, just a paragraph,” he says and then moves the book closer to James so he can better see. “This is the symbol of the god Morcyth. The man who wrote this did not know very much about those who believed in Morcyth, simply mentioning that it was an ancient religion whose priests were scholars and teachers.” He turns several more pages but finds nothing further written about Morcyth, so closes the book.

“Have you heard of this Morcyth?” James asks him.

Nodding, Ellinwyrd says, “A little. His influence waned over five hundred years ago I believe, though I am not sure why. I do know his priests were good, always helping everyone they came into contact with.” He looks questioningly across the table at James and asks, “One wonders how you came to be in possession of a medallion bearing the sign of a god whose priests have not been seen for over five hundred years?”

Shifting in his seat under the eyes of Ellinwyrd, he hesitantly replies, “It was given to me.”

“Oh?” Ellinwyrd says, arching one eyebrow questioningly.

Not sure why, but James feels that he can trust him. “It’s a rather long, unbelievable story,” he says. “I was not born in this world,” James admits as he looks to see the reaction his words are having on him.

“Truly?” asks Ellinwyrd, intrigued but somewhat skeptical. “What world were you born upon?”

“We call it Earth,” he explains. “It’s very similar to this one, but with many differences. One of the major differences is that magic doesn’t work in my world.”

“Fascinating,” Ellinwyrd says, then prompts James to continue.

James then relates the tale of how he answered the ad and all the events from the time he entered this world until the time the god, or whatever that little creature is, gave him the amulet. He further explains how he came here to Cardri, how he hoped to discover the meaning of the amulet. How he hoped in some way to shed some light on all this.

“An interesting tale,” Ellinwyrd says when James finishes. “It seems strange that you were brought to our world and not told why.”

“I agree,” James says. “All I was told was to do what feels right.”

“And it felt right to tell me your tale?” Ellinwyrd asks.

“I feel I can trust you with it,” James explains. “Odd, but you’re the first one I’ve met in this world that I’ve felt that way about. Even Ceryn doesn’t know the whole story.” He looks to Ellinwyrd and asks, “I hope that I am not mistaken?”

“Oh no, your story is safe with me,” Ellinwyrd assures James. “I can understand where secrecy about this might be the prudent course of action at this time.”

“Having heard my tale, what would you propose I do now? Should I go in search of Morcyth? And if so, where do I start?” he asks.

“You are the only one who can answer that,” Ellinwyrd says. “You were told to do what feels right, does going in search of Morcyth feel right?”

Considering the idea a moment, he says, “I still feel that I need to know more, so I guess it does. Where would be a good place to start?”

“I am not sure,” he admits. “Morcyth in his heyday was fairly widespread, with local temples in almost every major town. I believe I read somewhere that the central temple to Morcyth had been located in the Kingdom of Madoc, somewhere around the Sea of the Gods.”

“Sea of the Gods?” James asks. “Where would that be?”

“As you may be aware, the Silver Mountains lies along Cardri’s eastern border,” he explains. “On the other side you will find the Kingdom of Madoc. In the central area of Madoc sits an enormous

body of freshwater called Sea of the Gods, with many cities lining its shores. Quite likely, one of those cities once housed the central temple to Morcyth,” continues Ellinwyrd. “However, which one eludes me.”

“Well at least that’s a start,” James acknowledges.

“One slight problem however,” he warns.

“What would that be?” queries James.

“In case you haven’t heard, the Kingdom of Madoc is being invaded by the Empire from the south. Travel there will be difficult at best. The Empire is currently besieging the town of Saragon, some hundred or so miles south of the Sea.”

“I heard about that,” he admits. “Is there any way to get there without running into the Empire’s forces?”

“There are two passes that allow travel between Cardri and Madoc which would not take you near the fighting, at least where the fighting is right now. One is the Merchant’s Pass, just east of the city of Trademeet. That one is the most direct path to the Sea and is still some distance north of the invading forces so should be relatively safe. The other one is the Dragon’s Pass. It lies further north past the Forest of Kelewan. It would be the safer of the two but will take you many days out of your way.”

“I see,” says James. Getting up, he stretches his hand across the table to Ellinwyrd and then continues, “I appreciate you seeing me and being so helpful, but I must be going. I still have many things to do before I set out in the morning.”

Motioning for James to sit back down, Ellinwyrd says, “Don’t be in such a rush. Maybe I can help you further on your quest.” He gets up from his chair and walks over to a table with many books lying in uneven piles upon it. He picks up one and brings it back to the table.

“I have been meaning to send this to a colleague of mine who maintains the Great Library in the City of Light, which lies on the southern shore of the Sea of the Gods. His name is Ollinear. From time to time we send each other copies of books and manuscripts that are of interest to the other.”

He takes a large sheet of paper lying on a nearby table and proceeds to wrap the book tightly within it, inserting the corners within the folds until he has a nice, secure package with no loose edges. Taking a candle burning on the table, he drips some wax over a seam then presses his ring into it, making his sign. Satisfied, he hands it over to James who takes it.

“If you would be so kind as to deliver this,” Ellinwyrd says as he gets a quill, ink and paper out, “I will write him a letter asking him to help you in any way he can.”

“I would be glad to,” agrees James.

Ellinwyrd takes but a moment to write out the letter, then rolls it up and like the package, places his seal in wax upon it. He hands the letter to James saying, “Give this letter to him and he should be willing to help.”

James takes the letter and says, “Thank you for your, help. I will be sure to give him the book and letter when I arrive at the City of Light.” James again stands as he holds out his hand.

Taking James’ hand, Ellinwyrd says, “I am glad I could be of some help. Should your travels bring you back to Cardri, please feel free to stop by for a visit. I would dearly like to hear more about you and your world.”

“I will,” James assures him and then turns toward the door to leave.

Before he could take two steps, he’s stopped when Ellinwyrd says, “Just a moment, you require an escort to pass through the castle area.” Moving over to the wall he tugs on a decorative hanging rope. Shortly, the door opens and Berin, the page who had previously escorted him there, enters.

“Berin, please escort this gentlemen back to the gate,” he says.

“This way sir,” Berin says.

“Goodbye, Ellinwyrd,” James says.

Ellinwyrd replies “Have a safe journey, James.”

James turns and exits through the door, following Berin along the same path that they had taken in coming to the Archives. Entering the courtyard with the fountain, he sadly discovers that the Princess Alliende is no longer there. He would have dearly loved to see her one more time.

Continuing to follow Berin, James realizes just how late it’s becoming. It didn’t seem as if he had been in there all that long. When he arrives back at the gates, Berin takes his leave saying, “Good evening to you sir,” and then returns to within the castle area.

Needing to get some errands done before he leaves in the morning, he quickly makes his way down the road and finds Thelonius’ shop. Entering through the door, the ever present guards look him over, while one goes into the back to fetch him. The guard

reemerges from the back not long before Thelonius makes his appearance at the window.

“Good evening to you James,” he says, greeting him with a smile. “How may I help you this evening?”

“I’m having to leave town for a while and wish to withdraw two hundred gold pieces,” he explains.

“Let me get the coins,” he replies. “I shall be but a moment.” He turns and disappears into the back only a short time before returning with a tray of coins and two small empty pouches. Together they count the coins, and when they have made sure there are two hundred golds worth, he puts the coins into the two pouches and hands them to James. He then produces a paper which James must sign, signifying that he has withdrawn two hundred golds.

Once the paper is signed, Thelonius asks, “Is there anything else I may do for you?”

Picking up the sacks, James says, “Not right now, no, that’s all I needed.” As he turns to go he says, “Thank you.”

“A good evening to you as well, sir,” Thelonius says before returning to the rear of the shop.

One of the guards holds the door open as he leaves with a sack full of coins in each hand. As he’s walking down the street back to the Silver Bells, he begins to realize that this may not have been the most intelligent thing he’s ever done, walking down the street with two bulging pouches filled with gold coins. He doesn’t observe anyone following him and quickly makes it back to the inn, going straight to his room.

Back at his room, he finds Perrilin asleep again and Miko sitting bored looking out the window.

“James,” he says quietly when he sees him walk in through the door. “How did it go?”

He sets the two sacks of gold coins down on the floor in the corner, then comes over and takes a seat at the table. “It went well,” he replies. Taking out the medallion to show it to Miko, he says, “This symbol here is the symbol of a god named Morcyth whose influence waned over five hundred years ago. He didn’t know much more than that. However, Ellinwyrd did mention the area around a body of water called the Sea of the Gods was where the central temple to Morcyth had been located. He couldn’t remember exactly where.”

“In the morning, I plan to head that way, taking the road through the Merchant’s Pass and crossing over into Madoc. It’s my hope to

find this temple or perhaps someone who can further enlighten me about Morcyth.” He glances to Miko and says, “You needn’t feel that you have to accompany me, this could be dangerous.”

Looking hurt, Miko replies, “Haven’t I been a big help so far?” “Yes, you have,” he admits.

“Then I want to come along,” he insists. “You are about the only friend I have and if I can help, then I want to.”

Seeing that Perrilin is awake and has been listening in on the conversation, James looks to him for help. “Would you please tell him that going over to a kingdom at war is not the best of ideas?”

Miko looks anxiously to Perrilin as he carefully considers his answer. “Though there may be dangers, Miko is old enough to make his own decisions and has proven quite helpful thus far. From all I have gathered, he has been someone you have been able to trust and count on. That can be a rare thing to find.”

Miko beams at the praise while Perrilin continues. “A lengthy venture should never be attempted alone and there are too many things that may happen where you will need someone else, such as if you get hurt. Also, he has been quite good at ferreting out information in the city which could prove most useful since you are in search of information. And...”

“Okay, okay, I’m sold,” James says holding up his hands in surrender. Turning to Miko he says, “If you are going with me then we will need to get you a horse in the morning. We won’t make much time with you walking or us riding double.”

Eyes lighting up, he exclaims “My own horse? Can I pick it out?”

Smiling at his exuberance, James says, “We’ll let someone who knows horses pick it out okay?”

“Alright,” Miko agrees.

“Now go downstairs and see if you can arrange for a couple of baths here in the room. Also have dinner sent up.”

“Okay James,” Miko says as he practically skips out of the room.

Perrilin chuckles from the bed, “He sure is happy.”

“Yes, he is,” James says. “I hope he still feels that way later on down the road.”

“There is some strength in that boy,” Perrilin observes. “I think you could do worse in traveling companions.”

“I suppose so,” James admits. “Are you going to be alright?”

“I’ll be fine,” he says. “Miss Gilena will allow me to stay here for a while, at least until I’m much better.” Lowering his voice he says, “Actually, I’m pretty much okay now, just a bit stiff and sore. But I like the attention.” Smiling, he lays back on the bed.

“Enjoy it while it lasts,” James says as he smiles back.

Miko returns saying that the baths will be up shortly and that dinner will follow. They don’t have long to wait until there’s a knock on the door. Miko goes over to let in the staff bearing the bath tubs. To James’ surprise they bring in three tubs, not two that he had been expecting. Mystified, he turns and looks over to Miko who is blushing slightly, “Three?”

“One for each of us,” he says slightly embarrassed. “Well, I kind of liked it last time. I didn’t think you would mind.”

“Mind?” James replies. “Of course I don’t mind.” Laughing at Miko’s expense, James relates to Perrilin the circumstances of the last time they had a bath. “But I thought we were to keep Perrilin a secret?”

“Miss Gilena said that she has talked to her staff and if they want to keep their jobs they better be quiet about the whole thing. She feels that they will keep the secret, at least for a while.”

They wait while the staff begins bringing in buckets of hot water. Soon the tubs are filled with steaming water and towels are laid out for the bathers. Miko is the first undressed and submerged in the tub. James asks Perrilin if he needs any help but he refuses, saying he can manage getting undressed and into the tub himself.

James undresses and climbs into a tub filled with hot, soothing water. The heat suffuses every muscle and sinew, slowly taking away the aches. Perrilin manages to get in well enough on his own and soon all three are laid back, relaxing in the tubs.

A knock at the door is immediately followed by Miss Gilena walking into the room. She sees the three of them relaxing in the tubs. “Comfy are we?” she asks.

“Yes we are,” says Perrilin. “Perhaps you should come back when we are less, exposed?”

Waving away the comment, she closes the door and says, “There’s nothing here I haven’t seen before, so don’t you be worrying about my delicate sensibilities. I just came to see how you were doing.”

“I am fine thank you,” he assures her. “Just need a few more days rest and I’ll be as good as new.” He glances at James and gives him a look that says, ‘Don’t say anything’.

“Miss Gilena,” James says, “Miko and I will be leaving in the morning, our business here in Cardri is done. We are going to need a second horse for my friend and I was wondering if you knew of a place where we could purchase one?”

Thinking a moment she says, “Lufer sells horses outside the walls near the river. He’s honest and usually has a fair selection.”

“Thank you,” he says. “I’ll be by later this evening to settle what I owe you, after dinner.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she says. Then she looks toward Perrilin and says “Consider it a reward for rescuing him.”

“Thank you again,” James says.

“Well, since all is well here I must go, this place won’t run itself,” she announces then turns to leave, shutting the door behind her.

After she leaves they relax in the tubs for a while longer, until the water begins to turn cold. Once out, they send Miko down to get the staff to remove the tubs, which is a long process as they must use pails to remove most of the water before they are light enough to be carried out.

Shortly after the last tub is removed, their dinner arrives and it’s bigger than any so far. Comprising of two whole chickens, a big platter of vegetables, and three loaves of bread, James didn’t think they would be able to finish it all, but Miko proved him wrong. He continues to be amazed at just how much that boy can eat.

That evening, while Perrilin remained in the room resting, James and Miko went down to the common room to enjoy the evening’s entertainment. The bard performing for the patrons is enjoyable, though in James’ opinion, Perrilin is the more talented of the two. Still, they have a good night and when he catches Miko yawning, they head upstairs to their beds and sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

Early the next morning, Miko is again sent down to request breakfast to be sent up to their room. By the time the food arrives, he and James have everything packed and ready for travel.

Along with breakfast, Miss Gilena provides them with travel rations; dried beef, a half wheel of cheese, and several loaves of bread.

“I hope you find what you are looking for,” Perrilin says to James while they eat breakfast.

“I really don’t know what I am looking for,” he replies, “I have questions but very few answers. I don’t even know if the questions I do have are the right ones. I just know I need to be doing something.”

“I know the feeling,” he says.

“What will you do?” James asks him.

“Probably enjoy the hospitality here for a while and then go back on the road,” he replies. “I don’t like staying too long in one place. I prefer to travel and see what there is to see.”

Nodding with understanding, James asks, “What about Miss Gilena? She really likes you, you know?”

A wistful look comes over him and he says, “I like her too, but it’s not in my plans to be tied down to one place. I know that is what she would demand if we were to become serious. I am content to just be her friend, at least for right now.” He takes another bite and continues, “Later on, who knows?”

After they finish and while Miko gathers James’ bags, James goes over and shakes hands with Perrilin, “Try to be more careful in the future. I may not be around next time.”

Smiling, he returns the handshake and says, “Let’s hope there is no next time. Good travels to you both. I’m sure we will meet again sometime, someplace.” Turning to Miko he says, “You take care of him.”

“Oh, I will,” he replies in all seriousness.

Opening the door, James lets Miko precede him out into the hallway and then closes the door behind him. Downstairs they find but a handful of people in the common room as they head out the back door on their way to the stable.

There they find Gunter distributing feed for the horses.

“Good morning sirs,” he says as they enter. He takes a moment to pour feed from the pail he carries into a stall’s feed trough for one of the other horses before coming over to them. “How may I be of service?”

“We are leaving today,” James replies, “I’m here to collect my horse. Did he give you any trouble last night?”

“Of course not sir,” he says. “He has been well behaved the entire time. He’s a good one, he is.”

“That’s good,” James replies as he reaches his horse’s stall.

Seeing that he’s not going to be needed, Gunter resumes distributing grain to the rest of the horses.

In no time they have the horse saddled and ready for travel. Then they lead him out to the inn’s courtyard with a friendly wave of goodbye to Gunter as they leave the stable.

“Come again,” Gunther cheerfully hollers after them.

The streets are quite busy for so early in the morning so they decide to lead the horse instead of riding as travel through the crowd is slow at best. They slowly wind their way along the congested streets until finally passing through the gate which leads into the outer ring.

After traveling several blocks, from out of nowhere a rock appears and strikes James on the side of the head. Luckily it was a small rock and only caused minor stinging. He looks over in the direction from which the rock originated and sees several boys standing near a building as they look up into the eaves overhanging the front of a store. One throws another stone at something hidden up in the eaves. The boys laugh as an animal cries out.

Curious, James makes his way over and looks up into the eaves to see what they are throwing rocks at. To his amazement he finds a furry, yellow cat meowing pitifully as it clings to the eave for dear life. “I think we may have found Furball,” he tells Miko. “Run to the Dancing Squirrel and find Inius, tell him to hurry and get here before she runs off again.”

Miko turns and cuts through the crowd as best he can, quickly disappearing out of sight.

The boys continue to laugh, enjoying the sport of tormenting Furball. Another boy throws a small stone and strikes the beam not two inches from the terrified cat.

“You almost got him that time,” one of the boys says.

“I’ll knock him off this time,” another boasts as he picks up a stone and prepares to hurl it up at poor Furball.

James comes over and grabs the boy’s arm saying, “That’s enough of that. Leave the cat alone.”

The boy turns and confronts James, his buddies gathering in behind him. "We ain't hurtin' nuthin' mister," he says. "Just having some fun is all."

"Yeah!" one boy chimes in. "After all, it's just a cat."

James looks at the boys disapprovingly, "Being mean is never acceptable, even to animals." Pointing to Furball he says, "That cat up there is scared and frightened, but you boys think it's just fun. One of these days you may be in a similar situation where you are being tormented and can't get away. Then you will understand what you were doing here today."

Not looking very convinced, one of them says, "Come on guys, let's go somewhere we can have some fun."

Several of the other boys reply, "Yeah," as they turn and stalk off down the street.

James looks up at Furball who is still hanging on for dear life. "Its okay, Furball," he says soothingly to the cat. "Inius will be here shortly." He waits several more minutes with Furball before Miko appears with a concerned Inius following close behind.

When Inius sees Furball his face shows the relief he feels at seeing her alive. Coming up to James, he says, "Thank you for finding her for me."

"We just happened by and saw her up there," James explains, leaving out the part the boys had played. "We thought you might want to come and get her."

"Furball!" Inius says to the cat, "you come down here right now." The cat seems to relax some at the sound of Inius' voice, but she isn't making any move to come down.

Looking around for something to stand on, James finds an old unused crate sitting in a nearby alley. He goes over and brings it back where he sets it on the ground beneath the beam whereupon Furball lies. He then climbs carefully up onto the crate, hoping that it will hold his weight. By this time, a small crowd has gathered to see what's going on. He looks around at the people staring at him as he attempts to get Furball down.

Reaching up, he tries to grab her off the crossbeam, but Furball lays her ears back against her head and emits a deep, warning growl. When his hand comes too close, she swipes at it with her claws and scores two long scratches along the back of his hand.

"Furball, stop it!" Inius yells up at the cat.

Pulling his hand back, James mutters a curse as he sees the two long scratches beginning to well blood. He can hear the people

around him chuckling at his misfortune. He even hears some of the observers making wagers as to the outcome of whether or not he'll be able to get the cat down.

Realizing that the number of onlookers is growing, he again turns his attention to Furball and very slowly starts to reach up to get her. When the cat again starts a deep growling in her throat and lays the ears back on the head, he withdraws his hand and the growling stops.

A muttering grows from the crowd and James notices several of the bystanders exchanging coins, obviously some had bet he wouldn't get the cat on that try.

"Just knock it down with a stick!" a bystander yells.

"No!" counters Inius. "Don't hurt her."

James turns and sees the innkeeper's concern for Furball. "Don't worry," James assures him, "I'm certain that we can get her down without hurting her."

Turning his attention once again back to the cat, he silently begins the casting of a spell. A spell of soothing, of trust, and when he is ready, he releases the power and slowly reaches up to Furball. This time she doesn't start the growling, simply looks at him as he reaches up and gently takes hold of her around the middle. Lifting ever so gently, he removes her from the crossbeam.

He maintains the spell as he strokes Furball's back and listens to the contented purr coming from her. As he hands Furball down to Inius, the crowd breaks into a cheer and more money changes hands.

"Here you go," he tells Inius as he takes Furball from him.

"Thank you so much," he says to James. Then to Furball he says in a firm tone, "You've been a bad kitty," as he strokes her back.

"Maybe you should put a tag on her so people will know she's yours should she run away again," James suggests.

"A tag?" Inius asks.

"Yes," he replies. "It's a little metal disk attached to a leather collar around her neck with the sign of the Dancing Squirrel on it. So if she runs off again, people will know where to bring her back, or at the very least notify you as to where she was last seen."

"A good idea," he says, considering it. "I may just do that."

"Goodbye Inius," James says. Then scratches Furball between the ears saying, "You too Furball."

"We are both very thankful to you. Next time you are in town, you may stay with us free for a few nights," offers Inius.

“Thank you, I may take you up on that,” he says, then takes the reins from Miko as they once more head down the street to Lufer’s.

The remainder of their trek through Cardri is uneventful and pass through the outer gate without any further delays. Taking a side street through the outlying buildings in the general direction of the river, they find three buildings set together with a corral containing several horses and mules in the back.

“This must be the place,” Miko says.

“What was your first clue?” James jokes as they approach the hitching post by the front door.

“Clue?” Miko asks not understanding.

Amused, James replies, “Never mind.” Securing their horse to the post, the two of them enter through the door to the front office which is currently unoccupied. Voices coming from out back lead them to two men standing near the corral, an older gentleman and a younger one.

“Going to need to procure another dozen by fall,” the elder one says.

“I agree father,” replies the younger and then notices James and Miko emerging from the office. “What can we do for you?” he asks. The older man turns to face the visitors.

“Would one of you be Lufer?” James asks.

The father steps forward slightly to say, “I’m Lufer, how can I help you sirs today?”

“Miss Gilena said that we could get a good horse for my companion,” James explains, gesturing toward Miko.

“What are you going to need the horse for?” Lufer asks. “Travel or farm work.”

“We are heading over to Madoc,” James answers.

“We have many fine horses available and for friends of Miss Gilena we will make sure you get the best we have. Follow me,” he says as he goes over to the corral gate and opens it, allowing James and Miko to enter first.

Closing the gate, he says, “We have a mare here,” he says as he comes to a chestnut colored horse, “she’s three years old and in good physical shape. Very gentle,” he stresses, “not one easily spooked.”

James looks at Miko who doesn’t seem to be too impressed by the mare. He’s got his eyes on a black stallion with eyes that seem

to dare anyone to come within striking distance so he could bash in their skull.

“I think the mare will be fine,” James says to Miko’s disappointment. “Look,” James says to him, “that stallion would most likely kill you as not.”

As if the stallion understood what was being said, it stomps its foot and snorts.

Miko still looks longingly at the stallion, but realizes he has no choice in the decision. After all, a horse is a horse.

“Would you be interested in a pack mule as well?” Lufer asks. “If you plan on a long trip, your horses will do better without a lot of extra weight. A pack mule can carry much and they are very tough.”

“How much for both?” he asks, realizing that might not be such a bad idea.

“Sixty five golds for the mare and another twenty five for the mule,” Lufer says.

Miko’s eyes bug out at the cost. “Why so much?” he blurts out.

“With the war going on over in Madoc,” he explains, “there has been an increase in the demand for horses, especially from the Horsemaster up at the Castle. He’s been procuring many in anticipation of war with the Empire.”

“Oh,” says Miko, “that sort of makes sense.”

“Yeah, supply and demand,” James reasons. Then he launches into the haggling for the actual price of the horse and mule. He doesn’t enjoy the process but does seem to be getting the hang of it. He works the price down to eighty golds for both and they go into the office where he counts out the money. Luckily the price also includes a saddle and all the required tack for the horse and mule.

He also buys several days worth of grain and two ponchos for inclement weather. Lufer suggests hoods for the horses so in emergencies they can keep them calm. James agrees and adds three of those to the bill. Once their bags have been repacked onto the mule, they mount up and head out, saying goodbye to Lufer and his son. James has the lead rope for the mule tied to the rear of his saddle where a loop has been attached for just that sort of thing.

Miko is in high spirits, sitting tall in the saddle on his very own horse even if it is a mare. James goes over the various commands with him that he’ll need to use in order to guide the horse. It doesn’t take too long before he has the basics down and is able to control the horse adequately.

Following directions Perrilin had provided, they take the road east out of Cardri, hoping to make Trademeet and the Merchant's Pass in a little under a week. The day is young and the heat of the summer sun is just beginning to warm the air.

Still being within sight of the city, there are many other travelers on the road, including some caravans that they soon overtake and pass. They make good time and it's not long before they have left most of the other travelers behind. Once Cardri completely disappears behind them, foot traffic has dwindled to almost nothing.

According to Perrilin, the first main city won't be for two days, at a crossroads where another main trading route intersects theirs on its way north. The city is called Willimet and they will need to replenish their provisions, especially grain for the animals, before continuing on.

About the time the sun is high overhead, the road makes its way past a small grove of trees several hundred feet off the road. Within the grove they spot a pool of water. They decide to allow the animals time to graze while they partake of the noon meal. Also, the leafy boughs of the trees afford them some shade from the sun and the water is still cool and appears clean.

James dismounts first and lets his horse free to graze by the pond. He watches as Miko slowly dismounts, amused by the stiffness that is already showing in his movements.

Seeing James grinning he asks, "What's so funny?" as he stiffly walks over to where James is removing the bag containing their lunch from the pack mule.

"Are you sore?" he asks with mock concern. He hands Miko his share of the sack before taking his own.

"You know I am," he says accusingly as he takes his food. "And it's not funny." He sits down and begins to eat.

"I know," James agrees sympathetically. "I went through the same thing when I first started to ride. In fact, I still get sore, just not as bad."

"Glad to know it gets better," Miko says.

"Oh it'll get worse before it gets better," James informs him. "It's just something that will take time for your muscles to grow accustomed to."

While they eat, they watch as a caravan travels west on its way toward Cardri. James counts twenty seven wagons and an accompaniment of twenty horsemen. They seem to be far enough away from Cardri that the only traffic on the road are the caravans

and the occasional rider. All the foot traffic has long since disappeared.

Relaxing against the trunk of a tree, James revels in the peace and tranquility of the area. A gentle breeze, just strong enough to cool yet doesn't stir up the dust, gently flows through the trees. A full hour they spend in the cool shade until he can no longer put off returning to the road. Repacking the food, he returns it to the pack mule.

He then remounts and watches with some sympathy as Miko slowly and stiffly climbs back into the saddle, remembering his own sore posterior when he had first learned to ride. They make their way back over to the road and turn their horses east toward Willimet.

An hour later the road has become all but devoid of fellow travelers. During one such lonely stretch, Miko notices a solitary rider pacing them several hundred yards off the road to the north. "James," he says as he brings his horse alongside James', "there's someone to the north, pacing us."

"I know," he replies. "He's been there for the last ten minutes."

"What are we going to do?" asks Miko nervously as he once again glances toward the rider.

"Not much we can do. Fortunately we are in open territory so if any more show up we will have warning. Besides, we don't even know if he has any interest in us at all. It could be just a coincidence that he is pacing us."

"You don't really believe that do you?" asks Miko.

"No," replies James, "but it is a possibility. Until we know for sure, we will continue toward Willimet and deal with it should something happen."

Another ten minutes go by when Miko notices another rider has joined with the one to the north. "James, there's another one now."

Looking north, he nods. "Yeah, looks like it."

"You seem pretty calm," Miko observes.

Turning to look at Miko, James says, "Will the situation improve if I get nervous and all freaked out?"

"No," replies Miko.

"Okay then," James says. "I may appear calm but I am quite concerned about what may be developing."

"Like what?" asks Miko.

"Like an ambush," he says. "This could be another attempt by Lord Colerain to capture or kill us. But who knows, it may simply

be bandits or highwaymen seeing two lone riders and thinking to score some quick booty.”

Nervous, Miko begins scanning the horizon in all direction. “James! Behind us!” Miko exclaims excitedly when he glances to the road behind them.

James turns and sees three more riders approaching at a gallop. Looking toward the ones to the north, he sees them begin turning their way as they too break into a gallop. “Let’s go,” he says. Kicking the sides of his horse he’s quickly racing across the road at a fast gallop, Miko doing the same a split second after.

They race down the road trying to outdistance their pursuers when from out of the distance ahead, three more riders appear racing toward them from the east. South being the only direction currently free of riders trying to intercept them, he turns his horse in that direction and they leave the road, racing through the tall grass. James hopes fervently that neither horse puts a hoof in a gopher hole or something, which would prove disastrous.

As if on cue, two more riders appear in the distance to the south before they have gone more than twenty feet from the road. Realizing they are surrounded and unlikely to escape the trap, he scans the area for somewhere to make their stand. Seeing a small hill to the southwest an idea comes to mind and he turns his horse, racing for it. Upon reaching the hill he dismounts quickly, giving Miko his horse’s reins. “Get those hoods we got at Lufer’s and cover their heads, fast,” he tells him. “Whatever you do, don’t let go of their reins.”

“What are you going to do?” Miko asks as he begins pulling the hoods out of the packs.

“You’ll see. No time to explain, just stay close to me.” James looks around at the approaching horsemen. Their approach has slowed now that James and Miko have stopped atop the little hill. Those closer to the pair slow in order to allow those further away to be able to join with the closer ones in completely encircling the hill. Three of them have crossbows and are in the process of winding back the crossarm.

Scared, Miko watches as the men continue to tighten the noose. Holding tight to the reins, he keeps the now hooded horses and mule close to the top of the hill. He looks toward James and sees that his eyes are closed in concentration. The breeze that had been blowing gently begins to slowly increase in strength. Clouds move unnaturally fast as they rush toward them from every direction.

The approaching men continue tightening the circle. One of the crossbowmen looses a bolt but the wind blows it wide. They advance without seeming to care, or perhaps fail to notice what is going on in the sky above them. The gathering clouds begin smoothing out until the cloud cover looks like one big, dark blanket extending in all directions. Then all at once the wind suddenly stops and the world becomes ominously quiet.

The sudden cessation of wind causes the men to slow their advance as they begin to understand that something strange is happening. Suddenly, the clouds above them begin to swirl and Miko looks in frightened awe as a section of the swirling clouds descends toward them, the center of which is open and clear. It rapidly slams all the way to the ground, enveloping the men approaching the hill.

The wind whips around the hill in a frightening mass of flying debris and deafening sound. Standing amidst the relative calm upon the hilltop, Miko holds tight to the horses, trying to keep them from becoming frightened amidst the noise going on around them.

From within the tempest surrounding them he could hear the cries of men and horses being ravaged by the savage wind. Suddenly, one of the riders is flung from the storm and slams into the ground a few feet from him. Miko looks closely at the man and sees that his body is broken and lifeless. Truly awed by what James has done, he stands there holding tightly to the reins and watches as the storm continues to swirl around the hill. Looking straight up, he sees what appears to be a tunnel going all the way through the storm to the blue sky at the other end.

Not long after that, the storm begins to slowly dissipate as the swirling mass surrounding the hill thins and then fades away. The clouds above start breaking apart until they resume their normal course through the sky. Amazed, Miko looks at the grassland surrounding the hill and can see just how wide the storm had been. It started at the base of the hill, and he can see how the grass had been ripped and torn by the force of the winds in a swath several hundred feet wide all the way around. Scattered throughout the area were horses and men, all lifeless and broken.

When the winds finally recede completely, James' knees buckle and he collapses to the ground. Miko rushes over, relieved to find that he is only unconscious, not dead. Unable to rouse him, he gently lays James out comfortably and gets a blanket to use as a pillow for his head. Once he has taken care of James, he goes over

and removes the hoods from the horses and pack mule, letting them loose to graze.

Sitting down next to James, he waits for him to regain consciousness, all the while keeping an eye on the horizon for any sign of other unwelcome visitors.

It isn't until just before sunset that James begins to stir. Cracking an eye open, he discovers Miko has already started a fire and made camp with the horses picketed nearby. A groan escapes him drawing the attention of Miko who comes to his side bearing a water bottle. With Miko's help, James sits up slightly to take the bottle and drinks deeply before handing the bottle back to him.

"Thanks," he says shakily, lying back down.

"You're welcome," Miko replies. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Maybe," he replies. "I feel totally exhausted and have a splitting headache."

"Your storm seems to have taken out all the riders who were chasing us."

"Good," he replies. Groaning, he raises his hand to his head as he tries to soothe the pounding behind his forehead.

"Just what did you do?" Miko asks. "I've never seen anything like that before."

"It's called a tornado," he explains. "They are quite common where I come from."

"How did you do it?" Miko wonders.

"It's rather hard to explain," James tells him. "Luckily I remembered a show I saw about tornadoes."

"Show?" he asks. "What's that?"

Wondering how to explain television, he just says, "It's something from where I come from where you can learn things."

"Oh, okay," Miko says, not really understanding.

"Have you searched them yet?" asked James.

"Who?" asks Miko. "The dead riders?" He looks out at the scene surrounding the hill with undisguised revulsion at the thought of going near the dead men.

"Maybe there will be a letter or something on them that may tell us who sent them and why," explains James, the final words all but unintelligible.

"No, I haven't," Miko answers before realizing that he's already fallen asleep. Knowing how important this is to James, he gets up and goes through the grisly task of searching all the dead bodies, both men and horses for anything that may tell them what they need

to know. He returns a half hour later with an armload of saddlebags, pouches and one of the crossbows along with a brace of bolts. He sets the saddlebags and pouches on the ground near James which causes him to awaken once more.

Now rested enough that he won't immediately succumb to sleep, he props himself up on one elbow and gives the pile of saddlebags and pouches a once over. Then he notices the crossbow in Miko's hand and asks, "What are you going to do with that?"

"I don't know," Miko replies, "but it may come in handy."

"Maybe it will," agrees James. "Just don't shoot your eye out," he adds, then begins to giggle.

Miko doesn't understand why James should find him shooting his eye out to be so incredibly funny.

Calming down, James sits up further and returns his attention to the bags and pouches on the ground before him. The pounding in his head has diminished to a tolerable level.

While James begins going through them, Miko takes out some of the food that Miss Gilena had given them before they left. When both have food and drink, he sits down next to James and begins to eat while he watches as James inspects the pouches.

As James goes through pouch after pouch, he begins dividing their contents into three piles. One contains coins, gems and jewelry, another useless junk, and still another is a pile of papers. He places a stone on top of the papers to keep the wind from blowing them away.

When he finishes with the last pouch, he says, "Take the money and put it in with ours alright, Miko?"

"Okay James," Miko replies, getting up to do it.

While Miko is busy with putting away the valuables, James begins to read through the papers. All but one he crumbles up and tosses into the fire.

Seeing the one he has kept, Miko asks, "Why did you keep that one?"

"This one is an order from someone called Korgan to someone named Vorim. I can only assume that this Vorim lies dead out there somewhere," he says, gesturing to the dead bodies surrounding the hill. "It's basically an order to capture and interrogate us, that a person named 'Cytok' is interested in finding out who we are working for. They were also to find out the names of any other agents that we may be in contact with."

"Why did they come after us?" Miko asks.

“Who knows?” replies James. “When I rescued Perrilin, one of his captors managed to escape on horseback. I guess they found out that I helped him escape. So, since they didn’t get Perrilin, they went after me, probably assuming that I work with him. It seems our friend is more than the simple bard he claims to be.”

“Wonder who this Korgan is and why he’s after Perrilin?” wonders Miko.

“We’ll have to ask Perrilin about that when we see him next,” James says. “First Lord Colerain, and now this Korgan. Wonder if they are working together?” Sighing at the fact that though he has been in this world such a short time, he has acquired some rather deadly enemies, he folds the paper and puts it in with his other papers. He starts to yawn and once he has finished dinner, lies down in his makeshift bed. Miko gives him another blanket and soon he’s off to sleep.

Miko sits up awhile unable to sleep. He lays a couple more sticks of wood on the fire, keeping it going while he thinks about everything that has happened to him since he first met James. James told him that it may be safer not to travel with him, and that has definitely turned out to be true. But James is the only person who has ever treated him nice, and as more of an equal, well mostly, than anyone. He decides that no matter what, he will stay with him as long as James will let him. He sets several more sticks on the fire then lies down and finally falls asleep.

Chapter Sixteen

With a city guard hot on his trail, he raced through the streets of Bearn. Clutched tightly to his chest is a loaf of bread that had until just recently, sat on display in front of a baker’s shop. Still warm and emitting a most mouthwatering aroma, it would likely be the only meal he will have this day. Unless of course he was caught.

Usually he took more care when purloining food, those in his situation had to keep under the radar of the authorities. For once they became known as thieves, life became all the harder.

Miko never wished to be a thief. His life being what it is, he was forced to from time to time merely to survive. The odd job that came along never paid much and as often as not, afterward was forced to relinquish his coins to the older kids or suffer a beating. Life on the street was not easy.

“Stop!” the guard yelled. “Thief!”

A glance over his shoulder revealed the guard had closed some distance and was gaining fast. Up ahead loomed the dark mouth of an alley and he bolted toward it. Dodging around a servant girl with a basket full of fruit, he reached the alley and shot inside.

A form emerged out of the shadows before him. Unable to stop in time, he struck the emerging shadow dead center.

“What the hell?” a voice cried as a boy several years Miko’s senior was knocked to the ground only to have Miko land atop him.

“Miko!” another boy shouted.

Before he knew what was happening, Miko was pulled off the older boy, his hard won bounty ripped from his hands, and a poorly shod foot kicked him in the side.

Just then, the guard appeared at the mouth of the alley. “Stay right there!” he commanded. Drawing his sword, he was about to step into the alley when the group of older boys took off. As they disappeared into the shadows, one of them cried, “Thanks Miko!” to the laughter of his fellows.

“Stop!” the guard ordered but the boys were gone. Then he turned his attention to Miko. “It’s the axe man for you boy,” the guard said.

Miko knew what ‘axe man’ the guard meant. Anyone caught in the act of stealing would lose a hand, even if it was a loaf of bread. For not yet being of age to shave, he would most likely lose his left as a lesson while leaving him his right in order that he may still be a productive member of society after having seen the error of his ways. Unable to face such a future, he bolted.

The guard’s foot lashed out and tripped him before he could take two steps. “Oh no you don’t,” said the guard as Miko’s head slammed into the alley’s wall. Landing in a pile of refuse, he squirmed away but the guard placed his foot against his back, pinioning him to the ground.

“No use struggling,” the guard said, laughing. “You ain’t getting away.”

Nooooooooooooo!

Coming awake in a cold sweat, heart beating fast, Miko sits up and is about to bolt when realization of where he was sank in. It had only been a dream. The familiar sight of their horses and mule, as well as James lying still asleep nearby gave validity to that assumption.

Glancing over to the sleeping form of James, he worked to calm himself as he thought, *And you think coming with you is dangerous!* What he has gone through so far in his travels with James was nowhere near as bad as his previous life had been. At least with James, he is treated as an equal of sorts.

The caw of a bird draws his attention upward where several are fighting over something small. No sooner does one steal the prize from another, than that bird loses it in turn. Rubbing the sweat from his forehead the dream had produced, he freaks out when he removes his hand and finds it smeared with blood.

“James!” he shouts. “I’m bleeding!”

Startled out of a deep sleep, James raises his head and looks over to Miko. All vestiges of sleep vanish where he finds a scene that sends chills down his spine. Forehead darkened with blood and a hand to match, Miko sits not far away with wide and frantic eyes, staring at his blood smeared hand. Alarmed, James hurries over.

As he kneels down to better inspect Miko’s forehead, he says, “Now just calm down, it doesn’t look like it is still bleeding.” He puts his hand on the ground for balance and squishes something soft and a little bit nasty beneath his palm. Quickly lifting his hand, he discovers a small, bloody mass mixed in with the dirt.

“Miko, look!” he says as he picks up a stick.

As he bends over to look at it more closely, James uses the stick to first poke at it then turn it over. Miko watches, and when the object turns and is revealed to be a human eye, loses it. Bending over, he loses what little his stomach holds upon on the ground. Disgusted, James flips the eye out of camp.

A dark form swoops out of the sky, and in a deft aerial maneuver, snatches the eye before it hits the ground. James throws the stick at the bird who adroitly avoids the missile. As it flies away, two other black birds give chase.

“It hit me in the head!” Miko says when he’s finally able to stop vomiting.

“Relax,” James says as he heads over to the nearest horse. “You’ll live.” After removing the water bottle from behind the saddle, he rinses the blood off his hand then hands it to Miko. While Miko cleans himself, James gazes around the immediate vicinity. Groups of the black birds are massed upon the dead men and horses, feasting. His gorge rising, he quickly gets ready to travel so they can leave this place behind.

Miko helps him while both do their best to ignore what is going on around them. When they are finally ready to ride, Miko is the first in the saddle and races past the clumps of feasting birds with eyes closed, not stopping until they are no more than black specks on the horizon.

“Are you going to be okay?” asks James once he’s caught up with him.

“I’m better now that we left that behind us,” he replies, still a little pale.

“I know what you mean,” James agrees. “Better than us, eh?”

“Yeah, I suppose so.” Miko still feels a bit green, but after a few minutes begins feeling better.

The rest of the day goes by without incident and they arrive at the outskirts of Willimet shortly before sunset. The first building they come to boasts a sign depicting a man sleeping on a bed. Figuring this to be an inn, they stop out front where James leaves Miko with the horses as he walks to the front door. Just before he draws near, it unexpectedly opens.

From within emerges a man reeking of some unknown unpleasantness. His hair is matted and the original color of his clothes is lost beneath an accumulation of stains and grime. The odor emanating from the man is such that James is forced to hold his breath until the man passes to avoid breathing in the nauseating stench. Once the man has moved some distance away, he takes a hesitant breath. Though the man’s stench is still present, it is no longer so overpowering.

Stepping through the doorway, he again is forced to hold his breath as the inside of the inn reeked just as bad as the man who had just left. Nasty was the word that came to mind when he glanced around the inn and toward the common room. Some tables still had yet to be cleared of the remnants of the noon meal though it has

been over for many hours. Smoke from the kitchen creates an unpleasant haze that only heightens James distaste for the place.

A skinny man of average height with greasy black hair spies him standing in the foyer. Wiping his hands on an apron that possibly had never been washed, he crosses over to greet him. "Need a room tonight?" he asks, and James can almost see the green, putrefied odor coming from the man as he talks.

James turns his head slightly to try to get away from the sickening smell. "No," he quickly replies all the while trying not to breathe. "Just seeing if my friend was here," he lies. "Thanks though." He then turns and makes a hasty exit through the front door, taking a deep breath once outside. He informs Miko that they will not be staying there tonight.

"What was wrong with it?" Miko asks.

Getting back on his horse he replies, "It was filthy and nasty. The one person I saw stank and I fear may have been the cook." The thought of eating anything produced in a place of such disregard for cleanliness made his gorge rise.

"I'm sure there are others here, it's a fair sized town," comments Miko.

"I certainly hope so," says James. "I'll sleep under the stars again before I stay in a place like that."

They find another inn further into town, this one looks to have a fresh coat of paint and the grounds are well maintained and orderly. "I think this may do nicely," he says with satisfaction. It was a stark contrast to the earlier place.

"I hope so," adds Miko, "it's starting to get dark."

Coming to a stop before the steps leading to the front door, James dismounts and says to Miko, "Stay here and I'll see if they have a room available."

"Alright," Miko replies.

After handing Miko his reins, he goes up the stairs and enters the inn. This one, though it has a smoky haze similar to the other inn, but at least it smells of wood smoke and cooking. Overall, the place looks to be better maintained. A man comes over and greets him, "Welcome to the Apple Tree Inn, how may we help you tonight?"

Friendly greeting, neat and clean common area, *Yes*, he thinks to himself, *I think this will do.*

"My friend and I require a room for the night," he says, "and stalls for our animals."

“How many do you have?” he asks.

“Two horses, and a mule,” James answers.

Nodding, the man says, “Yes, we do have room for you. It will be a silver a night for the room and another four coppers for the stalls.”

When he agrees, the man walks to the counter where James hands over the money and receives a room key in exchange. “It’s off the common room.” He points toward a side hallway, “All the way down and on the left. It’s the quietest room we have.”

“Thank you,” James says, “I appreciate that.” Returning outside, he informs Miko they will be staying there. They then take their horses and mule around back, getting them settled into the stable. Taking their bags with them, they return to the inn and find the room at the end of the hallway. Two beds again, which makes Miko happy. They put their bags next to their respective beds before heading back to the common room for dinner.

They enjoy a quiet dinner of roast fowl, bread and ale. After downing the last of his ale, James says, “I think I’ll go for a walk” Glancing toward Miko he asks, “Like to come with me?”

“Sure, okay,” Miko agrees. “Maybe we could find some more tarts?”

“You never know,” replies James, smiling at his friend.

They leave the inn and stroll through the streets. During their walk they get propositioned by several women, all of which look rather skanky to James.

After turning down the fifth offer of cheap sex, Miko says, “There’s something I’ve noticed about you.”

“What’s that?” asks James.

“You are never with a woman. Don’t you like them?” Miko inquires. “Or is it because you were mutilated?”

“I like women, most definitely,” he replies, then comes to a stop when the last little bit Miko said finally registers. Turning a quizzical look to Miko he asks, “What do you mean ‘because I was mutilated’?”

Looking a little embarrassed, Miko says, “Well, when we took our baths the other night, I couldn’t help but notice that a part of you had been cut off.”

“What are you talking about?” James asks confused. Then it hit him, he was circumcised. He starts laughing and says, “What you are referring to was done when I was born. It’s a custom with my people that when a boy is born, such is done to him.”

Looking aghast, Miko asks “What for?”

“It’s the common belief that if it’s removed then there will be less chance for infection during his life,” answers James. “In fact there is one religion back home that mandates it.”

“I’m glad I wasn’t born there,” Miko states with conviction, unconsciously covering himself.

“There are times when I wish it hadn’t been done to me too, but there’s not a whole lot I can do about it now. But rest assured, it still works as well as anybody else’s and it doesn’t affect my desire for sex.”

“Then why don’t you go after the women?” he asks.

“I was raised to believe sex is not a casual thing,” he explains. “And it’s definitely something you should never pay anyone to do. Also, there are certain diseases that you can get from such activities that really mess you up bad, even kill you.”

“The boys I used to hang around with, whenever they got hair between their legs, started going after the girls,” says Miko.

“Yeah, I knew guys back home that were like that too,” admits James. “But you should always do what you think is right, no matter what others may think or do.”

James resumes walking and Miko is silent for a while, thinking about what he just said. They eventually arrive at the main marketplace which is still surprisingly busy even though night has already fallen. Several performers scattered around, one is a juggler who has several different objects coursing through the air simultaneously. Next to him sits a chair with a knife sitting half on and half off the seat. At one point the juggler adds the knife to the dance of items in the air with an upward kick of his foot. As it flies up from where it had sat upon the chair, the onlookers ooh and ahhh. When he catches it and incorporates it within the pattern of the other items, they erupt in applause, several tossing coins into a hat resting on the ground before him.

They remain to watch as the juggler continues keeping the items airborne while twice people tossed other objects which he also incorporated into his aerial display. Miko is completely fascinated by the man so they stay there for a little while watching him. By the time they move on, the juggler had seven items in the air and didn’t look like he was going to stop anytime soon. James gave Miko three coppers to drop in the hat.

As they make their way through the marketplace, they momentarily stop to observe other performers, though none are as

talented as the juggler. While they pause to watch a fire breather, James notices a small tent almost hidden in a dark corner of the market. Inside is a woman sitting at a table. Before her atop the table rests what looks to be a crystal ball. *She looks just like a fortune teller right out of an old movie*, he thinks to himself.

Curiosity gets the better of him.

“Miko, I’ll be over there,” James says as he points toward the small tent.

“Alright,” Miko acknowledges. “I’m going over to watch the monkey.” He points over to where a man has a monkey doing tricks and wearing a funny little outfit.

“Don’t get lost,” James says before he makes his way through the crowd over to the tent and enters.

“Close the curtain so we may have some privacy,” the woman says to James as she indicates the chair sitting across from her.

“Come, sit down and I’ll look into your future.”

He unhooks the curtain and lets it fall, then walks over to the chair and sits.

“Place your hands upon the table, next to the ball with your palms up.” When James has done so, she rests her hands upon his and says, “Now look into the ball and make your mind blank, let it drift as it will.”

He stares into the crystal ball, but all he sees is the crystal ball.

“You must relax,” she tells him, giving him a reassuring smile. He does his best and slowly his mind clears, his body relaxes.

She stares into the ball as she says, “I see a great future for you, one of power and fame.”

“Really?” he asks as he tries peering closer into the ball but fails to see anything.

She looks up from the ball and says, “The ball does not lie. Now, gaze deeper within its depths.”

He stares into the ball as she says, “I see love and happiness for you.” When he looks up to her she meets his eyes and says, “And not too far away.”

“She looks to be a daughter of a rug maker,” she says and then glances up to see his reaction. Then says, “Or possibly a horse trader.”

“Where can I find her?” he asks.

“Back home,” she says. “Where you were born.”

Fake! he thinks to himself. *There aren't any such back where I come from.* "Thank you," he says, then begins removing his hands from the table.

Suddenly, her hands spasm and clenches his tightly, preventing him from leaving the table. Then she says, "I can see that you have come a great distance and not by choice."

Inside the ball, a deep red color blossoms from within its center. He sits back down, intrigued by the show if not by the accuracy.

"You have many questions," she says, her voice becoming more distant, "and few answers. You are on a quest, a quest for answers."

A chill runs down his back, she's hitting closer to the mark now. The deep red color continues to grow and starts to slowly swirl throughout the ball.

"I see a long road but you are not alone, another walks with you," she says, her voice changing, growing harsh and raspy. "He will be the key, a lock must be opened."

Nervous, he hesitates. On the verge of leaving yet drawn to see what will happen.

The red swirling begins to churn faster and a subtle pulse can be seen coming from within. Gasping, her body jerks, hands tightening around his in a grip of surprising strength. He tries to free his hands but is unable to break away. Her grip grows uncomfortable.

Looking at her he sees that her features have changed subtly, yet unmistakable. With a voice growing less human she says:

***With the star, seal your fate,
A giant knocks upon the gate.***

Her voice rises in volume and pitch, the throbbing red vortex in the ball swirls like a maelstrom. The pulsing continues to grow and becomes much more pronounced with each word she utters.

***Pillars of Flame dispel the night,
Out of darkness, blossoms a light.***

Her grip on his hands becomes painful. Eyes wide with the pupils rolled back into her head, her visage completely unnerves James. Scared, he wants nothing more than to break free. Struggle though he may, her grip on his hands is simply too strong.

A friend's wrath you shall feel,

Destroy the land so it may heal.

The crystal of the ball is now completely infused with red and the swirl is no longer apparent. Now a solid red, it pulses, keeping in time with the words being spoken by the woman.

Return the lost, stones to dust,

The table begins to vibrate, the pulsing becomes more pronounced, actually bathing the entire tent in an eerie pulsating red glow. In a voice that sounds as if it's being stretched to its limit, she cries:

Remember... in all... your heart... to trust!

She screams as the crystal ball explodes, sending shards in all directions. Several score along his arms and face. At the shattering of the ball, she falls backward and releases the iron grip she had on his hands. Her chair tips over backward and the woman hits the floor where she lies unmoving.

James comes around the table to her and sees that she's still alive, but unconscious. Amazed, he discovers a streak of white going through her black hair that hadn't been there before. Droplets of blood begin to well out of the many spots on her arms and face where she was struck by the shattering of the ball. He lifts her from the floor and carries her over to a pile of pillows lying in the corner of the tent and tries to make her comfortable. When he has her settled, he looks around the tent at the mess the shattering of the ball has caused. Shards of crystal are everywhere.

He begins to remove the shards from her skin when her eyes fly open. "Who are you?" she asks him.

"You were telling me my future," James replies soothingly so as not to alarm her. "You must have gone into a trance or something. Then suddenly the ball exploded and you fell over unconscious."

"That has never happened to me before," she says, frightened. She looks around her tent at the scattered pieces of shards and breaks down into tears. "What am I to do?" she wails. "I have no ball! How am I going to get people to come in here? How am I to live?"

"I am sure you could still make it work," James assures her. "There are many different ways in which to tell people's futures."

She doesn't look convinced. "But seeing in the ball is what I am known for. They won't believe in me if I try another way."

"Can you get another one?" he asks.

"They are hard to come by and expensive. This one cost me over fifteen golds," she says, breaking down as sobbing comes over her again.

Reaching into his pouch he pulls out fifteen golds and gives them to her. "Here, take this and get started again."

Taking his coins, she again starts to cry only this time in gratitude. "Oh thank you, how can I ever repay you?"

"Just help others, that is all I ask," he replies.

He comes to his feet and looks around at the shambles that is her tent. "When the tale gets around that while you were reading someone's future, the ball shattered and that white streak manifested itself in your hair, you may have more business than ever before."

She reaches up and touches her hair. "A white streak?" she asks incredulously.

Coming over, he touches her hair above her forehead and says, "Yes. It starts here and goes all the way back. Kind of makes you look mysterious."

She pulls some of her hair down before her eyes and looks at the white strands. "Mysterious?" she says and starts to calm a bit.

"Will you be alright now?" he asks.

"Yes," she says. "I think I may."

"Then I must go," he says. "Thank you for the telling."

"You are welcome sir," she replies. "Was it helpful? I don't remember."

"It didn't make a lot of sense," he says, "but who knows with such things?" He then turns and walks out of the tent, pushing aside the curtain that had blocked the entrance. Outside he finds Miko still watching the performing monkey who is now riding a wagon being pulled by a small dog to the laughter of the bystanders.

When he reaches Miko's side, Miko turns and sees his face in the torchlight. "What happened to you?" he exclaims.

"Oh, I just had my fortune told and there was a little accident," he explains. "I'm okay, nothing to worry about."

Turning back to watch the monkey, Miko says, "This little guy is amazing, he can do all kinds of tricks."

"I'm sure he can, but maybe it's about time we head back to the inn," James tells him.

“Alright,” he agrees. “What about those tarts?”

“I almost forgot.” Glancing around the market, James tries to find a bakery but can’t make one out. “Let’s walk around and if we don’t find one, we’ll just head back to the inn, agreed?”

“Agreed.” Miko leads the way and though they fail to find a bakery, they do come across a man selling what reminds James of a cinnamon roll but instead of cinnamon it has a red jelly spread across the top and in the middle. They buy six and head back to the inn. Eating as they go, they both agree that they are delicious and end up eating them all before returning to the inn.

That night as he lies in bed, James has trouble falling asleep, the words of the woman still echo in his mind. *‘Another walks with you, he will be the key, a lock must be opened’. That’s got to be a reference to Miko. But what lock will he open? He’s not a thief.*

The rest of it doesn’t make much more sense:

***With the star, seal your fate,
A giant knocks upon the gate.
Pillars of Flame dispel the night,
Out of darkness blossoms a light.
A friend’s wrath you shall feel,
Destroy the land so it may heal.
Return the lost, stones to dust,
Remember in all your heart to trust.***

I’m sure it will make sense after it would have been useful to know, he reasons. After a while of wrestling with it, he finally succumbs to sleep.

Early the next morning, they gather their things and head down to the common room. There they discover the lower floor of the inn to be aswarm with people. The buzz of conversation flowed throughout the room like a hive of excited bees.

“...I didn’t believe it myself at first...”

“...lucky to be alive if you ask me...”

“...simply incredible, you should see her...”

Spying one of the serving girls, James catches her attention and asks, “What’s going on?”

Giving him a surprised look, she says, “Haven’t you heard? Serenna’s ball exploded during a foretelling last night.”

“Oh really?” he asks. “Is she alright?”

“She’s fine,” replies the serving girl, “though her face and arms were struck when the ball exploded. No one knows what happened to the person for whom she was doing the foretelling.” Suddenly, she notices his face and the numerous fresh puncture marks it bears. She looks at his arms and sees matching wounds there as well. “You?”

“I’m afraid so, but let’s not make too much out of it okay?” he asks. “I would just like some breakfast.”

“Sure thing,” she says as she backs away and heads toward the kitchen. On the way she pauses to whisper to another serving girl who glances over at him with a wide eyed expression. The other serving girl then turns to another person and soon, the conversations within the inn quiet as word of his appearance spreads. Eyes looking fearful take in the wounds caused by the shattering of the ball which dot his face and arms. James was beginning to feel a little self conscious beneath such scrutiny.

“Wonder why such a reaction?” Miko asks.

“Don’t know,” he replies. “Let’s just eat and then get out of here fast.”

Beginning to feel uncomfortable too, Miko says “Yeah, it’s getting kind of creepy.” Taking a seat at a small table in the corner of the common room, they wait for the serving girl to appear.

When their meal arrives, the girl sets it on the table then backs away fast. Wishing for nothing else but to rid themselves of the watchful crowd, they eat their meal quickly. Most of those within the inn, seeing that James is not behaving in any way out of the norm, return to the conversations they were having before.

James can’t help but notice the way everyone continues to cast glances their way. After a bit, he also notices that the crowd within the inn seems to be getting larger. Over in the corner are several youngsters talking amongst themselves. One girl from the group, who couldn’t be more than twelve, is given an encouraging shove from another as she timidly makes her way over to his table. She stops several feet away and asks nervously, “Can I ask you a question?”

James says, “Sure, what would you like to know?”

With eyes wide and a slight tremble in her voice she asks, “Is it true that a demon came and Serenna had to fight it off or it would have eaten your soul?”

“What?” he cries incredulously.

“You didn’t tell me that part,” Miko says.

“That’s because it never happened.” Turning to the girl he asks, “Just where did you hear that story?”

“Everyone is talking about it,” she says. “They say you made a pact with the demon and that it was coming to collect!”

“That’s absurd!” he replies. Then he notices how every eye in the inn is directed his way. From their expressions, it is clear they had heard the same thing.

Standing up, James turns toward the crowd and raises his voice saying, “Despite the rumors you may have heard, there was no demon and I have never made a pact with one.”

“But I heard the story from Serenna herself,” one lady says from the crowd. “She’s been telling it all morning.”

“Oh, we’ll just see about that!” Grabbing his things he says, “Miko, we’re leaving.” Heading out to the stable to collect their horses and mule, curious onlookers follow and watch as they make ready to ride. It’s with great relief when he is able to mount and leave the courtyard. A few people attempt to follow but he kicks the side of his horse and quickly leaves them behind.

Drawing near the marketplace, they find it jammed with people. Moving forward slowly, they force their way through, eliciting much disgruntled mumblings from those displaced. The marketplace isn’t much better as a mass of people fill the entire market area, all facing toward Serenna’s tent. Carefully maneuvering through the mass of people, James leads the way forward. Standing on a wagon in front of her tent, she speaks to the crowd, the white streak in her hair a stark contrast amongst the black.

“...its scaly foot had him pinned to the floor, a seven foot sword dripping with fire was raised and ready to cleave him from head to toe. ‘*Your soul is mine*’ the fiend cried.” The crowd collectively caught their breath, several women actually fainted dead away. “Not knowing what else to do, I cried ‘Fiend be gone’ and threw my crystal ball.” Pausing for effect she dramatically reenacts the throwing of the ball. “When the ball struck, it cried in pain. Why, I don’t know. The crystal shattered, spraying shards in all directions.” Using her hands to direct their gaze to her face, she continues. “Many of the shards struck me, causing great pain.” Members of her audience let out with an ‘ahhh’.

“The shattering of the crystal in some way caused the demon to return to its realm,” a cheer rises from the crowd. “The poor man, who had come to me for help, lay there, whimpering with fear.” Her

voice softens, “‘Mama, is that you?’ the poor man cried as I came close. Not knowing what else to say I replied, ‘Yes, it is dear’.”

Looking around, James can see the people around the marketplace are in rapt attention to every word Serenna is telling them. Some of the women are openly sobbing with tears streaking their face. Even a few of the men are visibly moved.

“I held him there, blood still welling from my wounds, pain throbbing in my face and arms, yet still I held him. He slowly came to his senses and at first did not know where he was, ‘Where am I?’ he asked. ‘You’re safe, that is all that’s important now,’ I assured him. He suddenly jumped up, fear again in his eyes and ran out of my tent. I called for him to return, so that I might help him, but he did not heed me.”

The audience begins to applaud and James would have been moved by the story too, if he didn’t know it was just a bunch of lies. Feeling slightly offended, he continues toward her.

Attention drawn to the presence of a rider approaching, she recognizes him. “There he is!” she cries pointing toward him. The crowd as one turns their attention upon him, the marks on his face and hands visible. They are a match to the ones she herself bears.

“It is him,” utters many whispered voices throughout the crowd.

“I am glad you are now safe,” Serenna says, loud enough for the crowd to hear.

“That’s quite a story,” James says, raising his voice loud enough to carry across the marketplace. “But not quite true, is it?” Turning to the crowd he continues, “There was no demon...”

A scream rips through the marketplace. With a crazed look in her eyes, Serenna screams again then cries out to the crowd, “The demon has taken this man’s soul for his own. Do not hearken to him.” She points an accusing finger at James.

His line of thought broken by the unexpected shriek, he begins formulating his next rejoinder.

“Uh, James,” says Miko staring at the crowd.

“Not now Miko,” James says, still trying to come up with a counter to what Serenna had just said.

“James,” he says again with a slight tenseness and sense of urgency to his voice.

James looks back toward Miko and then the crowd. The crowd is staring at him in a less than friendly manner.

“Be gone demon!” Serenna cries out. “Bother not our city!”

“Maybe we should go,” Miko suggests nervously.

The crowd grows ever more edgy. Fearing it could easily transform into a mob, he nods and they turn to proceed back the way they had come. The crowd parts for them as they leave. Every eye is on him as they make their way from the marketplace. As they leave the area, they hear Serenna once again speaking to the crowd though they are no longer able to make out the words. The crowd within the marketplace cheers loudly to something that she says.

Shaking his head, James leads them out of the city and once again they head east toward the Merchant’s Pass.

Chapter Seventeen

Riding out of Willimet, they remain quiet for some time. Miko is worried about his friend who has fallen into a dark, brooding mood. After the outskirts of town are no longer visible behind them, James suddenly stops his horse in the middle of the road and cries, “That bitch!”

Miko comes to a stop and looks back toward him saying, “Don’t take it too much to heart, James.”

“What? What did you tell me?” he yells, turning his attention on Miko. “Not only was that story a complete lie, but she forced me out of there so I couldn’t even reveal it for the lie that it was. And after I gave her fifteen gold pieces to get a new crystal ball because I felt sorry for her.” Glancing back down the road toward town he yells, “I want my money back!”

“Now just calm down,” Miko says as he brings his horse closer to his friend. “There is not much you could have done, not with that crowd believing everything she was saying.”

James gives him an ugly glare, but Miko continues anyway. “Just why are you so mad? Because you were made out to be a wimpy momma’s boy in front of the crowd? So what?”

James turns his horse around and begins to head back toward Willimet.

Miko quickly turns his horse and rides past, then turns to block his way back to town.

“Get out of my way,” James growls at Miko as he brings his horse to a stop.

“No,” Miko tells him, “I won’t. And you’re not going to go back either, not with the way she had that crowd believing everything she said. You’ll never have the chance to get close to her.”

“Look,” he continues while James listens, “let’s finish what we set out to do. Go and find this temple. Then afterward we can come back to deal with her if you still want.” Seeing James considering his words, he adds, “Remember, we have to make it to the City of Light before Saragon falls and the Empire advances further north.”

James stares at him for a second, emotions playing across his face, then slowly nods his head and says, “Alright, we will deal with her should we come back this way.” Turning his horse around yet again, he resumes their trek east toward Trademeet.

Seeing his friend turn about, Miko breathes a sigh of relief as he gets his horse moving and hurries to catch up. He wasn’t sure what more he could have done had James been set on returning to Willimet.

For the rest of the day, Miko rides in silence while James continues brooding about the way he had been treated and how she drove him out of town. His mood gradually improves and by late afternoon comes to the realization that going back truly would have been the wrong decision, maybe even a costly one.

Sunset finds them still on the road in the middle of nowhere with naught more than grass and low hills as far as they can see. Just before the sun dips below the horizon, they make camp atop a nearby hill.

After supper while they are relaxing around the fire, James hears a rumble off in the distance. “Looks like a storm may be coming in,” he tells Miko.

“Great,” moans Miko as he stares toward the storm on the horizon. Shortly, flashes of lightning begin to appear. “What are we going to do?” he asks.

“Get wet I suppose, not much else we can do,” James says as he stares out across the grasslands. Except for the occasional tree, there is nothing which could be used for shelter.

Pointing off in the distance where two lone trees grew Miko says, “We could take shelter under those trees over there. At least we could stay dry a little bit.”

Shaking his head, James says, “Not in a thunder storm. Lightning can hit the treetops and travel down to the ground where we would be. People have died from being struck by lightning, I would rather get wet.”

Miko looks longingly at the shelter the trees would provide, but trusts in James’ judgment and stays put. “Maybe it won’t reach us until tomorrow,” he hopes.

“Maybe,” James says not sounding as if he believes it. “There’s a good way to tell, though.”

“How?” Miko asks.

“Watch the storm and when you see a flash of lightning, start counting slowly. Stop when you hear the rumble of thunder. Do it every time, and if you are able to reach a higher number the second time, then it’s going away from you. If on the other hand, your count is short before hearing the rumble, it’s coming toward you.”

Miko watches the storm and waits for a flash of lightning.

Flash! “1... 2... 3... 4... 5... 6... 7... 8.” **Boom!**

Miko looks over toward James who says, “Now, if your next number is a 9 then the storm is moving away, if it’s a 7 then it’s coming closer.”

“What if it’s the same?” he asks.

“Then it’s most likely moving across the horizon, neither toward nor away from you.”

“That makes sense,” Miko says and once again looks toward the storm. **Flash!** “1... 2... 3... 4... 5... 6... 7... 8... 9” **Boom!**

Smiling he turns toward James, “It’s moving away!” he exclaims happily.

“Maybe,” concedes James. “However you should wait a few minutes before trying it again, some storms cover a wide area and the lightning could appear within different areas of the same storm.”

Miko sits anxiously by the fire, counting to himself in-between flashes. “James,” he says after several minutes of counting.

“Yes?” answers James.

“Couldn’t you do magic to make the storm not come over here?”

“I don’t know, maybe,” he replies, “but that would be selfish of me.”

“Selfish?” asks Miko. “What do you mean?”

“If I were to move that storm so it passed us by, then I could also be moving it away from farms that desperately need the rain for their crops to grow. That could cause hardship on people for my

own comfort. No, I refuse to influence the weather for so selfish a reason as that.”

“Not many people consider others before themselves,” says Miko.

“I found that to be true where I come from too,” James agrees. “You have to live by your principles, in all things. If you don’t, then there is no limit to how far you may stray.”

“Yeah, I can understand that,” Miko replies.

Flash!

James looks over and can see Miko silently counting till the crack of thunder.

Boom!

“What’s the count?” he asks Miko.

“Still 8,” he replies, looking relieved. “Looks as if it’s going to miss us.”

“Whether it will or whether it won’t, we need to turn in,” James says as he throws a couple more logs on the fire to keep it going further into the night. “We still have a long ways to go.”

Miko settles down in his blanket, drawing it over him as he continues watching the storm. James lies there as well, thinking about Willimet and how Miko probably stopped him from doing something stupid. It isn’t long before Miko begins to snore. He looks over toward the storm, watching the lightning as it flashes in the night, still concerned about it moving this way. Finally, he drifts off to sleep.

The morning dawns dark, the sun unable to pierce the dark clouds stretching from horizon to horizon. They awake to blankets damp from a light sprinkle that fell during the night. Not enough to soak but enough to make everything wet. The thunder storm has long since passed, for which Miko is very grateful. Taking just enough time for a quick breakfast, they are soon on the road.

Shortly after they head out, a light rain begins to fall. They break out their ponchos that they acquired some time earlier in Cardri.

The rain continues all morning, with a kind of an on again off again pattern. The cloud cover remains constant, with nary a break to allow the sun through. A little before noon, the rain begins increasing until it becomes a steady downpour that soon turns the road into mud, and the ditch running alongside into a small stream.

“I hate the rain,” complains Miko. “Can’t we find someplace to wait it out?”

Glancing around at the endless grasslands extending in all directions, James says, “Where would you like to start?”

Looking sullen, Miko hunkers down in his poncho and stays quiet.

With no great desire to stop in the rain, they eat their meal in the saddle, stopping only shortly to give the horses grain and a break from their weight. Later on as the day progresses, James notices what looks to be a caravan stopped in the road ahead. By the number of wagons, it’s a big one.

“Maybe we could ride in a wagon and get out of the rain?” Miko suggests, looking hopeful toward James.

James shakes his head, “They would be too slow and I seriously doubt if they would let strangers in with their goods.”

As they approach the caravan, things begin to look a bit odd. First of all, the wagons weren’t moving. As they draw closer, James begins to see why; none of the wagons have any horses.

“Trouble,” he says to Miko.

“What are we going to do?” Miko asks.

“See if we can render aid, they may have been hit by bandits,” he says as he quickly brings his horse toward the end wagon. “Keep your eyes open and holler if you see anything.”

Approaching the rear wagon, they find the driver slumped over, two arrows protruding from his back. Cautiously moving alongside the wagon train, they make their way toward the lead wagon. More dead drivers begin to appear, either slumped over on their wagons, or lying upon the ground next to them. Near the center of the column they come across twelve slain guards, testimony to a battle which had raged here. Their bodies were hacked and stabbed, many having been pierced with arrows.

Proceeding on, they continue toward the lead wagon where they discover a man who obviously must have been the merchant in charge of the caravan if his fine clothes were any indication. Six arrows protruded from his lifeless body and his lifeless hand still grips the stock of a crossbow. He didn’t go down without a fight.

A smashed chest sits on the ground by the wagon, its top had been smashed open. James looks inside only to find it empty. “Looks like it was bandits that hit them,” he says. Turning to Miko he continues, “Check all the bodies, see if anyone is still alive.”

Moving back down the caravan, they go about the grisly task of searching for any survivors who may require their help. They check dead body after dead body and begin to think that there is no one still alive. It wasn't until they reach the middle of the caravan where all the guards lie slain upon the ground that Miko yells out, "James, over here! We've got a live one."

Hurrying over, James reaches him just as Miko turns the man over onto his back. It's one of the guards. A large bump protrudes from the guard's forehead, which on a cursory examination, appears to be his only wound. Suddenly, the man's eyes flutter open and he tenses up when he finds James and Miko standing over him.

"We are not going to hurt you," James says reassuringly. "We are not with those that attacked you."

"Who are you then?" the man asks.

Gesturing to himself, he says, "My name is James." Pointing to Miko he continues, "And this is Miko."

"Name's Rylin." Propping himself against a wagon wheel, the man looks around at the dead bodies. "Is there anyone else alive?"

"You are the only one we have found alive so far," James replies. "It looks as if they took the horses and smashed open a chest by the lead wagon."

"Damn bandits," he curses and starts to rise.

"Hold on there," James says as he tries to keep him down. "You have a nasty bump and need to take it easy."

Knocking James' hand away, Rylin climbs to his feet where he wavers unsteadily. He brings his hand up to his head and feels the bump on it. "I don't care," he says and then starts walking toward the lead wagon. As he passes by the wagons, he gives the dead bodies a cursory look before continuing to the next.

Upon reaching the lead wagon, he stops when he spies the dead merchant lying on the ground and quickly scans the area. Turning to James and Miko he asks, "There were two women with us, the merchant's wife and his daughter. Did you see them?" He waits anxiously for an answer.

"No, all we found were dead guards and drivers," James replies. Miko nods in agreement.

"The bandits must have taken them," he says as he climbs up onto the wagon and scans the horizon. "Damn, can't see anything in this rain." Rylin then collapses into the driver's seat with a sad, stricken look on his face.

“We could try and find them,” suggests James. “When did they hit your caravan?”

“It was about an hour after we started moving this morning,” he pauses for a second, thinking. “Their attack came fast and five minutes into it, I was knocked from my wagon and must have hit my head on a rock when I fell. After that, I don’t remember anything until I came to with you standing over me? How long was I out?”

“It’s a little after noon now, so probably a couple of hours,” guesses James. “If they took the time to loot and steal the valuables, not to mention the time expended to take the horses, then they couldn’t have left too long ago. Perhaps we could catch up with them.”

“How?” he asks. “The rain has washed away any tracks that could have told us which way they went.”

“Miko,” James says, “go get my compass please.”

Nodding in understanding, Miko races back down the line of wagons to where their horses waited and returns quickly with James’ homemade compass.

“What is that gonna do?” Rylin asks, curiously hopeful.

“With your help, tell us which way they went,” he explains. “Now, if you could find me something that one of the women used to wear, or have with them often?”

“Why do you want that?” he asks.

“If I have something of theirs, it will help me to locate them.” Looking at Rylin and seeing he still failed to comprehend, James adds, “With magic.”

“You don’t look like a mage,” he says.

“I can’t do it without something of theirs,” James says, getting somewhat irritated at the man. “Are you going to help or not? You’re wasting time we can ill afford to lose.”

Getting up, Rylin rummages around inside the wagon and returns with a green scarf. “Sheila, the merchant’s daughter, used to wear this often. Will it do?” he asks as he hands it down to James.

“Let’s see,” James replies as he takes it. Wrapping the scarf around his hand, he holds the compass nestled within it. Closing his eyes he concentrates, thinking of the owner of the scarf and wanting to find her. He lets loose the power and the compass slowly swivels to the south, away from the road and into the grasslands.

Showing it to Rylin he points toward the south and says, “She’s that way.”

“Is she alive?” he asks earnestly.

“It doesn’t tell me that, just where she is,” he responds. “Even if she’s dead, we can still deal with the bandits.” Turning to Miko he says, “Bring our horses.” Miko hurries to comply and soon returns with the three animals.

As he and Miko make ready to ride, Rylin asks, “What about me?”

“Get on behind Miko,” James says, trying to ignore the look he flashes him. Once Rylin has mounted, James turns his horse in the direction indicated by the compass. “Let’s ride quick and see if we can catch them.” Without waiting for a reply, he kicks his horse into a gallop and they race off the road into the grasslands with James leading the way.

The rain steadily worsens, increasing until it’s a heavy downpour and reducing visibility to mere feet. It doesn’t take long before the ground begins showing signs of the bandits’ progress. The grass becomes increasingly trampled and the mud rain-soaked earth begins to show hoof prints. No longer needing his compass, James puts it away and concentrates on the trail before them.

“We must be gaining,” James says when they pull alongside him.

“Yes, I believe you are correct,” agrees Rylin. “How far behind do you think we are?”

“Not sure,” admits James. “Though I’ve never done any tracking before, I doubt if we are very far behind them.”

Not understanding Miko asks, “How do you know?”

Pointing to the trail they are following, James says, “The rain hasn’t had enough time to be able to remove the signs of their passing. Therefore, they can’t be too far ahead.”

“That makes sense,” Miko says looking at the signs of the bandits passing.

“If this rain continues as it is, we may end up riding right into them before we even know they are there,” says Rylin.

“That’s a chance we’ll have to take,” James says. A moment later, he comes to a stop and dismounts for a moment. Scanning the ground, he picks up several stones and places them in one of his pockets.

“What do you need those for?” Rylin asks.

“Ammunition,” answers James, grimly.

“Ammunition?” asks Rylin, “What’s that?”

“When we catch them,” James explains as he swings back into the saddle, “you’ll see.”

Mounted again, they once more set off after the bandits. Another hour passes and the rain continues its relentless downpour. The trail becomes clearer and more distinct now that they have narrowed the gap. Even with the torrential deluge, they have little trouble making it out.

Then, from out of the rain ahead comes a woman’s scream. “Sheila!” shouts Rylin. Kicking their horses into a gallop, they race forward hoping to arrive in time.

No sooner had James reached a full gallop, than indistinct shadows appear before him. Unable to stop in time, he rushes headlong into the bandits’ camp, knocking down two of them before even realizing they are there. As the two bandits hit the ground his horse slams into the side of a tent and the unexpected impact vaults him from the saddle. He hits the tent and it collapses beneath him.

“To arms! Intruders!” sounded the alarm.

James rolls and clears the side of the collapsing tent, gaining his feet. He looks around and sees men running toward him with swords drawn. Reaching into his pocket he pulls out the stones. With magic aiding aim and velocity, one of his missiles strikes the nearest attacker square in the chest. The bandit looks in startled surprise at the hole that appeared in his chest before collapsing to the ground, dead.

Three more men are bearing down on him so he turns and runs, keeping distance between them. He concentrates, then stops suddenly and spins quickly toward his pursuers, casting his flashing light spell. The brilliance of the flash causes them to pause for an instant, long enough for him to throw three more stones in quick succession, taking them out.

“To me!” he hears a commanding voice pierce the air. “To me!”

A clash of metal off to his right signals Rylin’s entry into the battle. Following the sound, he finds the caravan guard hard pressed battling two of the bandits. Using his last stone, he nails one of them in the side, dropping him to the ground. Rylin steps back a moment and glances over to see James, who is but a shadow in the rain. He acknowledges him with a nod and then continues the attack on the remaining bandit pressing him.

James moves in the direction from which the commanding voice had called out earlier. Darting around another tent, he spies a group of men heading toward him. One is covered in armor and wielding a

long sword, obviously the leader. They are heading toward the sound of Rylin's battle with the bandit.

He waits too long and one of the approaching bandits sees him standing by the tent and cries out, pointing him out to the others. The leader yells for them to charge and they surge forward, swords drawn.

Seeing a dozen men bearing down on him, James turns and runs, angling away from where Rylin is battling in the hopes of giving him time to finish his opponent before help arrives.

Another shape materializes out of the rain ahead of him and he prepares another spell. Then he realizes it's Miko leading the horses and mule.

"Are you okay?" Miko asks before spying the raging, sword waving men emerging out of the rain behind James.

"Get the hell out of here!" James yells at Miko, then turns to face the men. He concentrates on the ground near the leading edge of the attackers and lets loose a massive surge of power just as the men enter the targeted area.

Crrrrumph!

The ground erupts, throwing men, mud and rocks high into the air. James cries out at the pain caused by unleashing so much power at once. He drops to his knees, refusing to give in to unconsciousness.

Surveying the damage through the rain and falling mud, he sees most of the men lie unmoving. From behind the scene of carnage, three men, one being the leader, walk around the crater in the ground he just made. Coming toward him cautiously, the men gain confidence when they see him on his knees.

James grabs a stone from off the ground as he climbs to his feet and faces the approaching men. "Stand back!" he yells, putting more strength and confidence in his voice than he really feels. "Lest you wish to die."

"You're the one to die, mage," the leader says as he continues his approach, a smug smile upon his face. "You can't have much left in you after that, not if it left you on your knees."

Coming off his knees through a sheer force of will, James stands straight and tall, praying that his knees won't collapse on him. "Die then," he yells and throws the stone at the leader while casting his spell. There is no familiar out-surgings of power and the rock glances harmlessly off the leader's armor. His magic has been all

but depleted and the effort to draw on the little remaining to him causes dots to dance before his eyes.

Laughing, the leader says “Take him boys.” His two men come at James as he turns and tries to run away. But his weak legs give out and drop him to the ground. Turning, he sees his death coming at a run.

Thwock!

A crossbow bolt flies out of the rain to strike one of the men in the shoulder, spinning him backward. The bandit cries out in pain as he hits the ground. James looks to where the crossbow bolt originated and sees Miko throwing down the crossbow. Drawing his knife, Miko comes and stands before James.

The other bandit, seeing who it was who shot his partner says, “I’m going to gut you boy. You’re going to die slow and painful.”

Miko stands ready and doesn’t back down. James can see that the boy’s legs are shaking. He’s scared to death, but still holds his ground.

A fast-moving shadow emerges from the pouring rain and slams into the man approaching Miko, knocking him to the ground. Rylin quickly regains his feet and slashes down, catching the bandit in the neck, practically severing his head from his shoulders.

Roaring in rage, the leader rushes Rylin and launches into a series of blows, causing him to retreat in the face of such an onslaught. Rylin successfully blocks the leader’s attacks but seems to be doing all he can just to hold his own.

Hack! Hack! Slash!

It is soon obvious that Rylin is outclassed, the leader is by far the better swordsman and he’s protected by armor.

Miko approaches the battle in an attempt to help Rylin, but only receives a back handed cut for his efforts that slashes open his upper left arm. Out of commission, he backs away from the fight. He tears a strip of cloth off his shirt and uses it to stem the flow of blood coming from his arm, tying it as tightly as he can.

James watches as Rylin blocks blow after blow, never once being able to go on the offensive. The two combatants move around the camp, the leader seemingly able to have Rylin go in any direction he wants simply with the pattern of his blows.

“James what are we going to do?” Miko asks as he comes over, blood still leaking from under his makeshift bandage.

“I’ve no strength left in me,” he replies.

Miko extends his right hand toward James and asks, "Can you use mine?"

Looking at Miko through the rain, James says, "I don't know what that would do to you. It may kill you."

Miko glances over at Rylin then says, "He's not going to last much longer. If we don't do something soon we'll all be dead." He reaches over and takes James' hand, "Just do it!"

Nodding, James concentrates, envisioning the power flowing from Miko into him and then through him. He looks over at the battle where Rylin who's obviously exhausted, is having greater difficulty in blocking the leader's blows.

Suddenly, Rylin cries out as the leader scores along his side opening a shallow cut. The leader shouts in triumph, "Aha!" when he sees the blood beginning to well from Rylin's wound. Blow after blow the leader rains down upon him, continuously pushing him backward.

The leader maneuvers Rylin back close to the man Miko shot with the crossbow who is still lying on the ground. The man, though in pain, reaches out and grabs Rylin's ankle causing him to lose his balance and stumble to the ground. The leader sees his chance and raises his sword to finish it.

Feeling the power flowing from Miko to him, James releases it and feels it being sucked out of his friend at an alarming rate. Miko cries out before slumping to the ground unconscious. James keeps a tight hold of his hand so the contact won't be broken. He directs the power to the upraised sword of the leader, increasing the disparity of polarities between the sword and the clouds above.

Flash! Boom!

A giant bolt of lightning flashes from the sky to strike the end of the sword. The resulting explosion blasts the leader into the air. The bandit on the ground is charred as both he and Rylin are lifted into the air and tossed several feet away.

The leader, when he hits the ground, no longer moves. Wisps of smoke drift upward from his body and a hissing sound can be heard from where the rain comes in contact with the heated metal of his armor.

James checks Miko and is relieved to find that he's still alive and breathing. He then makes his way over to Rylin.

"What was that?" Rylin asks, a little shaky.

"Lightning," James replies, a bit shaky himself. "Are you okay?" he asks, looking closely at him.

Rylin looks down at himself and nods, "I think so, is it over?" He presses his hand over the cut in his side to stem the flow of blood.

"I don't see anyone else but us moving, so I think it is," he replies.

Helping Rylin to his feet, James says, "My friend is over there," pointing to where the boy lies in the grass. "He's out, but alive."

"Thank goodness," Rylin sighs, leaning on James for support. "Now, let's find the women."

They return to the collapsed tent where the battle started. There they find a lump under the canvas, and it isn't moving. Thinking the worst, they pull back the tent and uncover a bandit. The man's neck is bent at a wrong angle, obviously broken, and his pants are down around his ankles.

Rylin quickly scans the camp through the rain but sees nothing other than the dead bandits. "Sheila!" he cries into the rain. "It's Rylin! It's safe, they are all dead."

James looks around as well and soon spies two silhouettes appearing out of the rain, coming toward the camp.

"Sheila!" Rylin cries and runs over to them, James following.

The women, though shaken and upset, seem to be alright. Sheila is wrapped in a blanket and her mother has her arms around her. She has a lost look about her.

Rylin turns to her mother and asks, "Is she okay?"

"One of the bandits was just about to have his way with her," she explains. "He had stripped her and was about to..." overcome with emotion, she stopped. Getting hold of herself, she continued. "Then something hit the side of the tent, knocking it over."

Rylin puts his arm around her and begins to offer comfort when her eyes suddenly widen at something behind him and she looks as though she's ready to bolt. Seeing her reaction, Rylin turns around expecting an attack but only finds James walking toward them.

"It's okay," Rylin assures her. "This is James, he helped rescue you."

Relaxing somewhat, she says, "Thank you for helping us."

"You are welcome," he replies. "I hope you and your daughter will be okay?"

"I think we will," she says. "It may take some time for my daughter to get over this, but she will. She's a strong girl."

"Maybe we should put the tent up again," James suggests, "so the ladies can have shelter?"

“No,” the mother says adamantly. “We will not stay in that tent. Besides, we need to see about our caravan.”

“How?” Rylin asks. “The horses are gone.”

Shaking her head, she says, “Our horses were taken by several of the bandits to the south while this group continued this way. If we can get them back, then maybe we can bring in our caravan to Trademeet and salvage something from all this.”

Seeing the doubt in Rylin’s eyes, she continues, “With my husband dead, we need the money from those goods to survive.”

“James!” Miko’s cry interrupts the conversation.

“Over here!” James hollers back. Shortly they are able to see him approaching through the rain.

“Oh, you’re hurt!” Sheila cries out when she finally becomes aware of Rylin’s blood soaked shirt, pressed to his side. “Let me help you.” Taking him by the hand she leads him over to the tent and rummages around, coming up with several strips of cloth. Removing his shirt, she inspects the cut and decides it’s not too deep. She then proceeds to wrap the cloth around his side tightly, finally securing it with a knot.

“Thanks, ma’am,” Rylin says when she’s finished.

“That should do for a while,” she says. “Just be careful from now on, okay?”

“Alright, ma’am, I will,” he assures her.

Sheila finds her clothes in the tent and with her mother’s help, gets dressed while everyone else looks the other way.

As Sheila dresses, James says to Rylin, “Miko and I can go after the bandits and see if the horses can be recovered, though I will need to rest for an hour or so before I leave. I pretty much wore myself out during the fight.”

“Perhaps I should go with you as well,” Rylin offers.

“You need to stay with the ladies and watch over them,” James replies. “You can defend them better than either Miko or myself. And we certainly don’t want to leave them alone and unprotected.”

Rylin glances over to the mother who nods her head, agreeing with the plan. “Alright, but how will we know if you are successful?”

“If we are, we’ll take them back to the road and meet you there,” explains James. “Take the horses here with you and if we don’t come back, use them as best you can to get the caravan to Trademeet.”

“Those are not draft animals,” the mother says, looking at the nearby picket of horses.

“Better than nothing wouldn’t you say?” James counters.

“I suppose so,” she agrees, though not entirely happy about the situation.

“Miko,” James says to him, “search all the bandits, especially the leader. See if there is anything that may tell us why they are here.”

“What do you mean?” Rylin asks as Miko begins to rummage through their belongings and inspecting each of the dead bodies.

“The leader seemed too professional to simply be a bandit leader,” James explains. “Also, if they were merely bandits, why did they split their forces and send the horses south? It just doesn’t feel right to me.”

“I see your point,” Rylin acknowledges.

While Miko searches the dead, Rylin and James tie the bandit’s horses in a line, bridle to saddle. Three saddlebags are found to be filled with gold and other valuables.

“This must belong to the ladies,” James guesses when he sees the fortune, “taken from their caravan.”

“Most likely,” Rylin agrees.

The rain begins to lessen though it’s still a constant nuisance. Miko returns from his search and says “Couldn’t find anything on anyone. There was some paper on the leader but it’s ash now, couldn’t make out any writing.”

“Alright, let’s get our stuff and we’ll go look for the horses,” James tells him. “Also, let’s take the tent with us, it may come in handy should the rain continue.”

“Alright, James,” Miko says as he turns to go over to where the tent is lying in the mud.

Rylin, having already assisted the ladies to mount, comes over to James and says, “Thank you for your help in rescuing them.”

“We couldn’t leave them to their fate,” he replies. “I just hope Miko and I are able to get the horses back for you.”

“So do I,” he says. “We’ll wait on the road for a day or so before continuing on toward Trademeet. If you manage to get them, try your best to find us.”

“We’ll find you,” James assures him. They walk over to Rylin’s horse and James gives him a hand mounting.

“Goodbye ladies,” James says as he turns toward them. “We’ll see you in a couple of days.”

As Rylin gets the line moving, the mother says, "Thank you again, James. I can't begin to express my gratitude for you helping Rylin to save us. Should you ever need anything, the House of Ellinize will help you."

"Thank you ma'am," James replies. He stands back a bit and waves as they begin moving northward to where the caravan was abandoned back on the road.

Miko waves to them as they begin to leave. "Everything set?" James asks him.

"Yeah, I got the tent on the mule," he answers.

"Then let's go," James says and then walks over toward their horses.

"What is that?" he asks as they approach the horses. On the back of the pack mule is the tent all right, but it looks like it was stuffed and tied up there without any effort made in compacting it.

He looks over at Miko and asks, "Ever folded a tent before?"

Shaking his head, Miko answers, "No, I'm a city boy."

James begins to untie it from the horse, and then lays it on the ground. "Here, give me a hand and I'll show you how to do it properly so it will be a much smaller package to handle." Having never folded this particular type of tent, it takes him a couple of tries but they eventually get it down to a manageable size and secure it on the mule.

Then they mount up and begin to ride after the other band of bandits.

Chapter Eighteen

The rain continues to lessen throughout the morning until shortly after noon, when it stops altogether. Not long after the sun breaks through the clouds to bring a much welcomed relief to the sodden pair. James and Miko manage to maintain a quick pace as they try to catch up with the remaining bandits, only stopping for brief periods to rest the horses before continuing the search.

They pick up the trail about mid afternoon when they encounter a swath of grass that has recently been trampled. "I think we found their trail," announces James.

"Looks like it," Miko agrees. "What are we going to do when we find them?"

"Play it by ear," he answers. "We won't know what our options will be until we do."

"I suppose," he says. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Some," replies James. "I should be recharged somewhat by the time we find them."

"Recharged?" queries Miko.

Chuckling, James clarifies, "It's a word from where I come from. It means that I will be able to do magic again."

"Oh, that's good," says Miko.

A large group of tents with a makeshift corral set off to one side appears out of the horizon not long before dusk. The number of tents indicates a far larger group than they had anticipated. James has them enter a copse of trees from where they will be able to observe what's going on inside the camp, yet will still be far enough away so they won't be discovered.

"I think those are the horses," Miko says, indicating the herd inside the corral.

"You are probably right," agrees James. "But this is a far larger group than I anticipated. It looks like an army camp."

Glancing questioningly to James, Miko asks, "How do you figure?"

"Several things," James replies. "First of all the tents are lined up uniformly, in rows with the larger tents in the center. Second, they have patrols walking a perimeter around the encampment," he points out three men who appear to be walking around the camp at distinct intervals.

"What do we do now?" Miko asks.

Thinking for a second, he replies, "Not much we can do, but it's beginning to look as if the ladies will not be getting their horses back. Unless you think we should go down there and ask for them back?" Seeing the look of apprehension on his face, he can't help but add, "Or attack?"

"Good heavens no!" Miko exclaims. "They'd kill us for sure."

"Most likely," agrees James. "We'll hang out here for a while and see what's going on."

“Why?” Miko asks. “I mean if we are no longer planning on getting the horses back, what’s the point of staying here any longer than we need to?”

“You see Miko, I hate leaving things unanswered, and there are still several questions I’d like answers to.” James leans back against a tree and opens a saddle bag, taking out some travel rations to munch on while he watches the camp. He hands some over to Miko as well.

“Like what?” Miko asks in between bites.

Considering the question while he chews, James replies, “If that is an army of some kind, whose is it? I doubt if it belongs to Cardri. After all, why would the bandits take horses that they stole in their own territory to them? And if it isn’t, why are they here in the first place?”

“Mercenaries, maybe?” Miko suggests.

“Perhaps, though it doesn’t feel right,” James says. “Look at it like this, suppose the bandits that sacked the caravan and those over there are part of a much larger force. Remember that Madoc is under siege right now and has requested Cardri’s aid. What if these are working under orders from the Empire to sow fear here in Cardri? What would the result be?”

“I don’t know,” admits Miko.

“If the stability of Cardri is in question, then the king would be unlikely to send a large force to help Madoc against the Empire. After all, he needs to care for his own first.”

“But wouldn’t the Empire run the risk of going to war with Cardri if they are found out?” asks Miko.

“Most definitely,” agrees James. “Which brings me back to the questions needing answering.”

“So we are to just sit and wait?” Miko asks, not liking it.

“For the moment, yes,” James replies, then he turns his attention back to the encampment.

Miko sits and watches for a while before asking, “Why do you care?”

Glancing over to Miko, he asks, “Care about what?”

Pointing to the encampment, “Them. I mean, after all what does it have to do with you?”

“What do you mean?” he replies.

“You are not from here, why does it matter to you?” Miko clarifies.

“Some of those down there did a horrible thing when they killed all those people at the caravan,” explains James. “I would wish to hinder them for no other reason than that. Besides, people of good conscience must not stand idly by while bad people do bad things.”

“I understand,” Miko says, “I think.”

Smiling, James says, “Trust me, we are doing the right thing.”

They sit and watch until the sun begins settling closer to the horizon. At which point three horsemen emerge from the camp, riding hard to the north. Inside the camp, they begin to see activity as the tents start coming down.

“Looks like they are breaking camp,” James observes.

“Now what?” asks Miko.

“As much as I would like to know what those in the encampment are doing, I think we should go after the riders,” he says. Getting up, he quickly goes over and mounts his horse to follow the riders once they have ridden past. Miko moves to mount his as well. They wait upon their horses, hidden in the trees as the men first come abreast, then move pass, their hiding spot not more than a hundred feet from where they are watching. Once they are past and have moved further north, James and Miko emerge from the copse to set out after them.

James feels in his pocket to make sure his stones are there; glad to have picked them up earlier. Maintaining a good pace, they keep a discreet distance behind the riders, just within visual range.

“Looks like they’re heading for the bandits’ camp where we rescued the women,” James hollers over to Miko, once he realizes where the riders are heading.

Miko nods his agreement.

Suddenly from up ahead, they hear horns blaring and see the three riders turn and head back toward them at a full gallop. Coming into view behind the riders is a line of uniformed horsemen.

James brings his horse to a stop and dismounts.

“What are you doing?” Miko asks anxiously.

“Going to slow them up a bit,” he replies. Handing Miko his reins he says, “Here, hang on to this for a second.” He then turns and faces the riders who are coming fast.

Concentrating, he takes one of his stones and throws it as he casts his spell. It flies unerringly toward the rear rider and hits, causing him to fall backward off his horse.

Taking another stone, he does the same to a second rider. This time the rider's foot gets caught in the stirrup as he falls and is dragged along the ground before the horse comes to a stop.

By this time, the remaining rider has seen James and Miko and are making straight for them. James throws a third stone and this time nails the horse not the man, knocking the rider to the ground.

The man hits the ground at a roll and is on his feet not far from where James is standing. He looks at James and then glances back at the cavalry rapidly approaching. The man reaches into his shirt and then puts something into his mouth. A second later he grips his stomach and falls over to the ground, not moving.

"What happened to him?" Miko asks.

"He's poisoned himself," says James. "Guess he didn't want to be taken captive." They stand still and wait until the cavalry approaches.

"Stay where you are!" one of the men commands as the riders approach. Several hold lances and lower them, covering James and Miko. The riders encircle the pair, leaving an opening to allow another rider to pass through their ranks. This rider is an older man, with hair turning slightly gray at the edges. His uniform is of better quality than those of the others. *Must be an officer*, James thinks to himself.

"Now, who might you two be?" he asks when he draws close, looking down from the back of his horse.

James answers, "My name is James and this is my friend Miko."

When he hears their names, he nods and says to one of his men on his right, "Lieutenant, see to the dead riders and send out scouts. I want to know where they are and fast."

"Yes, sir," replies the man next to him who then turns and begins to bark out orders.

Turning back to James and Miko, the leader dismounts and hands his reins to another rider. "Greetings James, I am Captain Varos of the King's cavalry." He extends his hand and James shakes it. "So, would you happen to know someone by the name of Rylin?" he asks.

"As a matter of fact we do, Captain," James replies. "We helped him rescue two ladies from bandits earlier."

"Thought you might be them," he explains. "We ran into him and the ladies back at the caravan. They said you had gone in pursuit of another group of bandits that had taken off with their horses."

Nodding, James says, "That is correct. We found them too, but they had met up with a larger band and any chance of recovering the stolen horses was gone."

"Oh? How many were there? Where did you see them?" he asks intently.

"There were over fifty men and their camp was further south, about ten miles or so," James explains. "But they had begun breaking camp about the time when we began to follow them." He gestures to the dead men. "I think the main body was probably going to head south, though I am not positive."

"Lieutenant!" the officer bellows.

The lieutenant comes over to him, "Sir!"

"These men say their encampment was about ten miles to the south and that they broke camp not too long ago, possibly heading south. Send the scouts out in that direction and have the men ready to ride in five minutes."

"Yes, sir, Captain!" the lieutenant salutes and proceeds to carry out the orders.

Another rider comes up and salutes, "Captain, we searched the bodies but found nothing on them. One looks like he was poisoned."

"Very good," the captain replies and the man goes back to his duties. "Poisoned?" the captain asks when he turns his attention back to James.

"When I knocked his horse down with a rock, the man came to his feet. He glanced at you and your men coming and then reached into his pocket and ate something. Shortly after that he fell over dead."

"Too bad, would have liked to have questioned him," the Captain says.

The lieutenant returns and reports, "Captain, the men are ready."

The man who was holding the captain's horse brings it and the captain mounts. Turning to James he says, "Thank you for your help." To his men he says, "Let's ride!" and they race southward at a gallop.

Watching them ride out of sight, Miko asks, "Should we follow?"

Shaking his head, James replies, "I don't think so." He glances over at the dead bodies and then mounts his horse, Miko does the same. "There is likely to be a battle when they meet and I would rather not be around when it happens." Getting up to speed quickly, they head northward until the sun starts dipping below the horizon.

Once the light begins to fade, they make camp. After having a quick dinner of rations and then lay out under the stars as they watch the night sky slowly darken, until only the light from the fire is all that remains to keep the darkness at bay. The stars form a brilliant pattern in the heavens above. "Look!" Miko cries out as a shooting star leaves a blazing trail across the night sky, slowly dissipating into nothingness.

"That's an omen," he says.

"Hardly," James rebuts. "That is simply a rock falling out of the sky, hitting the atmosphere and the friction caused by its speed through the air burns it up which causes a blazing trail."

"What?" Miko asks, confused.

Chuckling, James says "It's just a rock falling out of the sky. There is nothing mystical about it."

"I don't know," Miko insists. "They are supposed to herald that something of import is about to happen or has."

"For who?" James questions.

"I don't know, somebody somewhere I suppose," Miko reasons. "It's got to mean something."

Turning on his side, James says, "Not everything has to mean something. Sometimes things occur and that is all there is to it. I am sure that something somewhere is happening to someone that could be called extraordinary. But I am sure that it would be happening even without a sign from above."

"Don't you believe in signs and omens?" Miko asks him.

"No, not really," James explains. "Everything has an explanation, if you just know all the facts about it. It's when you see only part of whatever is happening that you create mystical and often implausible meanings behind them. I know that rocks are flying through space out there all the time and that they do occasionally fall to earth, creating a blazing trail across the heavens."

Not looking very convinced, Miko argues, "The gods are always sending omens and portents, we just have to be alert and understand them when they are happening."

Thinking about magic and the things he's seen since coming here to this world, he says, "Perhaps you do have a point, and I'll concede that it may actually be a sign sent from above for a specific purpose. But since we have no way to know what, where, or who, I doubt if it's going to do us much good."

“I suppose you’re right about that,” Miko agrees. Changing the subject, he asks, “Are we going to see how Rylin and the women are making out?”

“I think so,” James replies. “At least we will tell them what is happening with their horses. They may get them back if the Captain is successful in battle. At least he knows who they belong to.”

“Do you really think there will be a battle?” Miko asks.

“Perhaps,” James answers. “The Captain can’t just let them get away with attacks on civilians within their borders, so if he thinks he can win the day, then I’m sure he will attack. And if not, then who knows what he will do, maybe send for reinforcements so he can launch a successful attack. We may never know.”

“Think we’ll find what you’re looking for over in Madoc around the Sea of the Gods?” he asks.

“I really don’t know,” James says, “but it is all I have to go on. Hopefully we can find out something more in Trademeet before we head through the pass. Maybe someone there will have some recollection of hearing a story or tale from their grandparents about it. We’ll see.”

Getting up, James goes over to the fire and adds a few more sticks to it then returns to his blanket on the ground. “We better get some sleep, we have a ways to go tomorrow and I’m tired.” He lies down and pulls the blanket over him to keep the coolness of the night away.

“Good night, James,” Miko says.

“You too, Miko,” replies James. They both lie there for a while, just listening to the night and slowly drift off to sleep.

Chapter Nineteen

Early the next morning finds them on their way back to the road where they originally found the raided caravan. After several hours of riding, the road appears ahead of them in the distance but there is no sign of the caravan.

“Maybe we came to the road in a different spot,” suggests Miko.

Nodding agreement, James looks down the road in both directions and says, “But which way?”

“Can’t you just do that compass thing and find out?” Miko asks.

“Probably,” James replies, “but it might be better not to use magic for a while, I’m getting kind of worn out from doing so much of it.” Thinking for a bit, he makes his decision, “We’ll head in the direction of Trademeet and if we don’t find them, then at least we will be heading in the right direction for where we want to go.”

“I suppose we could leave a message for them there, letting them know what’s going on,” says Miko.

“Good idea, we’ll do that,” he agrees. Turning their horses east, they set off at a canter, slowly eating away the distance.

Around noon they reach the spot where the caravan had been raided. Yesterday’s rain hadn’t been able to remove all traces of the blood soaked into the ground from the bandit’s attack as yet. And a hundred feet or so off the road rose a mound of fresh turned earth.

Indicating the mound James says, “Must be where they buried the bodies of the guards and drivers.”

“Looks like it,” Miko agrees. “Guess they managed to hook the bandits’ horses up to the wagons and are already on their way to Trademeet.”

“Hope so,” says James. “It shouldn’t take us too much longer to catch up with them, I would think.”

Riding fast, they leave the area of the battle and hurry down the road. They didn’t get far before a lone rider appears on the road ahead approaching them from the east. When he draws near, James slows and greets him, “Good day to you sir.”

The man slows as well and stares suspiciously at James all the while resting his hand upon the pommel of his sword. “Good day to you as well,” the man replies, not relaxing his grip on his sword.

“We were wondering if you could tell us if you had passed a caravan further down the road, heading east?” he asks. “There would have been a man and two women in charge of it.”

“Aye,” the man replies. “I passed a caravan some time earlier this morning. It had an escort of the kings’ soldiers with it, if that be the one you’re referring to.”

“Yes, that would be the one,” James says.

“They are perhaps two hours away, maybe more,” explained the man.

“Thank you sir, you’ve been a great help.” James nods his head in acknowledgement.

The man returns his nod, and begins to relax a little.

“Have a safe journey,” James says to the man as he starts down the road again. Glancing back, he can see that the man remains still as he watches them depart before turning and continues on his way.

“Not a very friendly sort, was he?” Miko asks.

“Alone in the middle of nowhere is not a place to be too trusting,” James explains. “Especially not when you are outnumbered two to one.”

“At least he let us know they’re not too far ahead.”

“Yes, hopefully we will catch them by nightfall,” James figures.

“That would be nice,” Miko says. “Sheila is kind of cute.”

Looking over at him, James warns, “You better not let Rylin hear you say that.”

“Why? She is cute,” Miko replies defensively.

“I agree that she is cute. However, I believe Rylin is in love with her and you wouldn’t want him to mark you as a rival for her affections,” James cautions.

“I’ll admire her from afar,” Miko states. Seeing the look on James’ face he adds, “Silently.”

“See that you do,” he says, with a little extra emphasis on the word *do*.

They continue to make good time and shortly before sunset a large camp with many wagons and tents appears alongside the road ahead. When they draw closer, Rylin emerges from the bustle of the camp and comes forward to greet them.

“James! Miko! How glad I am to see you,” he exclaims as he comes up to James and shakes his hand with enthusiasm.

Dismounting, James says, “Sorry we were unable to retrieve your horses, but the bandits joined with a larger force and we couldn’t risk it.”

Joining the conversation, Miko says, “Captain Varos took off after them though. He may return the horses to you.”

“So you ran into the Captain, did you?” Rylin asks. “He was kind enough to offer us an escort into Trademeet and then set off after the bandits. We told him you may be around.”

Walking their horses into camp, James sees Sheila and her mother, Shawna, getting the wagons positioned and the horses taken care of. Some of the soldiers are lending their aid in getting everything situated properly. They tie their horses near the wagons

and then walk over to where the ladies are busy removing the last of the tack from the horses.

“Sheila!” Rylin hollers over to her as they approach. She turns and sees him approaching with James and Miko. Placing the tack on the wagon, she turns to her mother and says, “Mother, Look! James and Miko are back.”

Pulling the saddle off the horse, Shawna looks over and gives them a smile in greeting before placing the saddle on the wagon. Giving the horse into the care of one of the soldiers, she comes over to them, saying, “We weren’t sure whether or not we would see you again. I’m glad you made it back safely.”

“We ran into some unforeseen problems,” James said.

With concern on her face she asks, “Like what?”

“The bandits had met with another group and together, were a force too strong for us to be able to do anything,” he explains. “We decided it was too risky to try to retrieve your horses.”

From the area the soldiers had claimed for themselves this evening, a man in uniform with a commanding presence, walks toward them. When he approaches the group, Shawna says, “James, Miko, this is Sergeant Mindol.” Turning to the sergeant, she says, “These are the two who were going after the bandits and attempt to recover our horses.”

“I was wondering who the newcomers were.” Extending his hand toward James, the sergeant says, “Good evening to you sir.”

Taking his hand in a firm grip, James says, “Good evening to you as well.”

“Did you catch up with the bandits?” asks Sergeant Mindol.

“As I was telling them, we did but they had joined with a larger force,” he explains. “We were on our way back when we ran into Captain Varos and told him what was going on. He led his men south and I believe was going to attempt to overtake the bandits.”

“He’s an outstanding captain,” Sergeant Mindol states. “I am sure he will be able to handle any situation he may run into.”

“He did seem rather capable,” Miko joins in. “Didn’t seem the sort to waste any time.”

“That sounds like him,” Sergeant Mindol agrees. Nodding to the ladies, he says, “I just wanted to know who the newcomers were, I must go and see to my men, if you will excuse me?”

“Of course, Sergeant,” Shawna replies.

Sergeant Mindol turns and walks back over to his men, making sure everything is as it’s suppose to be.

Watching him go, Shawna says, "I am glad that Captain Varos could spare him and his men. It makes me feel so much safer, especially since all of our guards were killed."

"I am sure we will see you safely to Trademeet," Rylin assures. He looks to James for his agreement but he is unable to give it.

"I'm afraid that Miko and I must continue our journey in the morning," James explains. "You shouldn't have any troubles now that you have a professional armed guard escorting you."

"Yes," Sheila interjects as she takes Rylin's arm, "I am sure we have all the protection my mother and I could want." She lays her head on his shoulder.

Rylin looks a little uncomfortable at the attention, but not altogether unhappy with it either.

Shawna's face turns dark as she looks at the way her daughter is acting. She says crisply, "Sheila, go and start dinner for us please."

Lifting her head off Rylin's shoulder, she replies, "Yes mother." She gives Rylin's arm one last squeeze before going over to the wagon and starts gathering together the items she will need in order to prepare dinner.

Looking a little embarrassed, Rylin says, "I should go and check on the horses, make sure they will be alright during the night." With a slight nod to Shawna, he turns and heads over to where the horses are picketed.

Stepping closer to Shawna, James says, "I take it you don't approve of what is developing between Rylin and your daughter?"

Giving James a sharp glance which seems to say 'It's none of your business', she says, "I don't think a hired guard is a suitable match for my daughter, no."

"What would be?" James asks. Seeing her expression darken, James hurriedly continues, "I mean, Rylin has already proven he would lay his life down for your daughter. Any other man you couldn't be sure if his words of love are for her or her money."

Her expression softens slightly as she begins to consider his words. "Rylin would always be there for her and she for him. You've seen them together, he loves her and she him. There can be no better foundation for a relationship than that."

"Maybe," she says, "but what kind of life is it to be married to a man like that? She should be married to a noble, so she can have servants to make her days easier for her than mine have been for me."

“Would you have wanted an easier life if it meant not having been with your husband?” he asks her.

Smiling a sad smile, she answers, “No, I wouldn’t.” Chuckling a little she adds, “In fact, my mother was dead set against me marrying him, but I was in love.” Sighing a little, she continues, “We snuck out one night and got married in the next town.”

“Oh, you should have heard my father erupt when he found out what I had done,” she says with a wistful laugh. “We stood our ground and after awhile, they came to understand that we were meant for each other.”

He motions over to the campfire that Sheila has built, “It looks like she’s her mother’s daughter.”

Shawna turns and discovers that Rylin has found his way over to where Sheila is preparing the meal. He sits not far from her sharpening his sword while she slices vegetables for the stew pot. Sheila has a smile, a glow about her that only being near the one you love can bring. Miko found his way over there as well, trying to engage them in conversation, but is being completely ignored.

As she turns toward James, he can see that she now has a look of understanding, “It won’t be easy for them, especially her.”

“Since you will always need guards for you caravans,” James explains, “make him the lead guard and you’ll always have him near. She wouldn’t have to worry about what he is doing, or if he’s getting hurt.”

“Perhaps you are right,” she concedes and then makes her way over to the campfire.

Miko comes over to James and says, “No one is paying me any attention over there.”

James continues to look at Sheila and Rylin as he says to Miko, “They only have eyes for each other.”

“Why don’t we travel with them all the way into Trademeet?” Miko asks him.

“It’ll take too long. Besides, I want to find that temple quickly,” he explains. “There’s a war over there and if it should move north, I would like to be done with what I need to do before it gets there.”

Nodding, Miko says, “I hope we can find it fast.”

“So do I,” agrees James, “so do I.” He then goes over and joins the others by the fire.

After supper, they settle down around the campfire, Rylin and Sheila sit together, sharing a blanket. Shawna’s gaze is no longer

one of disapproval, but a wistful one, remembering when she was young and in love with her man.

A strumming of a musical instrument from the soldiers' area reaches them through the night. They decide that an evening of music would be exactly what they all needed, so they make their way over and join them. They find that one of the soldiers has a mandolin like instrument, upon which he is playing a quick, lively tune. He accompanies it with a deep bass voice, not nearly the caliber of Perrilin's, but still pleasant to hear. The soldiers make room for them and they spend the rest of the evening listening to the music and socializing with each other.

In the morning after breakfast, James and Miko say their goodbyes and head down the road.

Chapter Twenty

James and Miko make good time as the terrain continues to be primarily flat plains. After the first hour, the land becomes increasingly more cultivated, with the occasional farms and orchards lining the road. Farmers are out in the fields working their crops, some wave a friendly greeting to them as they pass, though most simply ignore them.

A little before midday, a town of some size appears out of the horizon further down the road. As they continue toward it, James spies an orchard of fruit trees abutting the road ahead. A family of three generations is working hard harvesting its fruit, baskets already filled with the reddish-yellow fruit are stacked on a nearby mule drawn wagon. James slows and leaves the road to approach them.

As he nears, the family quickly takes notice of his approach but continues to gather their fruit, except for an older gentleman who must be the farmer's father, that walks over to greet him.

"Good day to you sirs," the old man says in a friendly manner.

“A good day to you too,” James replies. “I was wondering if you could tell me the name of the town that is up the road,” he asks pointing to the town on the horizon.

“That is Lornigan,” the man explains, “the agricultural center for this area.” He eyes James and Miko warily but relaxes somewhat when all they seem to want is information. The family behind him, though they cast repeated glances their way, continues harvesting.

“Lornigan?” questions James. When the old man nods, he says, “Thank you.”

“Any time good sirs.”

“I don’t suppose you would part with some of your fruit?” James asks. “Maybe just four or five?”

The man’s face broadens into a smile and he says, “Of course sir, it’ll be only a copper.” While James digs a copper out of his pouch, the man goes over to the wagon and picks out six of the fruits. He then brings them back to James and hands them over as he takes the copper.

“Six?” James asks. “I only wanted five.”

“I know” the farmer said, “but six is what a copper is worth and I wouldn’t want to cheat you.” He gave James a wink, “Besides, since there is but the two of you, six is easier to divvy up than five.”

“I appreciate that,” James says as he gives three of the fruits over to Miko. Eyeing the fruit longingly, he says, “And thank you for allowing us to purchase them from you.”

“No trouble at all sir,” the man assures him. “Actually it happens quite often. There are many travelers on the road to Lornigan, it’s the last large town before the long road to Trademeet.”

“Would you know of a place in Lornigan where we could get a bite to eat?” James asks.

“Sure,” the man replies, “try the Grinning Specter.” When he sees the look on Miko’s face at the name, the man continues. “Don’t let the name bother you boy, there’s nothing scary about it. The food there is good and fairly priced. You’ll find it along the road a little after you enter the town. Look for the sign with the smiling ghost.”

“Thank you, we’ll do that,” James says appreciatively. “You have a good day,” he says as he begins turning his horse back toward the road.

“You too, sir,” Hemdal replies before returning to aid with the harvesting.

Finishing his first fruit, Miko says, “Thanks for the fruit.”

Smiling, James says, “No problem, fresh fruit is at times hard to come by. Besides, you never know what you are going to find out by talking to the locals.” He takes a bite out of one and enjoys the sweet firm flesh of the fruit. “Reminds me of a nectarine,” he says.

“Nectarine?” Miko asks.

“It’s a popular fruit from where I come from,” he explains. “My grandfather always had some in the house whenever they were in season.”

“They are good,” agrees Miko, as he bites into his second.

They continue on toward Lornigan, munching on the fruit as they gradually approach the outskirts of town. The buildings here have been kept up well overall, though a few do show signs of their age and neglect. The usual hawkers are there to greet them as they pass the first several buildings. They crowd around trying to get James and Miko to buy their goods, but when they show little interest, relax a bit. Despite the lack of interest from James and Miko, some do continue to exclaim the virtues of their wares to the annoyance of both.

Passing several more buildings, they come to a three story structure with a sign out front upon which was painted a grinning ghostly apparition. “This must be the place,” James says.

“Yeah,” agrees Miko, “not what I expected though.”

Turning to Miko, he asks, “And just what were you expecting, a creepy, scary place?”

“Sort of,” Miko admits.

James chuckles at him, “Never let the name of a place give you the wrong impression.”

They hitch their horses out front and then go inside. The interior of the place is neat and clean, with a good aroma of cooking food coming from the kitchen. Most of the tables are filled with midday eaters, several servers scurry from table to table, delivering their orders and otherwise being helpful.

James spies an empty table to the side and they make their way through the crowd. Sitting down with his back to the wall, James signals to a server and he comes over.

“Good day gentlemen,” greets the server as he approaches the table. “How may I help you today?”

“What’s the special?” asks James.

“Today we have a roast goose with lemon sauce that is extra good,” he replies. “Or you can have the chicken stew. The goose is five coppers and the stew three, each comes with a half loaf of bread.”

“I’ll have the goose,” James replies, “and some ale.”

The server turns to Miko, “And you?”

“I’ll have the goose as well,” Miko tells him.

James takes the coins out of his pouch and hands them to the server who pockets them before heading off to the kitchen to place their order.

While they are waiting for their meals to arrive, James watches as eight men dressed in uniforms enter and head their way, taking the long table next to theirs.

A serving girl comes over and takes their orders. When they are done with placing their order, the leader says to her, “And make it quick please, we need to leave quickly.”

“Yes, sir,” the girl replies and hurries back to the kitchen. She returns quickly with a tray carrying eight large bowls of stew and four loaves of bread. Another girl accompanies her with eight mugs and a pitcher of ale. The soldiers set to with gusto, not taking the time to talk to one another, just intent on their meals.

“In a hurry?” James leans over and asks the leader of the group.

“You could say that,” the leader replies between bites of stew.

“We need to be to the Merchant’s Pass as soon as possible.”

Curious, James asks, “Why?”

The leader breaks a chunk of bread off the loaf and dips it into his stew before shoving it in his mouth. “The siege of Saragon is going badly we hear. We’re on our way to the Pass to inspect the defenses in case the Empire’s army decides to wander in that direction.”

“Are you worried that we may be attacked?” James asks.

“Not really,” he says. “Madoc is putting up stiff resistance and it’s unlikely that the Empire will have the additional manpower to attack us directly. I hear they don’t have the inner stability that would enable them to release more troops for battle.”

“You mean they must keep the bulk of their troops inside the Empire to keep it together?” James wonders.

“Not the bulk to be sure,” he replies. “But I hear they need troops to keep some of their more recalcitrant provinces in line. If they were to pull too many troops north to fight Madoc or us, then the southern and eastern sections might become rebellious and

cause them no end of trouble. Of course, I am just repeating barrack's gossip, I don't *know* any of this to be true."

"If they are so unstable," James asks, "then why the push into Madoc?"

Shrugging, the leader says, "Who knows? Maybe things have changed that has freed up a large section of their armies, no way to really know. I am sure we have spies within the Empire that may know, but I doubt if that knowledge would become available to the general population."

"True," James agrees.

"One thing is for sure," the leader continues, "it has strained relationships between Cardri and the Empire. We are not at war with them, but I hear that we are helping Madoc in these dire times with supplies and possibly some troops, though that is only rumors."

"Do you think we would go to war with the Empire?" James asks.

"Not unless directly attacked, I wouldn't think so," he replies. "Cardri has a fair sized army but nothing compared with the might that the Empire could put into the field. Now keep in mind, the troops they are keeping in their southern territories to keep rebellion in check, would be released to fight if we were to enter the conflict. The only hope Madoc has is if they overextend themselves and one or more of their southern territories were to think this would be a good time to rebel. Not likely to happen, but you never know."

"Thanks for the information," James says. "Maybe we'll see you again, we're planning on taking the Merchant's Pass over into Madoc."

"Then you better hurry," he replies. "From what I understand, if Saragon falls then the Pass is to be closed and all traffic diverted north through Dragon's Pass."

"Why would they close it, if we're not at war with them?" James asks.

"For safety," the leader replies. "With both sides having armies in the field, it wouldn't do to have our citizens traveling through the middle of it."

"I suppose you are right," admits James.

Finishing the last of his meal, the leader says to his men, "Let's get going, we've got a long way to travel before this day is through."

His men hurry with finishing the last of their stew. A couple of the soldiers take the remaining loaves with them, putting the bread in travel pouches hanging on their belts. As the leader gets up to leave, he pauses a moment and says to James, "If you are going over Merchant's Pass, be careful. If the Empire finds you over there, they will treat you as spies most likely. Good luck to you both."

"Thank you and safe travel to you and your men," James replies.

The leader nods in reply then heads for the door, his men having already exited the inn. "I guess we should hurry ourselves," he says to Miko.

"I agree," the boy replies, "but do you still think it's a good idea to travel over to Madoc? After all, you really don't know where what you're looking for is."

"The risks have increased, but I still feel that I need to get over there and try to find the answers." Looking at the worried expression on Miko's face, he continues, "Don't worry, we'll be extra careful. If we stick together, we should be okay."

"I hope so," Miko says, not sounding very convinced.

"We should be going though, Trademeet is still a couple of days away," James says as he gets up, placing the rest of the bread in his backpack for later. Miko comes to his feet as well and follows him out to the horses. They mount up and head through the streets of Lornigan. When they come to the junction Perrilin mentioned, where the trade road running north and south crosses the one to Trademeet, they take the north leg and in no time make it to the outskirts of town.

Not far past the last building, they come across a large open market consisting of dozens of tables and booths stocked with items offered for sale. Having never seen a market situated outside of a town, he hails a passerby. "Excuse me sir."

The man stops and looks up at James, "Yes?" he asks, in a tone that makes it clear he is being bothered.

"Could you tell me what that is over there?" James asks pointing to the open market.

The man looks at James like he's an idiot, "That's the summer market."

He starts to once again continue on his way when James says, "Sorry, just one more question."

"What?" the man asks, he slows his pace but doesn't come to a full stop.

“Why is it outside the town?” he asks.

“Because that’s the way it is, the way it’s always been for as long as anyone can remember. When the weather gets warm, they set up out here until it gets cool again.” This time the man quickly walks away, wanting to get away from bothersome questions.

“Friendly chap wasn’t he?” Miko observes, as he watches the man walk away.

“Some are just that way,” James says.

Indicating the market, Miko asks, “Are we going over there?”

“I don’t think so,” James answers, “I was just curious.”

“Oh,” grunts Miko.

They continue down the road, making their way through the crowds going to and from the summer market. By the time the market fades from sight behind them, the level of travelers has dropped down to a very few, allowing them to make better time. The further they progress from Lornigan, the more wild and uncultivated the surrounding countryside becomes until they are once again out in the unpopulated grasslands. They proceed on, making as fast a time as their horses will allow, stopping only occasionally to rest their horses and have a bite to eat.

By the time they stop for the night they are both fatigued and Miko can hardly walk for the stiffness and pain in his legs. “I thought this was supposed to be getting better,” he complains, “but it seems to be getting worse.”

Feeling sorry for his friend, James consoles him by saying, “It takes a while to toughen up the muscles and get them used to hugging a horse’s flank. Give it time, we rode hard today so you had little time to get off and stretch.”

A brilliant sunset off to the west paints the clouds red and orange. To the east rises a range of tall mountains. “Seems a long way to those mountains,” observes Miko.

Looking eastward, James says, “Yes it does. From what Perrilin said, those are the Silver Mountains and Trademeet will be at their feet, near the entrance to Merchant’s Pass.”

“How long do you expect it will take us to get there?” he asks as he sets about getting supplies for their dinner out and ready.

Thinking for a moment, James replies, “At the pace we set today, hopefully by tomorrow night.”

“I should be good and stiff by then,” Miko moans.

Grinning, James says, “Probably.” They set about having dinner and turn in early.

James is awakened during the night by cries coming from Miko. He looks over to his friend and finds him tossing and turning in his sleep. Seeing that he's in no danger, he turns back over and again falls asleep. Several more times throughout the night, James is again awakened by the tossing and turning of Miko.

In the morning as soon as they are both up and getting ready to go, James asks Miko how he had slept.

A tired Miko looks at James with bloodshot eyes and says, "I couldn't find a comfortable spot. My legs and butt kept hurting and every time I did fall asleep, I had a dream about being on a horse for so long that my legs fell off."

Laughing, James says, "I'm sorry."

"Yeah," replies Miko, "I'm sure you are."

"No, really I am," assures James, who breaks out laughing again.

His laughter is infectious and soon Miko is smiling as well.

"Now let's get going," James says as he saddles up his horse.

Miko puts the food away and begins to get his horse ready. He's not quite as stiff as he had been the night before but there is still a hitch in his get along. It's not long before they are both on their horses and heading once more down the road to Trademeet.

All day long, the cloud covered mountains continue to grow in the distance. James can make out snow covering their peaks during the few breaks in the cloud cover. *Must be pretty high to still have snow on them*, he thinks.

A couple of hours before sunset they begin to make out the outline of a large walled city at the base of the mountains.

"Trademeet," Miko says.

"Looks like it," James agrees. "We should make it before nightfall."

"Hope we can find an inn and are able to get a bath," Miko says.

James starts laughing, Miko looks at him and he just laughs harder.

"What's so funny?" Miko asks, not getting the joke.

When he finally calms himself enough to talk, he explains, "I was just remembering how you used to view baths that first time. I practically had to force you into one," and then he starts laughing all over again.

Smiling too, Miko said, "I'm just hoping it will help my poor legs and butt." Then he starts laughing as well, though not as hard as James.

"I am sure we can get a room and have a bath," James assures him. "I would like one too."

They hurry toward the city and the wall gradually grows before them as they draw closer. At the gate they are waved through by a couple of bored looking guards and enter the city.

Several blocks into the city they come across an inn that James considers acceptable. The sign outside depicts an ocean shoreline with a sun dropping below the horizon. James leaves Miko outside with the horses and mule and sees about getting a room.

"Welcome to the Setting Sun," a man says as James enters. "What can we do for you this evening?"

"A room for the night and a place to stable two horses and a mule," replies James.

The man, thin and gangly with a cheerful presence replies, "Not a problem sir, we have several available and plenty of room in our stable out back to accommodate your steeds. It's only a silver a night, but that also includes dinner."

"We'll take it. I have a traveling companion," James replies. "Can I get a room with two beds maybe?"

"Certainly sir, many of our rooms come with two beds anyway so that will be no problem," assures the man. Extending his hand the man says, "My name is Porlen, I own and operate the Setting Sun. Go ahead and get your steeds settled in out back and then come back in and I'll get you set up with your room."

James shakes his hand and says, "Thank you, I'll do that." He then returns back out front, telling Miko that they have a room for the night and that they should take the steeds out back. They lead the horses around the side of the inn to the courtyard where several people are hanging around. One a boy of about ten or eleven, disengages from the group and comes over to help them find a couple of stalls and get their horses and mule settled in. Once all are taken care of for the night, they take their travel bags and go inside the inn through the back door. They find Porlen behind the counter, straightening up.

He looks up as they enter the inn and come toward him. "Got em settled in, then?" he asks.

"Yep," James replies.

“Good, good.” Handing him a key he signals to a boy who comes over and takes their bags from them. “Ritchie here will show you to your room. Dinner will be served in about an hour. You might want to come down early, we sometimes get pretty crowded and it may be hard to find a table once we start serving dinner.”

“Thank you,” James says, “but is it possible to have dinner in our rooms?”

“Not a problem,” Porlen assures them. “I’ll send Ritchie to your room when it’s time and he can get you what you need.” Turning to Ritchie, he says, “They are staying in number seven.”

Ritchie says, “Follow me,” then proceeds to lead them to their room which is on the ground floor, down the hall off the main dining area.

Once at their room, Ritchie holds the door open, allowing them to enter first. He places their bags on one of the beds and then stands there waiting. James fishes a copper out of his pouch and gives it to the boy.

Ritchie takes it and looks at it, not entirely happy with the color, and then leaves the room.

“Guess he wanted more?” suggests Miko.

“Probably,” agrees James. “Maybe they get more here. I’ll give him a little more next time.”

In no time at all, Miko is stretched out on a bed, “Not as comfortable as the ones in Inius’ place, but it’ll do.”

James sits on his bed and sees what he means. It’s firmer and you don’t sink down very far, though it’s still comfortable.

“This place doesn’t cost as much as his did either,” James explains. “You generally get what you pay for.”

“I suppose,” Miko answers, then breaks into a big yawn.

James takes out his travel case and puts it on the table. He then opens it and removes several sheets of paper, a quill and a bottle of ink.

From the bed he hears Miko ask, “Gonna do some writing?”

“Yeah, just want to jot down some notes of what’s been happening,” he replies from the table. “You just lay there and rest yourself before dinner, okay?”

When no answer is forthcoming from Miko, he looks over and realizes that the boy has already fallen asleep. Smiling at his friend’s expense, James uncorks the bottle of ink and dips his quill in then begins to make notes about the last couple of days.

He writes down some of the high points on the conversation between himself and the leader of the band of men he had talked to the day before. Once he has that written down to his satisfaction, he takes a separate sheet and makes some notes about magic.

...during the battle when we rescued the girls, Miko offered to let me use the power in him to augment my own depleted magical powers. It worked fine, however there arose in me a moral dilemma. I feel it to be wrong to do this without asking, that it would be an aberration or evil if it was to be done against someone's will...

...the tornado I brought down almost killed me. I understood what to do, or thought I did. Having seen documentaries on television helped me to shape and control it. If I keep doing over the top magic like that it's going to end up killing me...

...I have found that the more I do magic, the easier it is to get the desired results, and the less weakened I become afterward. Maybe it's like building up muscle and endurance, the more often you do it, the better you can handle it...

...still don't know why the book told me that spells had to be in rhyme form and spoken. Maybe it's just the easiest way, and once you get used to the process, are able to evolve beyond it...

A knock at the door interrupts his writing. He lays the pen down and then gets up to see who it is. Ritchie is there, telling him that dinner is being served and would like to know what they will want. James goes ahead and orders for himself and his sleeping friend. Ritchie then tells him that he'll have it up to the room in just a few minutes.

When Ritchie has left, he goes over to the bed where Miko is sleeping. "Wake up," he says as he shakes his shoulder, startling him awake. "Dinner's going to be up in a few minutes."

Miko yawns, gets up and goes over to the table where he sits down to await the arrival of the meal. James removes his writing implements and moves the notes over to a side table where they can

dry undisturbed. It doesn't take long before there is another knock on the door.

James opens the door and lets Ritchie in who sets the platter of food on the table. Another boy is with him with a pitcher of ale and two mugs. James gives Ritchie two coppers and the boy seems more satisfied this time.

Before they leave, James asks, "Is there a chance we could have two baths here in our room after dinner?"

Nodding, Ritchie replies, "We can do that, though it will be another four coppers for each of the baths."

"Very well," James says. "After you have taken the plates when we're done, bring 'em on in."

"Very well sir," Ritchie replies. "I'll let Porlen know." Ritchie and the other boy exit the room, closing the door behind them.

James ordered the roasted duck with steamed potatoes. It's very good and Miko definitely enjoys it, going through it in his usual ravenous way. James makes sure to take an extra helping before he's even done with his first, before Miko eats it all.

No more than five minutes after the last bite was eaten, Ritchie again comes to the door and takes away the dirty plates and mugs. Shortly after that, two medium size tubs are brought in and filled with hot, steaming water. One of the girls asks if they would like her to stay to 'help' them.

"No, thanks," James says. "I think we can manage on our own."

"Okay," she replies, a little disappointed. "We'll be back later to remove the water and baths." She then leaves the room and they undress, settling into the warm water.

After a few minutes, James asks, "Is it helping relieve your aches and pains?"

"Ohhhhhhh, yeah," Miko answers very contentedly. "I can't believe that I ever thought baths were dumb."

"Tomorrow we'll leave and take Merchant's Pass over the mountains into Madoc," James states. "Better enjoy this while you can, it may be the last one that we will be able to enjoy for a while."

"I will," Miko replies, "don't worry about that." He sinks down into the tub until just his head is showing with a very contented expression on his face.

James relaxes in his tub until the water begins to turn cold and forces him out. Once toweled off and dressed, he notices Miko's desire to remain in the tub but the water is starting to turn cold and eventually forces him out as well. Once both are dressed, Miko goes

downstairs and lets one of the workers know they can take the tubs out.

They relax upon the beds as the workers remove the water, pail by pail. Once the level of the water has been sufficiently reduced, two of the larger lads come in and carry out the tubs.

Alone once more in their room, the weariness of the day sets in and sleep can no longer be put off. James blows out the candle and sleep quickly takes them. Miko doesn't thrash around in his sleep this night, as his legs are feeling much better.

The following morning they arise to the dawn of another sunny summer day. They get dressed and head downstairs for breakfast, bringing their belongings with them.

They find a table in the dining area and are soon enjoying a hearty breakfast of ham steak and potatoes. Suddenly the front door slams open and a man runs into the inn looking around. When he doesn't see the owner in the common area he hollers out, "Porlen!"

Porlen hurries from the back and seeing the man standing there, asks him, "What is it Jacob?"

"Saragon has fallen!" Jacob exclaims excitedly.

"Fallen? When?" Porlen asks earnestly.

"A rider just came through town from the Pass," Jacob replies. "He's heading to Castle Cardri to tell the king what's going on. They say that they're going to be closing the Pass sometime this afternoon."

James and Miko look at each other as they hear the news unfolding.

"The Pass is going to be closed?" exclaims an astounded Porlen. "It's hasn't been closed in over a hundred years."

"I know," Jacob replies. "They said it would only be temporary until they see what the Empire's going to do. They don't want people traveling out there in the middle of a war. They said that anyone who plans on taking the Pass better make it there as soon as possible."

That's all James needed to hear. He gets up and says, "Miko we're leaving, go get the horses ready."

Miko gets up and hurries out to the stables.

James goes over to Porlen, "How much to settle the bill?"

"Are you leaving us already?" Porlen asks.

"We got to make it to the Pass before it closes," James explains.

“Better be careful over there,” Porlen warns, “the Empire isn’t known for its kindness to strangers.” He goes over to the counter and totals the charges and James gives him what money he owes.

“We don’t intend to get that close to the Empire’s forces,” he explains. “Good bye,” he says to Porlen and then returns to the table where he gathers his things and then hurries out to the stables where Miko has their horses ready.

James secures the bags onto the mule and then walks the horses outside. They quickly mount then exit the courtyard, following the road in the direction of the Merchant’s Pass as quickly as the crowded streets will allow them.

The townspeople are all talking amongst themselves, exchanging the news of the fall of Saragon and the closing of the Pass. There is anxiety in the air and a little bit of fear as well. Many are nervous and none are sure what may or may not be happening.

As they get closer to the gate that leads from the city to the road that winds through the Pass, the crowds become thicker and thicker. The people don’t necessarily want to go over the Pass, they are just interested in finding out what’s going on. The road becomes increasingly congested and soon an announcement is made that only those wishing to travel the Pass are to be on the road so they will be able to reach it before the Pass is closed to all traffic.

Most people heed the announcement and the road slowly becomes less congested allowing them to make better time toward the Pass. It takes over an hour to get to the entrance to the Pass, a trip that should’ve only taken ten minutes normally, due to all the looky loos, as his grandmother would’ve called them.

Several merchants have set up stands hoping to get the people going through the pass to buy their wares. One in particular interests James so he makes his way over and pauses to inspect the goods.

Upon seeing James approaching, the merchant picks up a couple of the jackets he’s selling and begins extolling their merits.

Getting down from his horse James tries on one of the jackets, it is fur lined, soft and very warm. The outside is leather and looks as if it would repel water.

“Does this jacket shed water?” James asks the merchant.

“Oh yes good sir,” he says. “My jackets are the warmest and driest ones you can find anywhere. If you plan to cross the Pass, then you will need them. The summit is very cold, especially at night.

“How much for two?” James asks.

“I could part with two of these fine jackets for a mere six gold,” the man offers.

From behind him he hears a gasp from Miko. He turns to find Miko shaking his head, telling him that it’s too expensive. So James grits his teeth and sets into haggling with the man. He finally works him down to three gold and seven coppers. He has Miko get down to try one on and soon finds a jacket that fits him well.

After handing over the money, they pack the jackets onto the mule and mount up.

“Why do we need those?” Miko asks. “It’s hot.”

“It may be hot here, but when we reach the top, we may well be glad to have them,” James explains. “The mountains get cold when the sun goes down even in the summer, you’ll see.” Getting their horses moving again they continue on their way to the Pass.

The road they are following continues over a bridge and toward the mountains where it enters a gorge that over the centuries has been carved out of the rock by a large river. Running alongside the river, the road can be seen extending further into the pass until the gorge turns and it disappears into the mountain.

When they cross the bridge, they find the river below is flowing strong and fast. The temperature drops noticeably when they are over the river due to the coldness of the water coming out of the mountains.

A hundred feet or so beyond the bridge, off to the side lies a makeshift barricade that will most likely be used to close off the Pass. There is no actual gate to close, just a squad of guards and barricades to keep everyone out. When they come near to the actual entrance to the Pass, a sergeant is there telling all who are planning to pass through to Madoc that they will be able to return back through the pass from Madoc until the Empire’s forces have been sighted. Once the Empire’s armies have been seen, the Pass will be closed and no more traffic will be allowed to enter from Madoc. It will open again when the situation on the other side of the mountains becomes less unstable and dangerous to travelers.

Some upon hearing this turn back but there are still more that continue on ahead through the entrance despite the dangers. One lone caravan is braving the trip, and is causing a bottleneck at the entrance. The caravan master is moving his wagons through two at a time, causing the foot and horse traffic to bog down as they make their way around the slow moving wagons.

James and Miko take their place in line and after what seems like an overly long time, finally make it to the entrance and begin making their way around the wagons. As they pass the guards, James looks behind them and can see another dozen or so people who are waiting their turn to go around the caravan and enter the Pass. The guards are bringing up the barricades and it looks as if they are intending to close the Pass after the last of the stragglers enter.

They carefully make their way around the caravan and then quickly head deeper into the Pass.

Chapter Twenty One

The road through the Pass is the main artery for trade between Madoc and Cardri and is wide enough to accommodate three wagons side by side. The surface of the road, while not perfectly smooth, is firm and level with minimal ruts and potholes.

As they leave the entrance to the Pass behind and follow the road around the bend, the panoramic view of the gorge unfolds before them. They pause a second to take in its grandeur. On either side the gorge rises up to dizzying heights with the river cutting through the middle. Cascading down the side opposite that which the road meanders along, several waterfalls add additional splendor. The road follows the river for nearly a mile before beginning its ascent up to the higher elevations. With many a twist and turn, it occasionally vanishes from view only to reappear once more further up the mountainside. Straining their vision to its utmost, they can barely make out where the road ultimately disappears into the cloud cover further down the gorge.

“We’re going there?” James hears Miko exclaim incredulously.

“It’s not so bad,” he reassures his friend. “Caravans come this way all the time, so I’m sure we will have little difficulty.” Nudging his horse forward, James continues down the road forcing Miko to keep up with him or be left behind.

Before the road begins its ascent from the river, they come upon a fellow traveler driving a wagon loaded with goods. "Excuse me sir," James says as he comes abreast of the wagon.

The man turns his head toward the pair. "Yes?"

"How far is it to the other side of the Pass?" asks James.

"Two days on horseback," the man says. "Most caravans make it in about four to five days, depending on the load they're carrying."

"Is there any place along the way to stop and eat?" Miko asks the man.

"No son, there isn't," he replies. "However, there is a way stop near the top where travelers are able to rest for the night before making the descent on the other side."

"Thanks, mister," James says.

"You're welcome," he replies.

James nudges his horse and they resume their quick pace once again, leaving the man and his wagon behind.

"Are we going to spend tonight at the way stop?" Miko asks, once they have pulled away from the trader.

"I would think so," James replies. "If we make it that far before it gets dark that is."

Once the ascent begins, the road climbs at a steady, though at the moment, not an overly steep pace. It continues running along the right side of the river, following the water's path as it flows through the gorge. At times the river roars to life when making its way through an area of rapids.

As they progress deeper and deeper into the Pass, the mountainside to the right of the road becomes increasingly vertical as its vertical slope increases. Waterfalls grow plentiful as the warm summer weather melts the snowpacks in the upper elevations. At one of the larger ones James notices that someone had built a culvert or drainage system beneath the road to allow water to flow under it to the river without eroding the surface.

Being a city boy, Miko had never seen waterfalls like these and is quite impressed by their beauty and power. He pauses by one as he dismounts to fill his depleted water bottle. When he places the bottle in the waterfall, he quickly snatches his hand back when the fall's water hits his skin.

"What's the matter?" James asks, startled at his reaction.

Miko turns and looks at James, "It's cold!"

Laughing, James explains, "Of course it's cold. The water is coming from snow melting high up in the peaks."

"Oh," he replies, feeling slightly embarrassed at not having known that. He grits his teeth and places his bottle back into the falling water and fills it. Then he secures it back to his saddle and remounts. Looking at his hand, he finds that his fingers are a little red from the coldness of the water. He's intrigued by the water cascading down the side of the mountain and watches it until they have traveled far enough that it disappears from view.

They continue along the road, passing the occasional wagon or traveler as they progress further up the mountain. It isn't long until they begin to hear a steady, loud roar coming from up ahead.

The mountainside on their right abruptly falls away, revealing a tall narrow gorge with a majestic, powerful, three tiered waterfall. The water, after collecting in a pool at the base of the falls, crosses under a bridge and cascades down the mountainside to the river below.

The sound of the falls is deafening as they cross the bridge spanning its outflow. Its thundering reverberates through them as they pause a moment to marvel at this wonder of nature.

"Ain't that something?" James hollers at Miko as he tries to be heard over the roar of the falls.

"Yeah!" he hollers back. While they sit there on the bridge marveling at one of nature's wonders, the spray from the waterfall feels good as it helps to alleviate the heat of the day.

"James, look!" exclaims Miko as he points to the pool at the base of the waterfall.

Taking a closer look, James spies three deer drinking from the pool. He nods his head, acknowledging having seen them, then indicates they should continue down the road. As they leave, Miko turns his head several times trying to capture in his mind the marvel of the waterfall and the deer below until the scene finally disappears behind trees and rocks.

The travelers encountered are few and far between, all being either on individual wagons or part of small caravans. None are very talkative as they have far too much on their minds, what with worrying about conditions on the other side of the mountains, and whether or not they will find safety there.

The further into the Pass they go, the more the road climbs away from the river. Though still able to hear the rapids as water crashes

over rocks below, it has been steadily growing fainter and fainter as they progress to the upper elevations.

Upon reaching where the road widens into a scenic overlook, they decide to stop for a short break to give the horses a chance to rest and have a quick bite to eat. After getting off his horse, Miko moves to the edge of the overlook and gazes down to the river below. Having never before looked down from such a height, he is almost overcome with a sudden fear of heights. Assailed by vertigo, he backs away quickly until there are several yards of road between him and the edge.

“You okay?” James asks as he hands him a portion of their rations.

Taking the food, Miko nods his head affirmatively, “It’s just that we are so high. I didn’t realize we had climbed so far.”

“It is deceiving,” James admits. “While you are climbing, it doesn’t seem like your ascent has been all that dramatic, until you look down. Then it sort of hits you all at once. I remember it happened to me once when my family took me to Yellowstone.”

“Your family took you to go see a yellow stone?” asks Miko confusedly.

“Not a yellow stone,” corrects James, “but a place called Yellowstone. It’s a place where people go to get away for awhile and have fun.”

“Oh,” replies Miko.

After the break, they remount and travel for another hour before coming to a section of the mountain that levels out for a ways into a plateau. The plateau extends for several miles from the gorge until it ends and the mountains resume their rise. About a quarter mile off the road further back on the plateau sits a large structure, looking in ill repair. It stands four stories high with windows only in the uppermost section of the walls. A large door looms open and is slightly ajar.

“Must be an old keep,” James guesses. “Maybe a garrison was once stationed here.”

“Could be,” agrees Miko. “It doesn’t look as if anyone has been in there for a long time. Wonder if it’s haunted.”

“Don’t tell me you believe in ghosts?” James asks, slightly amused.

“Of course not,” asserts Miko. “It’s just that the place looks creepy.”

“I would love to see what is inside,” admits James, and then lets out a big sigh. “But we better make the best time we can, while we can. No telling how long we will have before we run the danger of encountering the Empire’s armies once we get through the mountains.”

“Good idea,” agrees Miko, slightly more enthusiastic than the occasion called for, “we better hurry along.” With that he kicks the flanks of his horse and quickly continues down the road, putting distance between himself and the old keep.

Grinning at his friend, James quickly hurries to catch him and then together they continue down the road. The plateau area with the abandoned keep is quickly left behind.

The rest of the afternoon passes fairly quickly with more waterfalls, though none as spectacular as the three tiered one earlier. About mid afternoon, the sun falls behind the high mountain peaks to the west and the air begins turning chilly. It’s not too terribly uncomfortable at first but over the next hour, the temperature drops rapidly. Soon they pull on the jackets bought earlier in Trademeet.

“I see what you mean,” Miko tells James as he puts his jacket on.

“About what?” he replies.

“About how cool it gets up here after the sun goes down,” he explains.

“My grandfather taught me to always be prepared,” says James. “He used to say ‘It’s better to bring a jacket you’ll never need than to need the one left at home’.”

“Wise man your grandfather,” comments Miko, now warm and comfortable.

“Yeah, he was. But you know, when they are giving you these little gems of wisdom, you seldom see the value of it at the time and often see it as being a big nuisance.” James sits in thought for a while before breaking out in laughter.

Miko looks at him and asks, “What’s so funny?”

“I was just remembering when I came to realize the value of that particular gem,” he says as he begins to explain, but then pauses for a moment.

“And what happened?” Miko prompts him.

Smiling at the memory, James says, “Well, it was summertime and we planned a trip out to the coast, San Francisco was the name of the city. Now, my grandfather was telling me that I should bring my jacket, that I may need it. But it was really hot where we were

and I couldn't see the need of it. We arrived at the city and decided to go see Alcatraz, that's an old prison situated on an island in the middle of the bay. I got on the ferry that was going to take us over there, and froze."

Smiling, Miko is enjoying hearing about James' little goof up.

"I told my grandfather that I was cold," he explains. "But he just smiled and called it a lesson learned. We stayed there on that island for what seemed like a long time and I froze the entire time. I was miserable, my nose was running and I was shaking. When we finally returned to the mainland, I made a beeline toward this guy who was selling hot clam chowder and grabbed me some."

"I'll never forget that experience and I will never be caught again without a coat, not if I can help it." Finished with the story, James rides along in silence for a while, silently reminiscing about home.

Shortly, he begins noticing the smell of wood smoke. He looks around for a plume of smoke that could indicate a forest fire, but doesn't see anything. The smell steadily increases as they continue, when he suddenly realizes that they must be approaching the top of the summit and what he has been smelling is the smoke from many campfires.

Cresting the top of the Pass, they come to the way stop and are surprised at how many people are camped there. A contingent of soldiers is also there, seeming to be keeping order.

As they approach, one of the soldiers breaks off from his fellows and approaches, holding up his hand to have them stop. "Sorry, but the way stop is bursting to capacity with more coming in all the time," he explains. "You two will need to camp a little further back down the road."

"Why?" James asks. "What's going on?"

"Refugees from the fall of Saragon," the soldier explains, indicating the people at the way stop. "They've been pouring through the Pass for the last day or so. We made a temporary camp here for them and will keep them here until we know what is to be done with them."

"Why not allow them to go on into Trademeet?" Miko asks.

"Those are the Captain's orders and he didn't explain himself to me," the soldier replies.

"No problem," James tells him. "We can camp a little further back down the road tonight and then continue on over in the morning."

“Sorry,” he says, “but we got orders that no one is to be allowed down the east side of the Pass until further notice.”

“What?” James exclaims. “Why?”

Looking like he’s tired of explaining the same thing over and over, the soldier says, “Like I said before, that’s the Captains orders and he doesn’t explain them to me.” The soldier, having said all he intends to, turns around and heads back toward the camp that has been set up at the way stop.

“Now what are we going to do?” Miko asks.

James gives Miko an exasperated look and says, “Would you stop asking me that!”

“Alright, alright,” he replies.

“Let’s go back down a ways and find a campsite,” James says. “Maybe we can think of something.”

Going back down the road, they find a widening of the road with enough room for them to make their camp and not be on the road. James sends Miko to gather firewood before it gets dark while he stakes out the horses and gets them ready for the night.

Miko makes three scavenging trips before collecting a sufficient store of firewood to last throughout the night. James gets the fire going and has dinner started before the light completely fades. While sitting around the fire eating dinner, two men appear from the direction of the way stop and approach their campfire.

“Hello,” one of the men says.

“Good evening gentlemen,” James replies, then waits to see what they will do.

They approach a little closer to the fire and James can see that they are eyeing their food hungrily. He says to them, “Would you two care to share our fire this evening? We have enough to share.”

“Yes, we’d like that,” the other man says. “But we actually came to see if you could spare some for our families. You see we fled Saragon when it fell with nothing but the clothes on our backs.”

“Certainly,” James says, “if you don’t have too many,”

The taller of the two men almost breaks down and cries while the other says, “Thank you very much.” Turning to the taller man he says, “Silas, go and bring ‘em over.”

Silas nods and heads back toward the refugee camp. The man says, “My name is Bellon, I was a farmer before the Empire’s army sacked our city.”

“How did you get out?” Miko asks.

“When the Empire overran the walls, it was total chaos,” Bellon explains. “People were running in every direction trying to get out. My grandfather used to be a smuggler way back when he was a younger man and once showed me an old smuggler route into the city that he said no one, not even the Governor knew about. Silas and I found it and used it to get our families out past the walls. The tunnel came out in a pile of old stones a dozen yards from the river, almost two miles north of the city.”

“We were past the enemy lines and ran all night and all day, hiding whenever we heard someone approaching. We did that until we saw some of our soldiers coming from the City of Light. We waved them down and told them where we were from and what had happened. They told us to head here, saying we could find refuge and safety.”

“Remarkable story,” James says. About that time, Silas returns with the rest, two women, an older boy and two smaller children. All have the lost look of those who have had their lives torn asunder.

James stands when the ladies approach and says, “Welcome to our campfire. You are welcome to stay here the night if you wish. We don’t have a lot of food, but what we do have we will gladly share.” Turning to Miko, he says, “Get the rest of the food out of the bags and pass it out, they look as if they could use it.”

The two families situate themselves on the ground around the campfire and wait for Miko to distribute the food. As it happens, there is enough to go around, maybe not enough to stuffing their bellies, but sufficient to still their hunger.

“By the way, my name is James and this is my companion, Miko,” he says, indicating Miko.

“We sure thank you for this, James” Silas says. “The kids were getting awfully hungry and the food that the soldiers were distributing had run out by the time we made it to the front of the line.”

“I don’t think the soldiers had planned on this many making it here,” Bellon says. “They said a caravan was on its way from Trademeet but wouldn’t be here until later tomorrow or possibly the day after.”

“We passed a large caravan coming this way early in the morning,” Miko tells them. “It will most likely be up here sometime late tomorrow.”

“That’s good news,” Silas says.

“James and I plan on going on through the Pass to Madoc in the morning,” Miko tells them.

James gives him a look that says, ‘Don’t tell strangers our business’. Miko has the good sense enough to blush at his mistake.

Silas’ wife says, “You mustn’t go there!”

Holding his wife’s hand, Silas says, “I agree, it’s not a good place to be right now.”

“Well, we don’t plan on going anywhere near Saragon,” James says.

“Still, the Empire’s men are terrible foes,” Bellon states.

“Why are they so terrible?” Miko asks with apprehension.

Bellon looks at him and says, “They kill just for the pleasure of it. If they can capture you, you become their slave and they take you back to their Empire to sell you at auction. When Saragon fell and we were running through the streets to get to the smuggler’s route, we saw the slavers taking people, tying their hands behind their backs and stringing them in slave lines. If they were too old or an invalid, they just slit their throats, leaving them to lie in the street and bleed to death.”

Bellon’s wife puts a hand on his arm, and when she has his attention, shakes her head and indicates the children. “Oh, sorry, maybe this is not the time or place to be talking about such things,” he says.

“I think I get the idea,” James says, understanding. “But there is not much we can do, we have to go.”

“If you must go,” Silas says, “then stay as far to the north away from Saragon as you can. No one was sure if the Empire would stop at Saragon or push further north.”

“We will, I promise,” he assures them and then turns his attention to the vacant eyed younger children. “Now who would like to hear a silly song about a bunny?” he asks.

They kind of perk up at that, at least the younger two do. One of them says very timidly, “I do.”

So James begins to sing. “Little bunny Foo Foo hopping through the forest...” While he sings, he pantomimes the little bunny hopping along with the rest of the cast of characters.

For the remainder of the evening he sits and sings all the old silly songs he once sung as a child and even throws in a couple of poems. The children sit in rapt attention and after the first two songs, begin to smile a little and even clap along. The adults, seeing

life returning to their children, begin to clap along as well with tears in their eyes.

Eventually, James' voice begins to crack and he has to stop for a while. Miko, surprisingly, begins a song about a lord who can't find his slippers. It's a silly song, but obviously one that the children have heard before because they begin to sing along with him after the first chorus.

The rest of the night is full of singing and silly tales. For a time at least, the memories of what happened and what their futures might hold are forgotten. All that mattered this night was that they had brought joy back to the children.

The following morning when the sky begins to lighten, even before the sun rises over the mountain peaks, James and Miko make ready to get through the Pass.

Silas, Bellon and their families gather around, shaking hands. Silas' wife even goes so far as giving James a kiss. "Thank you so much for last night," she says with tears in her eyes.

"I wish you all well," James says as he mounts his horse with Miko following suit. James reaches into his shirt and pulls out a bag of coins and tosses it toward Silas who catches it. "Take this and start a new life," he says.

"We can't accept this," Silas says and makes to hand it back.

"No, you keep it," James says, refusing to take it. "Money I have plenty of, what good is it if you can't use it to help out your fellow man."

"How can I ever repay your generosity?" Silas asks.

"Before the year is out, help two people who are less fortunate than yourselves," James explains. "Also, ask them each to help two people within a year. Start a chain of giving, who knows where it might lead." When all is ready he mounts up as does Miko.

"We will," says Bellon, the rest of the adults nod their heads in agreement.

James reaches down and shakes hands with Bellon and Silas, "Good bye now, and good luck."

"May the gods speed you on your way," Silas says.

"And be careful," his wife adds.

With a final wave, James and Miko turn to head back toward the summit and over into Madoc. Behind them, James can hear one of the little girls begin to sing, "Little bunny Foo Foo..." With a tear beginning to well in his eye, he hurries along toward the way stop.

They don't get far before they are once again challenged by a soldier, a different one than the day before. "Travelers are not allowed beyond the way stop," the soldier tells them.

"We can take care of ourselves," James assures him.

"Be that as it may, my orders are clear. No one and I mean no one is to be allowed to endanger themselves by traveling into the Madoc area." He stands there and bars their way, staring at them.

"What if we just ride around you and go anyway?" he asks.

"Then the soldiers further east will stop you," the soldier explains. "If you persist after that, they will arrest you and place you in jail for your own safety until you realize that it's not safe for you to go there."

"Damn!" James mutters under his breath. Turning his horse around, he heads back toward the west. As they return, they find that Silas and Bellon have already returned to the refugee area with their families.

James glances at Miko who is looking at him with a questioning look on his face. "Don't ask me!" he says to him.

"I wasn't," Miko replies innocently. "I am simply waiting patiently to find out what we are going to do now." Smiling, he continues to look at James.

"I don't know," he says. "I certainly don't want to waste the time backtracking all the way to Trademeet and then going north through the Dragon's Pass. That will add days to our travel time."

"Why don't you use that compass thing of yours," suggests Miko.

"It might just be time to do that," James agrees. "Good idea."

Miko beams at the praise as they return to the spot where they spent the night before. There they dismount and James removes the compass from his backpack.

He sits as far from the road as he can with his back to the rock wall. Motioning Miko over he says, "This may take a while, so make sure I am not disturbed. And remember, we don't want anyone to find out I can do magic, alright?"

"Alright," agrees Miko as he takes position a little closer to the road.

James settles down and holds the compass in his hands on his lap as he begins to tap the magic. He concentrates on finding a way through the mountains that he and Miko will be able to travel, which will avoid the soldiers patrolling the road. He concentrates harder and harder and then feels the magic surging forth when he

releases it to begin hunting for a way. To James, it feels as if the magic is expanding from him in a spherical radius, causing ever increasing amounts to be drawn from him, searching every nook and cranny of the mountain for the elusive path.

The spell continues to draw large amounts of power from him and after just a short time, he begins feeling the effects. His head starts to throb and his breathing becomes more labored. Yet still the spell isn't finished, has not yet found a path through the mountains.

Suddenly, the flow of power eases as the powers begin to merge and flow in a more singular direction like a pack of dogs that's caught the scent of a fox. Then all of a sudden it was over and the needle of the compass turns to point westward down the road, back toward Trademeet.

Opening his eyes, James sees where the compass is pointing and sighs.

Miko hears him and comes over asking, "Did it work?"

"Yes," James replies, "but it's pointing back the way we came." He shows the compass to Miko.

"Is it directing us toward Dragon's Pass?" Miko wonders.

"I don't know," he replies, "though we may have little choice." Getting up, he has a sudden dizzy spell and briefly loses his balance. Miko sees him faltering and puts James' arm around his shoulder. After taking a few steps and several deep breaths, he begins feeling better. He then removes his arm from around Miko's neck. "I'm okay now, it's passed."

"Too big a spell again?" he asks.

"I think so, but I seem to be better able in handling the effects." He mounts his horse and they turn to follow the direction indicated by the compass.

Several hours later and still following the compass, they once again come to the plateau where the old abandoned keep stands. When the keep comes into view, the compass swings and points toward it.

"Great!" James hears Miko exclaim when he realizes where the compass is pointing. "Somehow I knew we'd be going in there."

"I had my suspicions too," James admits. Thinking the way may be further down the plateau and not the old keep, James angles them to go around its left side. But when they begin to pass the entrance, the compass turns and continues pointing toward the open front door.

He shows the compass to Miko with a grin. Shrugging, he turns his horse toward the entrance and dismounts when they come to it. James peers through the slight opening made by the door being ajar, but isn't able to make out anything in the dim light filtering in.

Turning back to Miko he says, "Let's secure the horses around back and then investigate. We don't want anyone coming by and helping themselves to them while we are in there." They walk the horses around to the back where they find a fallen tree to secure them to. James takes his backpack and they return to the entrance. They stand there for a second when he says to Miko, "Wanna go first?"

"No," replies Miko, a little scared.

"Alright then, I'll go first." James steps up and slowly makes his way through the doorway, passing into a poorly lit room. He makes his glowing orb and the light from it reveals a large room with several doors and two hallways leading from it. The compass indicates they should take the hallway directly opposite the door.

He makes his way across the room to the hallway. As he enters, the light from the orb reveals something large lying across the floor not three feet from where he stands. As he moves closer he discovers it to be a dead body in the latter stage of decomposition. The clothing on the man, at least he thinks it was a man, is in pretty bad shape but looks as if they used to be of good quality.

Miko sees the dead body illuminated by the orb and gasps. "James, we shouldn't be in here," he says with a tremor of fear in his voice. "Let's find another way."

"Don't be scared Miko," He says reassuringly. "It's only a dead body." He leans down and grabs a stick and then begins poking through the dead man's clothes. "Most likely this was a merchant traveling through the Pass that ran afoul of bandits and they dumped his body in here. See, look, there is no purse on him, nothing at all of value." James uses the stick and turns the head. "And look," he says indicating the back of the head, "it's cracked like someone hit him in the head with something hard."

"Maybe the bandits are still here?" Miko says worriedly, looking around.

"Not likely," he replies. "If they were still using this place, they would hardly have left a dead body rotting in the hallway. They would have dumped it out back where they wouldn't have had to walk over it and smell it."

“I suppose you’re right,” admits Miko, though still not sounding very reassured.

“So relax, we’re going to be okay,” he assures, trying his best to calm Miko.

“If you say so,” Miko replies halfheartedly.

Leaving the body behind, they continue down the hallway, passing two doors before coming to a halt before the third.

“Why are you stopping?” Miko asks.

“It’s indicating that we need to go through this door,” he explains. He tries the handle but finds it locked. He hands the compass and glowing orb to Miko before throwing his weight against the door. With a crash, the door bursts in, breaking off a two foot section of the door jamb in the process. His momentum carries him a little ways through the door where he stumbles and falls as his foot fails to find purchase on the floor. He rolls down a flight of stairs coming to rest at the bottom. Bruised and scraped but otherwise unhurt, he gets to his feet.

From the top of the steps he sees Miko illuminated by the glow from the orb in his hand looking down at him. “Are you okay?” he asks.

“Yeah,” replies James, “come on down. But be careful, I might have broken a few of the steps during my fall.”

Being extra careful, Miko takes it one step at a time, having to skip over one due to it being in such bad shape that he doesn’t think it will support his weight. He finally makes it to the bottom.

By the time he’s reached the bottom, James has taken a cursory look around the room. It’s a small room, only about ten feet by maybe twelve. The only exit is the door at the top of the stairs. The room itself is empty except for the dust that has accumulated over time.

He retrieves the compass from Miko and sure enough, it’s still pointing the way. Only this time it’s indicating the direction they need to go is through the wall. Pointing to the wall indicated by the compass, he says, “It says that we are to go this way.”

“Another secret door like in Lord Colerain’s estate?” suggests Miko.

Nodding his head, he replies, “I think so, give me the orb for a second.” Holding out his hand, Miko passes him the orb.

He does a thorough inspection of the wall and fails to find anything that looks like it could be a trigger to open the secret door.

He then moves to the adjoining walls, searching for some trigger or other mechanism that could possibly open a secret door.

Miko looks around as well and notices a design on the floor, partially hidden by the accumulated dust. “James, look at this,” he says as he points it out to him.

James comes over and kneels down, taking a closer look. Brushing away the dust he discovers that it is a square shaped stone engraved with a design of a circle within a circle within a circle. He presses on it but nothing happens. Getting to his feet, he has Miko step on it while he goes over and pushes on the wall but nothing happens. “Maybe there are others we need to release first,” he theorizes. “Look around for any more similar designs.”

They look around and Miko discovers another one on the wall about midway up the stairs. This one is just a single circle. Excited, James says, “If there is one with three circles and another with just the one, then there may be another with two circles. And hopefully by pressing them in the correct order, it’ll enable us to open the secret door.”

“Makes sense,” agrees Miko.

They continue to look but fail to find two circles, one in the other. “I don’t think there is one here, James,” Miko says after they’ve searched for a while.

“There has to be,” he insists. “It wouldn’t make any sense otherwise.” He continues to look around, getting on his hands and knees to closely examine the floor inch by inch.

“But we’ve examined all the walls and floor over and over,” Miko goes on. “There is no such design here.”

Stopping and standing up suddenly, James looks at Miko, “You’re right. We have searched all the walls and the floor, but we haven’t looked at the ceiling.” He turns his gaze up toward the ceiling and sure enough, there is the design with two circles, one inside the other. “I knew it!” he exclaims excitedly.

“Miko, go and press firmly on the single circle,” James tells him.

Miko cautiously makes his way up the stairs and presses the circle, “Now what?”

“Toss the piece of the door jamb that I broke off down to me,” he replies.

Miko looks around and finds the broken door jamb, he tosses it down to James.

Catching it, James raises it up toward the double circle in the ceiling. Holding it steady, he puts the end against the design and presses firmly. Miko by this time has made it back down the stairs.

James lowers the broken door jamb and lets it drop to the floor. He walks over to the triple circle on the floor and presses firmly on it with his foot. Suddenly, a section of the wall begins to swing inward, creating a three foot wide by five foot tall opening.

He brings the orb close and discovers the opened door has revealed a narrow passage which looks to have been carved out of the mountain.

As James stands there looking down the passage, the door slowly begins to swing closed. Finding no way to keep it open, he backs out of the way and lets the door close. Turning back to Miko, he says, "Let's go back up and get our things from the horses."

"You mean we're leaving them up there?" Miko asks incredulously.

"Our way lies through there," James says, pointing toward the secret door. "And I seriously doubt if the horses will be able to make it. Besides, can you think of a way to get them safely down that broken flight of steps?"

"No, I can't," Miko admits as he glances over to the steps in question.

"Okay then, so let's go and get what we are really going to need and hide the rest, just in case we manage to come back this way again." He walks over and carefully climbs back up the stairs, trying to place his weight evenly so as not to cause another step to break. Miko waits until he has made it to the top before following.

They walk back through the hallway, past the corpse and through the front door. Around back they find their horses and mule just where they had left them. James grabs the jackets, throwing Miko's over to him who grabs it and puts it on. They take everything off the horses and mules, tying them loosely so that if they don't return, they will be able to break free.

In several trips, they manage to haul all their equipment and the tack down into the little room at the bottom of the stairs, secreting it under the steps. As they are bringing in the last load, James sees the supply caravan they had passed the day before trundling past along the road on its way to the refugee camp.

He stashes the last of the equipment under the steps and says, "Unless someone comes down here, our stuff should be safe."

Miko nods agreement, "It's too bad we have to lose the horses."

“I know, but we have money to buy new ones and we’re pressed for time,” he says. Taking out his traveling scribe case, he places it on the stairs and opens it.

“You’re not taking that with us are you?” Miko asks.

“No,” James responds, “I just want to take the notes I have written.” He removes the note filled parchment and rolls them into a tight roll, placing them in his backpack. Closing the case, he places it with the rest of the equipment under the steps. He turns to Miko and asks, “Did you get the money?”

Miko pats one of the bags he has over his shoulder and says, “Right here.”

“Okay, looks like we’re ready,” he says. “Go push the circle by the stairs and we’ll get going.”

Miko climbs up the stairs and pushes the circle on the wall, James again uses his makeshift stick and pushes the double circle on the ceiling, then goes over and steps on the triple circle on the floor. The secret door swings open and James takes the lead, holding the glowing orb in his hand as he passes through the doorway and into the tunnel.

Chapter Twenty Two

The tunnel they find themselves in is quite narrow, wide enough to accommodate them side by side and barely tall enough to allow them to pass without ducking. Once through the door, it begins to swing closed again until finally shutting tight. The orb gives them sufficient light to see, illuminating the tunnel as it continues deeper into the mountain.

James hands his things to Miko and then begins searching the area near the door in an attempt to find the hidden mechanism that will allow them to reopen the door from this side. After several minutes of fruitless searching, he gives up, unable to locate the trigger mechanism. “Let’s hope that we don’t need to come back this way in a hurry,” he says to Miko while he takes his things back.

“Yeah,” agrees Miko nervously, “let’s hope that.”

When his packs are situated properly about his person, James again takes the lead and heads off down the tunnel. Ten feet or so from the door, they come across a bundle of torches. Miko removes his knife and cuts the ties holding the bundle together. Taking several of the torches, he places them in one of his bags.

James looks at him questioningly and Miko just shrugs and says, “You never know.”

Nodding his approval, James turns and leads them further into the mountain. The tunnel continues for some time before opening onto a subterranean cavern. The orb’s light reveals many stalactites and stalagmites, the play of shadows as they pass through gives the cavern an eerie feeling. From all around comes the steady drip, drip, drip of water coming off the stalactites.

“Wow,” Miko says, in awe of the extraordinary rock formations revealed by the orb’s light. After a brief pause to marvel at the rock formations, they continue on. The orb’s light reveals further marvelous, breath taking sights as they wend their way through the cavern, some being quite brilliant with many contrasting colors. Miko stops briefly to touch one.

“Pretty impressive isn’t it?” James asks, coming up behind him.

“I’ve never seen anything like it in my life,” he replies. “How did all this get to be here?”

James indicates one of the stalactites hanging from the ceiling, “Water drips through cracks in the ceiling and runs down one of those stalactites.”

Miko looks at him, confused.

“Stalactites are what the ones from the ceiling are called and stalagmites are the ones rising up from the floor,” he explains. “Over a very long time, hundreds and thousands of years, the continual passage of water leaves minerals behind. Over time, they harden to form the structures you see here.”

“Amazing,” Miko says as he rubs one, “it’s as hard as rock.”

“It is rock,” James explains. “Over time the minerals come together and form the rock.”

“Hard to believe,” Miko says in wonder. “Wouldn’t have if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.”

“Come on, we need to get going.” James hurries Miko along and they make their way further through the cavern.

In pools and scurrying among the rock formation they encounter many strange animals in this subterranean world, most being pale in

color. In one large pool of water, Miko notices little dots of light moving below the surface.

“James,” he hollers, “come here, you gotta see this.”

James comes over to where Miko has again stopped and kneels down, looking into the water. Seeing the little dots moving around, he says, “It’s probably just small fish.”

“Fish?” Miko asks incredulously. “With lights?”

Feeling like a school teacher out on a field trip, James explains, “When there is a total absence of light, fish and other animals will often produce their own.”

“How?” Miko asks.

“That I don’t know,” he admits. “I just know they do.”

“That is so weird,” Miko says, continuing to watch the dots flutter around.

“Yes it is,” James says. “Now, can we please hurry through here without all the stops?” He gets up and continues on, making Miko rush to catch up or be left behind in the dark.

The cavern continues on for another several hundred feet before they reach an open chasm cleaving the cavern in two. It looks as if the mountain had pulled apart some time in the past, leaving a rift over a hundred feet wide. A wooden bridge in poor repair spans the gap, some of the boards are missing and others are badly cracked, altogether looking as if it wouldn’t support their weight.

James checks his compass which indicates that their path continues across the chasm. He shows it to Miko.

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Miko exclaims. “There’s no way that’s going to hold when we cross. We’ll be dropped into whatever is down there.” He moves to the edge and looks down, but only sees blackness within the chasm. “We’ll die!”

“There’s no other way to go,” James tells him. “We can’t go back, so we have to go forward. Besides, I haven’t seen any other passages we could possibly have taken.”

Miko gives him a defiant look and stands his ground.

“Okay scardy pants,” James says mockingly, “I’ll try it first. If it will hold up for me it should hold up for you.”

“But what will I do if you fall and die?” Miko asks. With a wild look on his face he shouts, “I’ll be trapped here!”

Coming over to where he’s standing, shaking slightly in fear at being alone here, James tries to calm him. “Look, I won’t ever leave you like that, but someone has to go first and see if it is safe.”

Miko gives him a look that could only be called pitiful, but nods his head. “Alright,” he says in barely a whisper.

James casts a short spell and the orb floats up and hovers above and a little behind his left shoulder, following him as he moves. He walks over to the bridge and takes hold of the single rope handrail on the right, the one on the left had long since fallen off. He places his left foot gingerly on the first board as far to the edge as he can and slowly eases his weight onto it. When the board is supporting his entire weight, he turns and looks over at Miko and says, “See, it’s going to hold.” Then he takes his right foot and places it on the next board.

Slowly, he repeats the process, board by board, until he gets about mid span. Suddenly, a board breaks in two from his weight, causing him to lose his balance as his foot goes through.

“James!” Miko screams from where he’s watching.

He catches himself on the handrail and is able to prevent himself from falling. Turning slightly, he waves back to Miko letting him know he’s fine.

Once his nerves settle down and his heart stops racing, he steps over the broken board and then tests the next board before trusting it with his weight. He’s relieved when the board holds firm and then continues on as he tests each and every board until finally making it to the other side.

Once safely on the cavern floor, he hollers over to Miko, “I made it!” *made it...made it...made it*, his voice echoes throughout the cavern. “I’m sending the orb back so you can use it during your crossing.” *crossing...crossing...crossing...* Concentrating, he makes the orb float across the chasm to Miko. He has the orb settle over Miko’s left shoulder and keeps it there.

“Okay, now it’s your turn,” *turn...turn...turn...* he hollers over to Miko. “Just keep your feet to the edge of the boards and they will hold your weight better.” *better...better...better...*

He watches as Miko approaches the edge of the bridge and hesitantly sets his foot on the first board. When he realizes it will hold his weight, he moves his other foot cautiously to the next, making sure to keep his feet as far to the edge of the board as possible. Both hands clutch the handrail in a grip only fear of imminent death could produce.

Slowly, board by board he makes his way across the bridge. Upon reaching a board that doesn’t look as if it will hold his weight,

he steps over it and places his foot on the following board. It's a stretch, but he makes it with no problem.

When he's about a third of the way across, he places his foot on a board and hears a loud cracking noise as soon as his weight settles upon it. Realizing the board is about to break, he takes his foot off the board and pauses on the bridge. The board after the one that was cracking is broken as well, only half of it remains. Now he's faced with a gap of two boards, he looks at it wide-eyed, paralyzed with fear.

Seeing Miko stop, James hollers out to him, "Come on Miko, it's not much further." *further...further...further...*

"The next board is cracking," he hollers over to James, "and the one after that is broken in two. I can't make it!" *it...it...it...*

"Yes you can, just calm down," James says trying to reassure him. "Put your feet on the side beneath the handrail and scoot your way down to the next board!" *board...board...board...*

Working up his nerve, Miko does what James advises and places one of his feet on the side, then the other. Sliding slowly, he makes his way past the board that's cracking and then past where the next one is broken in two. When he's close enough to the next good board, he cautiously sets a foot on it and sighs with relief when it holds his weight. Once again he slowly makes his way across the bridge, one board at a time.

It seems an agonizingly slow time, but he eventually makes it to the other side where James stretches out his hand, helping him the last few feet.

"Great job," he says, patting Miko on the back. "I knew you could do it!"

Miko's knees begin to shake and he all but collapses on the ground before falling over.

"I guess now would be a good time for a rest break," James says as he opens a bag searching for food. When the bag containing the food comes up empty, he realizes they gave all their food to the families last night. "Uh, oh," he groans.

Miko turns his head and looks at him, "What?"

"We're out of food," James tells him.

He wraps his arms around his legs, rests his head on his upraised knees and groans, "Great! Now we're going to starve to death."

Giving him a look of annoyance, James says, "You know, you're awfully negative sometimes. We are not going to starve to

death, it takes days for that to happen and we should be out of here by then or at least found something to eat.”

Miko just looks at him for a second then stretches out and lays on the ground, not saying anything.

James allows him to rest for a few minutes to calm his shaky nerves before getting him up and pressing onward.

The cavern continues past the chasm for another hundred feet until it begins to narrow and ultimately end at another passage that had been carved out of the rock. This new passage is as narrow as the previous one and the sides are wet with water that seeps through cracks in the rocks. The floor of the passage has a thin coating of algae which makes for a slippery surface.

As they follow the passage, the water that’s seeping through the cracks slowly begins to create a small flow running along one side of the passage bottom. It continues to grow until the passage abruptly comes to an end where the water flows over the edge and down toward an unseen bottom. They have come to another subterranean cavern. How big it is and how far from the bottom they are is uncertain as the orb’s light fails to illuminate the cavern in its entirety.

The drop-off before them extends almost vertically downward to an unknown depth. Standing at the opening they feel a slight breeze blowing from the cavern and into their passage. A narrow flight of steps has been carved out of the side of the cavern and descends into the darkness below.

“Wonder what’s down there?” James asks. Placing one foot onto the uppermost step, he holds the glowing orb out as far as he can. The light doesn’t illuminate very far and all they can see are the narrow steps disappearing into the darkness below.

“I don’t know,” Miko replies. “I hope we can get out of here soon.”

“I’d like that too,” James agrees. “Be careful, the steps may be slippery.” He takes another step and begins descending the steps, being careful as the water flowing from the passage cascades over the first six before moving off.

They don’t descend very far before they notice the sound of a distant waterfall coming from somewhere below. Soon after that, mist begins to float upon the air. The further they descend, the louder it becomes until when they finally reach the bottom of the steps, the sound is practically deafening. They are unable to see where the sound is originating from as the light from the orb doesn’t

extend quite that far. The stairs end at a stone platform that has been carved out of the wall of the cavern.

Upon the stone platform, sitting on a wooden rack is a small boat that looks as if it could seat four people comfortably. Mounted on the wall next to the boat are two oars resting on several pegs. At the edge of the platform flows a fast moving underground river. It disappears through a wide tunnel in the wall, whose ceiling seems barely high enough to allow adequate clearance for the boat let alone any passengers.

Upstream to the left, they hear the crash of the mighty waterfall as it plummets down, forming the river somewhere out in the dark. The mist from the waterfall fills the cavern, leaving everything slightly damp.

“Looks like we ride from here,” James says as he drops his backpack on the platform and goes over to inspect the boat. He takes a second to try and figure the best way to remove it from the wooden rack without wrecking it.

Motioning for Miko to help him, he takes one end of the boat while Miko takes the other and together they gently lift it off the rack, setting it slowly upon the platform.

Miko leans close to James so he'll be able to be heard over the thunder of the falls and asks, “Think it'll float?”

“I sure hope so,” he replies. “I really don't fancy getting in the water and swimming through that tunnel.”

“What do we do if it sinks?” Miko asks worriedly.

“Stay afloat and swim as best we can, I guess,” James says. “But the wood looks sound, even if it has been down here for a long time.” He whacks the side of the boat with his hand, showing Miko that it still has some strength and durability left in it.

Miko looks dubious, but holds his tongue.

James removes the two oars from the wall and places them inside the boat. Then he grabs his backpack and places it inside as well.

Miko follows suit and places his bags inside and then they slowly work the boat over to the edge of the platform. The end of the platform gently slopes downward until it is only a few inches from the top of the flowing water. James eases the boat into the water, all the while maintaining a firm hold to keep it from being pulled out onto the water and through the tunnel. He signals with a jerk of his head for Miko to get in.

Miko shouts “Don’t let go!” and climbs into the boat, sitting down in the rear of the two bench seats.

James concentrates on the glowing orb and it floats over and takes position at the stern of the boat. He looks at Miko and hollers, “Now, when I get in we’ll each take an oar, and use them to keep us away from the walls and anything else that may pop up in front of us.” James waits until Miko gives him a nod, indicating that he understands and then pushes the boat out and jumps in yelling, “Stay down and watch your head!”

The boat moves out from the platform a little as James settles into the front seat and takes an oar. Then the current grabs hold of them and shoots them toward the tunnel, picking up speed rapidly. They begin going faster and faster until they pass from the cavern and into the tunnel. The ceiling is only about six inches from the tops of their heads. James places the oar back into the bottom of the boat as he quickly realizes that if he were to use it against the sides of the tunnel, at the speed they are going, it would be ripped out of his hands.

They both scrunch down as far as they can and hold on for dear life. Luckily the current is keeping them a comfortable distance from the sides of the tunnel, so they have little worry about hitting it. The walls of the tunnel rush past in a blur and James can hear faint sounds coming from Miko but he’s not sure if he’s crying or laughing.

James is scared to death and loving every minute of it. *This sure beats the hell out of any log ride I’ve ever been on!* Letting out a cry of enjoyment, he grips the sides tightly and rides on. Rushing headlong into the unknown, the possibility of being killed at any moment, is an exhilarating rush for him.

From up ahead they begin to hear a change in the sound of the water, it’s getting slightly louder and the tunnel seems to be growing narrower, causing the boat to increase in speed. Fortunately the tunnel is still sufficiently wide to accommodate the boat. Then all of a sudden the ceiling of the tunnel opens up and the river suddenly goes over a steep, ten foot drop.

At the speed they are going, the boat flies out over the waterfall, becoming airborne. A scream of terror comes from the back of the boat as they sail through the air, but James dares not look back to see if Miko’s okay, for fear of falling out. Unable to contain his excitement, he lets out a scream of his own, “Yeeeeee Haaaaaa!”

Wham!

The boat slams against the surface of the water, almost knocking them out of the boat. James tries to regain his breath after it had been knocked out of him from when they hit the water. The boat slowly begins reducing speed as it floats upon the placid water. He looks around and realizes that they are upon an underground lake.

Turning to Miko, James says excitedly, “My god! Was that some ride or what?”

“Yeah,” says Miko miserably. “It was great.”

“Oh come on!” James exclaims. “Where I come from people would pay top dollar to go through that, again and again.”

Miko just looks at him like he’s insane and shakes his head.

His lack of enthusiasm somewhat dampens James’, but he can still feel the thrill of it when they went sailing over the waterfall and landed on the lake. Grabbing the oars, he begins to row in the direction the boat is currently going.

To Miko he says, “Keep a lookout behind me and make sure I don’t run into anything.”

Miko just nods his head and keeps an eye out for anything in the lake ahead of them.

After rowing for a few minutes, Miko points behind James and says, “There’s something in the lake ahead.”

He glances over his shoulder and sees a small island poking out of the surface of the water directly in their path. He turns the boat a little to the right and they sail around the island, which isn’t very large, and continue on their way. For a brief moment he has visions of riddles and rings.

He continues rowing for a little longer before Miko suddenly exclaims excitedly, “James, there’s light coming from up ahead!”

Looking over his shoulder, he can see a small patch of light in the distance ahead of them. He angles the boat toward the light and rows harder. “Maybe it’s the way out?” he says.

“I hope so,” Miko replies. “I want to get out of here!”

Pulling on the oars with renewed vigor, he rows toward the patch of light, which continues to grow as they approach. When they’re closer, they can see that it’s an opening in the cavern wall, allowing a small stream wide enough to accommodate the boat to flow through.

“Should we take it?” James asks, knowing the answer even before he hears it.

“Yes!” exclaims Miko.

James heads for the opening and as they get closer, begins to see trees and bushes on the other side. Excited, Miko gives a whoop and holler as they enter the sunlit world, leaving the underworld behind them.

The stream flows through a tangle of trees and undergrowth, flowing steadily and smoothly. As it turns out, the stream is barely deep enough for the boat to keep from scraping the bottom. Twice, they become stuck when the boat runs aground where the stream becomes too shallow. Using the oars, they push off from the bottom until they are once more in deeper water and the boat is able to float free.

It isn't far until the trees open up and they realize that they are now at the bottom of the gorge. Through the trees ahead they can see where the stream will be joining the river as it flows on its way into Madoc. Having no more need of the glowing orb, James cancels the spell.

As they join the main river, they look up and can barely make out the road that they had been on earlier in the day, way up the side of the mountain. "Hard to believe that we were way up there just a few hours ago," Miko says.

James looks at the shadows on the mountain and realizes that they had been in there far longer than a few hours. "I think that we were in there most of the day," James corrects him. "Gauging by the shadows the sun is casting on the mountain, it's more likely early evening. We left the way stop just after sunup."

"Guess that's why I'm so hungry," Miko says, looking at James.

"Let's find a good spot for a brief camp and we'll see what we can do about that." He maneuvers the boat to the center of the river and doesn't worry too much about rowing, except in maneuvering them around obstacles, the current here is fairly fast. He sits back a bit and rests his arms, which have been growing tired from all the unaccustomed rowing.

The river makes a turn up ahead and on the inner bend of the turn, there's an open area, a sandbar really. As likely a spot as any to make camp, James uses the oars to bring them closer. When they get near and are about to be carried past by the current, he signals to Miko and they both leap from the boat. James keeps hold of the side until he's regained his balance.

Miko on the other hand didn't fare nearly as well. For when he jumps from the boat, his foot slips on a submerged rock and falls

into the icy, cold water. He starts splashing and yells, “James! Help me!”

James looks over as he steadies himself and says, “Its not deep, just stand up.”

Miko’s thrashing begins to calm down and with a face red with embarrassment, he stands up and realizes he was only in a couple feet of water. Dripping wet and frozen, his clothes are soaked through and through. And with the sun behind the mountains, there is little to help him get warm.

With the bedraggled Miko’s help, they get the boat far enough up onto the sandbar so the current will be unable to drag it away. By the time the boat comes to rest, Miko is shivering quite badly and his teeth have begun to chatter.

Seeing his predicament, James collects some of the driftwood lying around and stacks it together. He uses a fire starter spell, catching the wood on fire and then begins placing larger pieces on top. Soon he has a fair sized fire going and Miko gets close, holding his red hands as near the flames as he can stand.

Now that Miko’s plight is beginning to improve, James hunts the sandbar until finding a stick approximately three feet long. He then takes his knife and sharpens one end of the stick to create a makeshift spear. Once it’s finished, he wades into the river and stands patiently waiting for a fish to swim by.

Miko shivers by the fire, its warmth slowly seeping back into his body. Not far off in the river, James stands motionless, his face a study of concentration as he searches the water for movement. Then, in one quick movement, James thrusts the stick into the water and pulls out a large wriggling fish impaled upon its end. Bringing his catch over to the campsite, James uses his knife to gut and scale the fish, then uses the same stick he used to catch it to roast it over the fire.

“How long are we going to stay here?” Miko asks after sitting quietly listening to the spit and sizzle of the juice dripping from the fish into the fire.

Thinking a bit, James turns the fish before answering. “Probably not until after dark and our clothes are a little drier,” he replies. “I want to get through the gorge and past any patrols that Cardri may have at the other end of the Pass.”

“Isn’t it going to be dangerous riding the river in the dark?” questions Miko.

“Probably, but if we keep our wits about us and listen for any changes in the sounds of the river, then we should make it through,” he says.

“Once through, we head for the City of Light?” he asks.

“That’s right,” answers James. “Unless of course the Empire’s army is in our way, then we’ll just have to see what choices present themselves and go from there.” He takes the fish off the fire and inspects it, deciding that it still needs more time and puts it back over the fire to cook longer.

“The first town we come to, we shall see about getting a couple of horses,” he tells Miko. “We’re going to need speed if we want to keep ahead of the Empire’s forces. Hopefully, they will not venture into the same area where we are planning to travel.”

“Yeah, let’s hope so,” agrees Miko.

Checking the fish one more time, he decides it’s fit to eat. Grabbing a couple large leaves from a nearby plant for makeshift plates, he divides the fish between them and hands Miko his share. While they eat, the sunlight continues to dim as the sun sinks lower and lower behind the mountains. By the time they finish eating, the first stars begin to appear in the sky and Miko announces his clothes are fairly dry, at least the part that has been facing the fire.

Anxious to leave the Pass behind them James says, “Let’s get going and pray we are not seen as we exit the Pass.” He uses a stick and scatters the fire, kicking sand over it with his foot until it’s completely out.

They push the boat to the edge of the river until it just begins to float, then Miko hops in. Once he’s seated with the oars at the ready, James gives the boat a final push as he jumps in and they float out onto the river. Miko extends the oars and maneuvers them toward the middle of the river. Once the boat is in position, he pulls the oars from the water and allows the current to carry them downriver.

The night slowly deepens until only the light from the stars above illuminate possible obstacles in the river. They keep a vigilant lookout ahead of them, as well as listening for any changes in sound that may indicate rapids or a possible waterfall. Riding an unknown river in the dark makes James uneasy, but feels the risks are worth it if they can make it through the Pass undetected.

As fortune would have it, a quarter moon peaks over the tops of the mountains, giving them more light with which to spot rocks jutting from the surface. After floating for some time, they make

their way around a bend and James realizes the river is growing wider. He begins to relax, as that usually means a gentler river and less chance of coming across any rapids.

They drift along for another hour or so when Miko whispers, "James, look up ahead."

Snapping awake, he realizes he dozed off for a few minutes. Ahead of them can be seen the light from several fires on the shore to their right. Silhouettes of many men move among them.

"It must be the checkpoint at the end of the Pass," he whispers to Miko. "Let's be quiet so they won't know we are here." Taking the oars he slowly edges the boat over to the left side of the river, putting as much distance between them and the men on the shore as possible. When he has moved them as close to the shore as he dares, they lay low in the boat and watch the men on the shore as they drift silently by.

Wisps of conversations drift from the camp, but they are too far away to accurately make out what is being said. There looks to be about fifty men around those fires and most are wearing armor. From what is revealed by the flickering campfires, it looks like they have constructed defensive fortifications across the road.

"I doubt if that would hold out anybody," Miko whispers to James as they drift past the end of the encampment and come to the fortifications.

"So do I," he agreed. "Maybe it's just to delay an attacker until they get further back into the mountains. Though from what we've heard, it's unlikely the Empire will move against Cardri, at least not for a while."

They continue to drift until the fires from the encampment can no longer be seen. The silhouette of the mountains against the night sky shows that they, too, are beginning to drop away, becoming rolling hills. Deciding that they are far enough away, James takes the oars and brings them to the northern side of the river, opposite to the side the encampment they passed was on.

Beaching their boat among a patch of bushes, Miko helps him pull it further up the shore away from the water and hide it. "Let's get some sleep before the sun comes up. Then we can see where we are and decide whether to follow the river or continue overland."

Miko lies down near the boat beneath a large bush with reddish, purple flowers. Using one of the bags for a makeshift pillow he says, "Sounds good to me."

James gets comfortable in the shelter of another of the flowering bushes and soon both are asleep, exhausted from the long day.

Chapter Twenty Three

The morning dawns sunny and clear. The temperature has already risen quickly, foreshadowing the hot day to come. Once awake, James peers from beneath the bush to discover where the river had brought them. Off to the west rise the mountains they passed through the day before, still close enough to be imposing. On the opposite side of the river lies a road matching its course as it makes its way from the mountains. On this side, grass covered hills roll northward with the occasional trees scattered about.

“Looks like if we stay on the river we’ll continue to follow the road for a while,” he observes.

“Good,” replies Miko. “I would just as soon not walk.”

“Me too,” agrees James. “Let’s get the boat back onto the water and continue further down to see if there’s a town where we can get a couple of fast horses.”

Putting their things back in the boat, they push it to the water’s edge where Miko hops in first. James pushes the boat the rest of the way out onto the water before jumping in. As the boat floats away from the shore, Miko takes the oars and brings them to the middle of the river. Adding his efforts to that of the current, he keeps a steady rhythm with the oars as they move along.

They hadn’t gone very far before a column of dust is seen rising up to the sky to the east. As they steadily move toward it, they are soon able to tell the dust plume is the result of hundreds of men marching eastward along the road with a wagon train trailing along behind.

When James realizes they will shortly be drifting past an army on the move, he takes the oars from Miko and brings them quickly

to the north shore, beaching their boat. "Think that's the Empire's army?" he asks Miko after they get out.

"Could be," he replies, staring at the men in the distance. "Hard to tell from here."

"I think it would be wise to assume they are the Empire's for now," James suggests. "We better leave the river and head overland."

Miko takes the bags from the boat as he says, "Yeah, let's hurry and get out of here." When the bags are situated about his person, he looks back at the soldiers and asks, "Wonder where they're going?"

"Don't know, but we better find some horses soon or we'll never get ahead of them and beat them to the City of Light." Picking up his backpack, he slings it across his shoulder and sets out to the northeast, angling slightly more north than east to begin putting distance between them and the soldiers.

As they walk James scans the ground and gathers several fair sized stones, placing them in his pocket.

Miko sees what he's doing and asks, "Expecting trouble?"

"Never know," he replies as he bends over to pick up another, "but it's best to be prepared."

"Wish I still had my crossbow," Miko says, thinking of the crossbow left under the stairs with the rest of their things in the abandon keep.

Nodding, James hurries them along.

They travel for no more than half an hour when dozens of people appear on the horizon ahead of them. Some are running but all are making the best speed they can. Several have small children in tow, others are burdened with bundles either tied to their backs or carried in their arms.

"Must be refugees fleeing from another town the Empire has taken," James guesses. "Or is about to."

"What'll we do?" asks Miko, obviously concerned seeing as how the refugees are heading their way.

Coming up behind the fleeing people and riding hard to overtake them are six riders wielding clubs. As the riders reach the stragglers, they strike them in the head with their clubs, felling them. Then they leave them where they lie as they race to the next fleeing refugee.

Behind the riders roll three wagons, each trailing a line of naked people, both men and women of varying age. Out in front of each

wagon walk two people who, when they come to a felled refugee, start slapping or hitting them until they regain consciousness. Once they've regained consciousness, they are pulled to their feet, stripped of their clothes and then have their hands tied behind them. After that they are taken and added to the line of naked people behind the wagon.

"Slavers!" James says in disgust. He stands there watching them for a moment as a woman carrying a baby gets struck in the head. As the woman falls, the baby goes flying out of her arms and strikes the ground where it begins crying piteously. The mother doesn't lose consciousness and crawls over to her baby, wrapping her arms protectively around it. In a vain attempt at escape she attempts to crawl away. When the wagon comes, one of the men pulls the baby out of her arms. James can hear the woman's scream as she tries to hang onto her child. The man strikes her across the face with his fist and rips the baby from her arms. With the mother's pleas falling on deaf ears, the man returns to the wagon and hands the baby to someone inside. He then returns to the wailing woman, and dragging her by the hair, takes her to the rear of the slave line trailing behind the wagon. There she is stripped and put in line with the others.

"James!" Miko says as he pulls on his arm insistently, "we have to get out of here!"

Shaking his head, James says, "No." He turns his head to look at Miko and says, "You don't have to stay." Turning back toward the oncoming horsemen, he reaches inside his pouch and grabs several of the stones he collected and holds them in his left hand. He then takes one in his right and starts walking toward the horsemen.

"Crap!" he hears Miko say behind him as the boy follows him into battle.

One of the horsemen is fast approaching a man who is carrying a bundle on his back. The man looks back and sees the horseman almost upon him. Tossing the bundle aside, he breaks into a run. The horseman closes with him and raises his club to bludgeon the man to the ground. Suddenly, something strikes him in the chest, going through the leather armor he's wearing and blasting out the back. He looks at his chest for a moment in disbelief before toppling off his horse, hitting the ground dead.

Another horseman sees his partner fall and cries out alerting the other riders. He hooks his club to the saddle then draws his sword as he pauses, looking around for whoever it was that killed his partner.

Seeing James standing defiant when everyone else is fleeing, he kicks his horse and charges straight at him, sword raised to cut him in half.

James cocks his arm and lets fly another stone, striking the charging rider through the forehead and blasting out the back of his head. Like a limp rag doll, the rider falls from his horse.

“Miko,” James says over his shoulder while indicating the horses of the fallen riders, “grab the horses, we’ll need them. Also search the dead riders for valuables or any papers.” Not looking to see whether or not Miko is doing what was asked of him, his attention remains focused on the four riders racing toward him, swords raised.

James concentrates and then lets the magic flow.

Crumph!

The ground under two of the charging riders erupts, throwing debris, horses and riders into the air.

James turns to the remaining two riders who are almost upon him and throws another stone, catching one in the chest, creating a hole as it passes through. James jumps to one side, rolling on the ground when the remaining rider strikes down at him with his sword. He feels its passing as it comes within inches.

The rider turns and tries to trample him with his horse’s hooves as he lies there on the ground.

James rolls out of the way quickly and then tries to stand up when one of the horse’s hooves clips him in the side of the head, knocking him down, causing the world to spin wildly.

He rolls on his back and sees a blurry horseman with sword raised, ready to finish him off. Sure that his time has come, James is surprised when two other blurry shapes jump up and grab the rider, pulling him off the horse.

Another blurry shape comes over and asks, “James? You okay?”

“Yeah,” he replies as he sits up, recognizing Miko’s voice. “The horse clipped me in the head. Be okay in a few minutes, I hope.”

“Thank you!” a woman cries as she kneels down, putting her arms around James and giving him a big hug.

As his vision begins to clear and becomes steady, he sees many people around him, all trying to express their gratitude. That’s when he realizes they were the people fleeing the oncoming slavers. Miko is standing there with two horses, smiling broadly.

The two riders who had been knocked off their horses by the erupting ground have been torn to pieces by the refugees. Several

people are walking toward him from the dead bodies, each wielding a bloody knife or stick.

“We need to free the people in the slave lines behind the wagons,” he says as he tries to get up.

“Already being taken care of,” a man says as he points to four horses racing toward the wagon. Riding each is a man who earlier had been fleeing for his life. Now with a sword in their hands and vengeance in their hearts they ride to free their neighbors and friends. Others are following on foot to give what aid they can.

James regains his feet and looks around at all the faces. Some smiling but many have seen too many horrors to ever smile again. “Where are you from?” he asks.

“Pleasant Meadows,” answers one woman. “It’s further downstream where the road crosses the river. The Empire was seen last night heading in our direction and the whole town fled in every direction.” She looks at James and says, “I guess we were fortunate to flee this way.”

Many people around her nod their head in agreement.

James looks off toward the wagons and sees that two of them have already been liberated, the people in the slave lines being untied and led this way. The four riders are closing fast with the remaining wagon, engaging the two men on foot as they try to make a stand. One of the riders is struck and James sees him fall from his horse while the remaining riders strike and kill the last of the enemy.

“You better make as best time you can before the Empire sends scouts out this way and discovers what has happened,” James says. “If you follow the river toward the mountains, you’ll find an encampment of soldiers at the beginning of the Pass, they look to be friendly. You definitely don’t want to be here when the Empire shows up.”

James motions to Miko and he brings over the horses, giving him one. James swings up on the horse and looks over the people that surround him. Miko mounts as well.

“Good luck,” he says to them, “and God speed!”

“Where are you going?” one of them asks.

“City of Light,” Miko replies, getting a stern look from James.

“You mustn’t go there!” one man insists. “The Empire will surely not stop until they take the City. It is the key to the entire southern region of Madoc.”

“He’s right,” another interjects, “their forces are swarming this area, looking for people fleeing. You’ll never make it.”

“I appreciate your concern, but we must.” Turning to Miko he says, “Let’s go,” as he heads his horse toward the northeast. The people surrounding him make way and soon they are galloping across the hills with cries of gratitude following them.

When they’ve traveled a ways and are out of sight of the people they just aided, James stops his horse and turns to confront Miko. With anger in his voice he says, “You never, *NEVER!* tell anyone our business unless I tell you it’s okay to do so. Do you understand?”

Withering under James’ stern glare, Miko says defensively, “But who are they going to tell?”

“How about the Empire for one! If those poor souls back there get recaptured, the Empire is going to want to know what happened to their men.” Pointing back the way they had come he continues, “One of them is bound to tell them who it was and where we are going. What someone doesn’t know can’t be tortured out of them!”

“I don’t think they know our names,” Miko says in his defense.

“True, but they know what we look like and they know where we are going.” Shaking his head, he continues, “Miko, you need to learn when to talk and when not to. Our lives could very well depend on it.” Pausing for a moment, he looks in Miko’s eyes to see if he’s gotten his point across, “Okay?”

Feeling like he’s let his friend down, Miko hangs his head and says, “I’m sorry James. I’ll try to do better.”

“Don’t say try,” James replies kindly, “try means you expect to fail.” He puts his hand on Miko’s shoulder, gives him a smile and then turns his horse and kicks it into a gallop.

Miko silently vows silently to himself not to let James down again as he races after his friend.

Figuring the Empire’s forces are to the east and south of them, James bears even further to the north. The terrain slowly turns from hills to a rolling plain, tall grass waving in the summer breeze.

They make good time for several hours, when Miko suddenly yells “James, look!” as he points to the south.

James looks and they can barely make out column after column of soldiers marching toward the northeast. The dust they’re kicking up must be visible for miles away.

“They must be heading for the City of Light,” observes Miko. “Think it’s the same ones we saw earlier?”

“Doubt it,” states James. “We better hustle if we’re going to be able to reach the City of Light and still have time to get out before they arrive.”

James angles them now almost due north and they ride quickly until the soldiers are no longer visible on the horizon. They then go no more than a couple more miles when out of the north appear a score of horsemen heading south, right for them.

James immediately veers to the east and brings his horse to a gallop, trying to put distance between them, hoping to remain unobserved.

Looking over his shoulder at the riders, he sees them turning to give chase. From behind he hears Miko cry out, his horse has put a foot in a gopher hole and snapped its leg. Crashing to the ground, Miko is thrown off the horse and sails through the air before landing hard upon the ground.

James quickly turns and races back to where Miko is getting to his feet. Reaching down a hand, he swings the boy on the horse behind him. Looking northward again he sees the horsemen approaching fast. He kicks his horse in the side and they race toward the east, the riders continuing to follow.

“James!” Miko hollers. “They’re gaining.”

“I know,” he replies. “We’re not going to outrun them, not riding double.” Regardless, James continues to ride hard, prolonging the inevitable.

Miko starts shaking James’ shoulder, “James, I don’t think they’re the Empires’ soldiers.”

“Are you sure?” he asks.

“Yes,” Miko responds. “Their uniforms are different than the ones we saw marching earlier.”

“Madoc’s?” James asks over his shoulder.

“Could be,” he replies. “They’re not from Cardri.”

James slows his horse to a canter then turns to face the oncoming riders, finally bringing them to a stop. They both dismount to wait for the riders to approach.

Upon seeing them dismounted and waiting for their arrival, the riders slow their advance to a trot. When they reach James and Miko, they encircle them while two men with crossbows take aim and wait. One of the riders, an officer by the embroidery on his uniform, comes forward and asks, “Who are you and what business do you have in Madoc?”

“Then am I safe in assuming that you are not of the Empire?” James asks hopefully.

“That is correct,” the officer replies. “Now answer the question!”

“My name is James and this is my traveling companion Miko. We are on our way to the City of Light with a package to be delivered to the Great Library.”

“What package is so important that it requires you to pass through a war zone?” the officer asks.

Shrugging, James says, “I don’t know, only that the Custodian of the Royal Archives in Cardri requested that we deliver it.”

The officer signals for his men to stand down and the crossbowmen to lower their crossbows. “Let me see this package,” he demands.

James reaches into his backpack and brings out the package bearing the seal of the Archive Custodian. He hands it to the officer.

The officer takes it, examining the package as well as the seal and then hands it back. “Okay, so you have a package bearing the seal of the Royal Custodian, but there is no proof that you are the couriers.”

“Well, no, that’s true,” James admits. “But I assure you that we are.”

Miko nods agreement.

“I don’t have the time or the manpower to deal with you right now,” says the officer, “so I will take you at your word. A spy from the Empire would have a more plausible reason for being here than that. Now,” he continues, looking intently at James, “on your way from the Pass, did you see anything of the Empire’s forces?”

Nodding, James tells him of seeing the columns of men they saw before leaving the river.

“Damn,” the officer exclaims, “we were hoping they hadn’t moved that far yet. What else?”

His men crowd around to hear what James has to say. “We ran into people fleeing the fall of a town called Pleasant Meadows,” he tells them, though leaving out the part he played in their escape. At the mention of Pleasant Meadows, several of the officer’s men curse and James can see anger and sadness appear on many faces.

“And then not too long ago we saw another army heading northeast,” he adds.

“Dire news indeed,” he says. “You may go on your way, though be careful. If Pleasant Meadows is taken then they are most likely

continuing up the road to the City.” Pointing east the officer says, “They will be using the road due east of here, so if I were you I would make almost due north and hope to swing around them.”

“Thank you sir,” James says, and then looks over to Miko’s horse that’s lying on the ground, in great pain. “What about our horse?” he asks the officer.

The officer looks over at the horse and then gives a signal that’s followed by two crossbow bolts striking the horse, one in the head and the other in the chest, bringing an end to its pain. “Hate seeing a horse suffer so,” he says. Then to James he continues, “Can’t spare one for you, sorry. You’ll just have to make due with what you have.”

He signals his men and then mounts up. “Good luck,” he says to them before he and his men ride off toward the south at a gallop.

“Grab our stuff,” James tells Miko. “We’ll have to ride double, at least until we can acquire another horse.”

Miko collects the few bags he had on his horse and takes them over to James’ where he secures them behind the saddle. James mounts, then reaches down a hand and Miko swings up behind him. “Still better than walking, eh?” he says as they begin heading northward.

“A little bit,” Miko replies. “How far do you think the City is from here?”

“I’ve no clue,” says James. “Maybe a couple days, more if we have to detour around any of the Empire’s forces.”

They make good time, even riding double. The ground continues leveling off until it’s fairly flat, with tall grass swaying in the summer breeze. They continue their course for another two hours when they see an unusually large congregation of birds off to the east. Curious, James angles eastward to take a closer look.

There they find around fifty of the Empire’s forces, dead and bloating in the sun. The birds squawk and take to the air as they come near. The smell of rotting corpses is nauseating so they keep their distance.

“Looks like the Empire took a beating here,” says James.

“Good!” Miko exclaims. “Serves them right.”

They circle the field of battle for a ways but fail to find anyone other than the Empire’s men. “Either Madoc was really fortunate or they took their dead with them,” James reasons.

“Yeah,” Miko agrees, “the losers tend to stay where they fall unless their rotting corpses will bother someone.”

Not seeing anything of interest, James once more turns and makes speed northward.

During the ride, Miko eventually nods off, head lying against James' back. He begins to dream of his life before James when he lived on the street and had no one to trust. In some ways he's glad to be gone from there, but in others he misses his old life. No one was ever trying to kill him, at least not seriously.

Deep in a dream about he and a friend filching fruit from a merchant's stand, he's suddenly startled out of his reverie by the sudden motion of James jerking his arm forward. "What's going on?" he asks sleepily.

James points off to the right where he had dropped a rabbit with one of his stones. "I figured it was time for dinner," he explains. Then he breaks out in a smile as he adds, "Didn't mean to wake you."

"Wasn't sleeping," Miko exclaims defensively, "just thinking is all."

James grins knowingly. "Let's take a short break and cook us some dinner," he says.

Miko nods and swings down, James following right after. While James gets the rabbit ready for dinner, Miko makes a fire from some of the dried grass and small sticks in the area.

James watches him as he begins putting the fuel for the fire together and says, "Make sure you have a bare area around the fire, we don't want to start a wildfire."

"Wildfire?" Miko asks.

"If you catch some of the grass on fire, the wind can blow it along and before you know it the entire grassland is aflame," he explains.

"I'll be careful," says Miko as he strikes flint making a spark and then blows gently to coax it into a flame. When he gets a small flame going, he gradually adds more fuel until a sizable blaze is burning.

James notices with worry at the smoke rising like a signal to all in the area that they are there. "We better eat fast and leave before someone comes to see what this fire is all about," he says.

Miko glances up and sees the smoke rising like a beacon, "Should I put it out?" he asks.

“No, just use the driest grass you can find and that should minimize the amount it emits,” James replies. “Besides, we need to eat or we’ll be too weak to defend ourselves in an emergency.”

James finds a fair sized stick and impales the rabbit upon it, using it as a skewer to cook the rabbit over the fire. When the rabbit is done, he quickly extinguishes the fire by kicking dirt over it until the smoke stops.

They eat in silence, all the while keeping watch for anyone approaching. Once finished, they remount and proceed on again, riding quickly until it gets too dark to see. They make camp, staking the horse out near them.

“We’ll take turns keeping watch tonight,” James says.

“Alright,” agrees Miko. “Do you want me to go first?”

“No, I’m not that tired,” he replies. “You go ahead and sleep. I’ll wake you when it’s your turn.”

Miko settles in and is soon asleep.

James lies back and watches the stars overhead, marveling how different they are from the ones at home. At midnight he wakes Miko for his turn.

“Now don’t fall asleep,” he tells Miko who seems to be having a hard time keeping his eyes open.

“Don’t worry,” Miko assures him, as he stifles a yawn, “you just get some sleep.” He then gets up and begins pacing around the camp, keeping himself awake.

James lies down and listens to Miko’s steps for a few minutes before sleep takes him.

As the sky begins to brighten, James awakens to find Miko asleep a few feet away. Shaking his head, he goes over and nudges him in the side with his foot. “Wakey, wakey sleepyhead,” he says as Miko begins to stir.

Miko’s eyes shoot open and he sits up quickly, “I fell asleep!”

“Yes you did,” James says to him. “Luckily nothing happened, this time. Let’s get going.”

Feeling bad, Miko gets the horse ready and soon they are once again mounted and making good time northward.

They keep alert for others on the plains and once during the late morning have to veer more to the north when they encounter a force over three hundred strong marching from the southeast. They push the horse hard for a short time to put distance between them and only slow down to a canter again once the forces vanish from sight.

They again come across forces on the move in the afternoon, but this time they are moving from the northwest going generally eastward. “Must be reinforcements on their way to the City of Light,” observes Miko.

“I think you are right,” James agrees. “Still, let’s give them a wide berth, we don’t want to be mistaken for the Empire again.”

They backtrack half a mile before proceeding to the northwest for another two miles. Once they figure they have put Madoc’s army behind them they again turn more easterly. Moving quickly, they press on for several more hours.

When the sun begins to dip toward the horizon, a great body of water appears to the east. A road runs along the shoreline upon which many people are coming from the south. Most are on foot while some ride in wagons or pull carts. Those on foot carry bundles while the wagons and carts are filled to overflowing with belongings.

Coming to the road, James inquires of one traveler, “Where are you all coming from?”

The man looks up at James with a face totally lacking in hope or joy, “The City of Light,” the man replies despondently.

“It’s fallen already?” James asks him in shock.

Shaking his head, the man says, “No, at least not when I left. But those you see here didn’t want to stay and be there when the Empire besieges it.”

“It’s certain then that they are heading to the City?” he asks.

“That’s the rumor,” the man replies.

“Then the Empire hasn’t reached the City yet?” James asks anxiously.

“I don’t think so,” he says. “They said our army was going to engage them in the field before they can reach the city. With our allies and mercenaries, they hope to stop them before they get that far.”

“How far is the City from here?” James inquires.

“It’ll probably take you a day with your horse,” he replies. “I’ve been on the road two days, heading for relatives up north.”

“Thank you for your help,” James tells the man.

The man nods and then continues on his way.

“Still a ways to go,” Miko says.

James nods and turns his head to say, “But at least we’re close, and unlikely to run into the Empire’s forces along the way. Unless

they are already besieging the City of Light by the time we get there.”

“Let’s get as much distance behind us as we can before dark,” Miko suggests.

“Good idea,” James replies. He looks at the sinking sun and says, “We probably only have a couple of hours left anyway.”

Bringing the horse to a canter, they quickly make their way down the road. The other travelers on the road are all going in the opposite direction, they are the only ones foolish enough to be going south. James and Miko have little trouble making their way through the people, most move aside when they see them coming.

Once the sun is close to the horizon they stop and make camp near the water’s edge amidst a group of trees. James takes a long stick found near a tree and wades out into the lake and returns with a fish for dinner.

Both are ravenous as they haven’t had anything to eat since the rabbit the night before. Once the fire is going well and the fish is cooking over the flames, they sit back and in the fading light watch the people on the road as they pass by. A few glance in their direction but none approach.

After they eat, James has Miko take first watch tonight. When asked why he replies, “Maybe you’ll stay awake better if you take first watch.”

Miko sits with his back against a tree and sets his mind to not falling asleep again this night.

Seeing that Miko understands he continues, “Wake me around midnight, sooner if you think someone is approaching.”

Nodding his head, Miko says, “You can count on me.”

“I hope so,” James says. “Don’t let me down.”

“I won’t,” he replies. “You just get some sleep. I’ll stay alert and keep the fire going.”

Lying down, James contemplates again the wisdom of going to a city that will most likely be under siege shortly. He feels that this is something he must do, though it scares him to death. *Get in, get out*, he tells himself as he drifts off to sleep.

“James! Wake up!”

Startled out of sleep, he bolts upright and quickly looks around the campsite. Miko is sitting by the tree where two men are holding him, one with a knife to his throat. A third man is coming toward him, a longsword in hand.

“Stay right there,” the man approaching him says, “and your friend won’t get hurt.”

James sits still and the man slows his pace once he sees that he is cooperating.

“Lim, get the horse,” he says to one of the two men holding Miko, while still continuing to approach James.

Lim releases Miko and walks over to the horse. The other man remains with Miko, his knife held to the boy’s throat.

The man with the longsword comes toward James and raises the point of his sword to rest against James’ chest. He then says, “Give me all your gold.”

James removes his coin pouch and hands it over to the man who opens it and looks inside. Smiling at the coins and gems he sees in there, he says over to his partners in glee, “Looks like we hit the jackpot this time!”

They both grin and laugh at their good fortune.

James begins to concentrate and forms a spell, then releases the magic. From the direction of the lake behind him, a squishing sound begins to be heard as if someone was walking in boots full of water. From out of the darkness lurches a slow moving glistening, shimmering form roughly man shaped.

The man guarding Miko sees it first and lets out with a cry of fear.

The man with the longsword looks up from examining the contents of the pouch and sees it approaching. Letting out a startled cry he backs away as it approaches, not realizing that he has just removed the sword from in front of James’ chest.

James waits until the man has backed up several feet then quickly bends over and picks up a stone. In one fluid motion he arcs his arm back and then throws it at the one guarding Miko. Distracted by the sight of the water creature the man fails to see it coming and the stone pierces his chest. The light in his eyes quickly vanishes as he slumps to the ground dead.

Rolling away from the man with the longsword, James puts distance between them, all the while maintaining his concentration on the creature. It continues its advance, steadily closing the gap.

Eyes wide in fear, the man raises his sword and strikes at the creature but it has little effect. The sword simply passes right through the water.

Seeing one of his partners lying dead on the ground and another battling a creature that is unaffected by the sword, Lim screams in terror and races off into the night, leaving his partner to his fate.

The man turns to run just as the water creature lurches forward and touches him on the arm. Unable to break the contact, the man watches in horror as the water from the creature begins to spread along his skin, moving to envelope his entire body in a thin layer of water.

Miko stares in awe as the man becomes completely cocooned by the creature. Gasping for air, the man's mouth opens in a vain attempt to breathe. Water from the creature instead flows into his lungs and he starts to spasm as he chokes. Finally his eyes roll up in his head and collapses to the ground.

When he hits the ground, the water from the creature loses its integrity and splashes off him, running along the ground.

Gasping from the exertion of having maintained such a spell, James almost passes out but somehow retains consciousness.

Miko comes over and closely examines the man killed by the water creature. He turns to James and exclaims, "He's dead!"

Nodding, James sits there and tries to keep the world from spinning.

Miko takes back James' pouch from the man's hand and brings it over to him. "The other one fled into the night," he tells him.

"That's okay," says James. "I doubt if he'll be back anytime soon."

"What was that thing?" he asks.

"I suppose you could call it a cross between a water elemental and the blob," James replies. "It's something I cooked up a while back for a game a friend and I used to play. It was almost more than I could control though, it kept trying to lose cohesion and break apart."

"Whatever it was, it sure was impressive," Miko says. He starts to chuckle, "It sure scared the hell out of them."

James smiles back, "That was the idea." He lies back and can feel himself beginning to slip back into sleep. "Miko, you're going to have to keep watch till morning," he tells him, yawning. "I'm not going to be able to stay awake."

"That's okay, James," he says. "You go ahead and rest, I doubt if I could sleep now anyway."

James closes his eyes and quickly falls asleep.

Miko drags the dead men out of camp but not before going through their pouches and removing anything of value. Once the camp is clear of dead bodies, he begins walking around and manages to stay awake until morning.

Chapter Twenty Four

The following morning, James wakes with a terrific headache and a mouth as dry as a desert. He discovers Miko still to be awake and had remained so throughout the night.

Upon seeing James rise, Miko brings the water bottle over with some berries gathered earlier that morning from nearby bushes. “Feeling okay?” he asks his friend, concerned.

“No, but I’ll survive.” Giving him a reassuring grin, he assures Miko that he’ll be fine and takes the water bottle, draining most of it. Then he pops the berries in his mouth one at a time while gazing out over the water. Soon his headache has been reduced to a manageable throb.

Miko has the horse ready for travel by the time James finishes the meal and feels ready for travel. He extends his hand and aids James in getting to his feet and then onto the horse. He swings up behind him and rests his head against his friend’s back. Though exhausted from having stood watch the entire night, he feels good about not letting his friend down again.

It’s not long after they return to the road and head for the City of Light when James feels Miko slump against him and begin to snore. He does his best to make him comfortable and to ensure he doesn’t fall from the horse.

The number of travelers has dramatically increased since yesterday. More families are on the road than there were yesterday, many small children ride in the back of wagons or walk beside their parents. When asked, they tell him the City had not yet been besieged when they left.

As the day progresses, groups of riders appear to the west as Madoc riders patrol the area. The closer to the City they go, the more frequently they appear.

Miko rouses several times during the morning, but lapses back to sleep after taking a quick look around or answering the call of nature.

Prior to midday they pass through a small fishing village which was really not much more than a couple main buildings with lots of huts and houses surrounding them. The people there, though concerned about the Empire, haven't yet evacuated their homes. Many still go about their day to day business as usual, several fishing boats are seen out on the water.

One of the buildings is a store and James decides to make a brief stop to replenish their depleted supply of rations. The only food left is dried fish and day old bread, the throngs of people coming through having bought everything else. He buys two days worth at exorbitant prices. The lady wouldn't even haggle with him, saying that if he didn't buy it, someone else surely would before the end of the day.

They returned to the road, eating the dry fish and stale bread as they ride, though not very tasty at least they were filling. The road passes through other villages, about one every five miles or so, and the number of closed and vacated buildings increases the closer to the City of Light they become. The number of people on the road is also steadily increasing as well with more and more refugees fleeing the approach of the Empire.

As the shadows begin growing long with the closing of the day, a great walled city nestled against the edge of the Sea begins to appear in the distance ahead. A formidable wall surrounds it and many ships are anchored in the harbor. When asked, a passerby confirms that it is, indeed, the City of Light. Hundreds of buildings spread outward from the wall, though many have the look of being deserted, likely in anticipation of a siege by the Empire.

Travel upon the road is slow as a veritable exodus of people flow from the city. In the surrounding fields many farmers work to save what crops they can. Some fields are actually on fire to prevent the Empire from benefiting from the unharvested grain.

Cavalry can be seen running patrols throughout the countryside, and the walls of the city are lined with many men. "It's going to take a while to break this city," James observes.

“Yeah,” agrees Miko. “It looks impressive, bigger even than Cardri.”

“It’s not just the men already here,” James says as he points over to the harbor. “But the Sea enables them to receive fresh supplies of men and equipment should they need it.”

The gates are jammed with people and wagons, going both in and out. An entire squad of the city guard is at the gates attempting to maintain what order they can. It takes a while but they make it to the gates where one of the guards questions them about their business in the city.

When James tells him of the package they are delivering and shows it to him, they are waved on through into the city.

They make their way carefully from the gate, forging their way through the throng of people who are trying to make it out of the city. After inquiring as to the whereabouts of the Great Library, they forge their way further into the city. Following the directions given to them, they arrive at the Library in little time.

The impressive structure which is the Library is at least four stories tall and a hundred yards wide. Outside the entrance sit many wagons being loaded with books and manuscripts brought from within the Library.

A man is supervising the distribution and packing of the books and manuscripts. “Easy there!” he yells at one man who tosses several books haphazardly into a wagon. “Those are hundreds of years old, you must treat them with care.” The man mumbles an apology then returns inside the library for more.

James dismounts and walks over to the supervisor and says, “Excuse me.”

The man directs two men carrying a chest to place it in the last wagon, then turns to James and says, “Yes?” Then to another man he yells, “Not in there, take it to the front wagon!”

“I was wondering if you could direct me to Ollinearn?” he asks.

“He is very busy,” the man says to James. “He does not have time to see anyone today.” Spying a man walking out of the Library with books stacked on top of delicately rolled scrolls, he rushes over and berates the man, taking the books off the scrolls that were being crushed.

James follows him and says, “But this is important, I have a delivery from Ellinwyrd in Cardri.”

“Ellinwyrd you say?” the man asks as he pauses and actually looks at James for the first time.

“Yes, Ellinwyrd,” James acknowledges. “He asked us to deliver a book for him.” He reaches inside his backpack and brings out the package, showing it to the man.

The man takes it, sees Ellinwyrd’s seal and then hands it back to James. “Very well,” he says, “go on inside. You will find him in the back preparing the last of the books for travel.” Seeing another man not treating ‘his books’ properly, he leaves James standing there and rushes over to the miscreant where he begins berating him and instructing him on the proper way to handle these aged books.

James signals for Miko to remain by the horse as he enters the Library.

Inside he finds shelf after empty shelf where books until recently had sat. If the number of empty shelves is any indication, they must have already transported a staggering amount of books and other related items.

From a door in the back of the central area another man emerges carrying a box filled with books. Figuring this to be where Ollinearn would be, James walks over and passes through the doorway.

Within the room he finds a wizened old man directing three helpers in the packing of books and manuscripts.

“Carefully now, Yorn,” the old man says kindly. “They must be packed just right if they are to survive the journey.” He pats the young man on the back and turns to see James walk in through the doorway. “Yes?” the old man asks. “Can I help you?”

“Are you Ollinearn?” James asks.

“Yes, I am he,” the old man replies.

James brings out the book and offers it to him, “Ellinwyrd sent me here to give this to you.”

Ollinearn takes the package and glances at the seal upon it, then removes the wrapping. He looks at the book a moment then glances questioningly at James, “He sent you here to deliver this book?”

“Yes, sir,” James replies.

He motions for him to follow and says, “Come with me.” To his helpers he says, “Continue with these, then we shall finish with the histories.”

“Yes, sir,” one of the helpers says.

Ollinearn exits the room through a small door in the back and walks down a small hallway. Near the end he opens a door on the right and enters.

As James follows him inside he sees it’s a small study with but a desk and three chairs. Ollinearn goes around the desk and sits down.

He gestures to a chair across from him and says, "Please, sit and be comfortable." After James sits he continues, "My apologies for not offering any refreshments, but things around here are in a state of confusion."

"It's alright, I understand." James assures him.

Placing the book between them on the table, he says, "Now, I find it strange that Ellinwyrd would have sent you here to deliver this book." He looks at James for a response.

"Why?" James asks.

With a wave of his hand he says, "It's a book of little consequence, quite common really. It's hardly worth sending someone through a war zone to deliver. In fact, I have two copies already."

James produces the letter Ellinwyrd had written and hands it across the table to Ollinearn. "He did send this as well," he says.

Ollinearn takes the letter, breaks the seal and then reads it. After he's finished reading the letter he looks to James and says, "He asks that I aid you any way I can, very strange."

"Why is that strange?" James asks.

Placing the letter on the table he says, "He has never made such a request before. In addition, he makes no mention of your need."

"I am in search of the god Morcyth," James explains.

"Ellinwyrd believed that the last temple to him was located somewhere around the Sea of the Gods and that you would be my best chance of finding its whereabouts."

"Morcyth?" he asks. "Are you a historian?"

"Nothing like that, no," James replies. "I am on kind of a quest and this is where it has led me."

"Hmmm..." Ollinearn muses as he sits back in his chair thinking. "We have several books detailing Morcyth and his religion," he says to James. "Though most of those are already on their way to a safe area north of the Sea."

"Is there anything you can tell me?" James asks.

He says to James, "There are a few books here that have yet to be packed for shipping which deals with religious history and related subjects." He brings his hands together before him on the table and continues, "But we are very busy and do not have much time before the Empire knocks on our door. I am afraid that I will not have the time to spend in searching for the information you are after. I am sorry."

James reaches inside his shirt and pulls out the medallion, showing it to Ollinear. "This medallion was given to me." He takes it off and lays it on the table before him. "I wasn't told anything about it, but have learned that it has something to do with Morcyth."

Ollinear reaches out to the medallion and looks to James questioningly. When James nods his head, he picks it up and examines it closely. "I know this," he says as his fingers trace the design on the medallion. He looks up to James, "Maybe I'll find the time to help you after all, follow me."

Still holding the medallion, Ollinear leads James back out to the hallway and returns to the room where his helpers are almost finished packing the few remaining books. When they enter the room, he says to one of the men, "Pack as quickly as you can, I will be occupied for a short time."

"Where will you be?" the man asks.

"Back with the histories," he replies. "I shouldn't be too long." Taking a candelabrum with several lit candles, he leads James through another doorway and down a long sloping hallway. They pass several doors, many are open and James can see room after room of empty shelves. Ollinear comes to the final doorway and is the only one which remains closed. Opening it, he precedes James into a room where the light from the candelabrum reveals dozens of neatly stacked books lining many shelves around the room.

"This is where the books chronicling the history of this region are stored," he explains. "They are not of any great importance, so are to be packed last." Turning to glance at James he says, "Which may prove to be providential." Waving to a chair by a table against a side wall, he says, "Please rest a moment while I find the book I believe to have this design depicted."

James sits in a chair and watches as Ollinear closely examines one book after another until finally pulling one off the shelf and brings it over to the table where he is seated. Placing the candelabrum on the table, the old man takes a seat across from him and sets the book down between them.

"This book was written four hundred years ago by one of my predecessors," he explains as he opens it and begins turning the pages. On the second page is a picture showing the exact same design as is on the front of the medallion, Ollinear holds up the medallion next to the picture and compares one to the other. "As I thought," he says as he hands the medallion back to James. "This design on your medallion is called the Star of Morcyth."

“Star?” James asks. A cold shiver runs down his spine, *‘With the star, seal your fate’*.

“Yes, it was the symbol of the religion, and was embossed on all important artifacts,” explains Ollinearn. “There must be some significance as to why you are carrying it.”

“That’s what I am trying to find out,” he says.

Nodding, he reads a little more and says, “The writer tells of a conflict between two major religions nearly half a millennium before this was written.”

“The church of Morcyth was one and the other was...,” he pauses as he takes a moment to read the passage. “Ah yes, here it is, Dmon-Li. That was the other one.”

“Dmon-Li?” James asks questioningly. “I’ve never heard of it.”

Ollinearn looks up from his book and says, “Not too surprising, unless you come from the south. It’s widely worshiped still in many parts of the Empire. In fact, I believe it has influence with the Emperor as well but do not know for sure.”

“What kind of god is Dmon-Li?” James asks.

“You see, where Morcyth was a god of good whose main tenets taught teaching and learning, Dmon-Li’s followers thrived on chaos and warfare. His priests often were great warriors, given great strength and skill that was used to foment wars and conflict.”

He reads several more passages and then says, “It seems at some point, Dmon-Li set about annihilating Morcyth’s priests. His warrior priests began hunting them down one by one until only a few were left.” He continues to read as he relates the tale. “It says here that there came a time when all had been slaughtered save a few priests who made their way to the High Temple.” He pauses a moment and then looks up at James and adds, “Here in the City of Light.”

“The High Temple was here?” James asks excitedly. “Here in the City of Light?”

“Apparently so,” Ollinearn affirms. “It seems that the last of the priests of Morcyth gathered together at the Temple while the High Priest began a period of fasting and prayer.” He looks up from the book, “Most likely to find a resolution to the problem of Dmon-Li, the book doesn’t give the exact reason.”

“Did anything come of it?” James asks.

Referring back to the book, he says, “There are no specifics, just that when the period of fasting ended, the priests all left the High Temple and as far as the author of this book knew, were never seen

again. He goes on to say that they left everything behind, taking very little with them.”

“That’s it?” James asks. “It doesn’t say where they went?”

Ollinearn flips through a couple more pages, scanning the writing, “No, it doesn’t. It does say that over time the temple was looted and was finally destroyed during a great quake that brought down most of the city in the year 2322, two hundred years prior to the writing of this book.”

“Does it say where the temple had been located?” James asks.

“No, it doesn’t,” Ollinearn replies as he continues examining the pages. “Here may be something,” he says, making eye contact with James. “It says that the last High Priest was born in the city of Saragon, maybe he returned home.”

“Possibly,” agrees James. “But the Empire now controls it and from what I hear to venture there would be very unwise right now.”

“True, true,” nods Ollinearn. He reads a little bit further and then says, “That is all there is about Morcyth and your medallion.” Closing the book he comes to his feet. “I hope I have been able to help you further your quest.”

“Yes, thank you,” replies James. “You have been most helpful.”

Ollinearn takes the candelabrum and motions for James to precede him out the door. He shuts the door and then leads James out to the main library area. “Good luck on your quest,” Ollinearn says. “I really must have the rest of these books packed before the ship sails.”

“I understand and thank you again,” he says and then moves to leave through the front door and back to where Miko waits with the horse.

“Did you find out anything?” Miko asks expectantly as James approaches.

“I’ll tell you later,” he says. “Let’s find a place to eat and then get out of here before the Empire shows up.”

“Good plan,” says Miko.

With Miko leading the horse, they travel through the crowded streets until they see an inn. Not wanting to leave their horse out front where someone fleeing may try to help themselves to it, they go around back and secure it near the back door before proceeding inside.

The inn is deserted save a lone serving girl who sits at a table near the front window watching the people making their way to the gates to get out of the city.

She fails to take notice of them until they get close and James says, "Excuse me."

Startled, she jumps from her seat and turns around, "Sorry, I didn't hear you come in. What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"Are you open for dinner?" James asks.

"Yes," she affirms, "we are, though there is limited choice. You see we are leaving first thing in the morning."

Taking a seat near the front window he says, "Just give us two large helpings of whatever you have and some ale."

Before she goes to the kitchen she pauses and says somewhat guiltily, "That's going to be three silvers, each."

"What?" James asks incredulously.

"That's outrageous!" Miko says, obviously mad.

Looking embarrassed, the girl says, "Sorry but that is what I am told to charge today."

James nods his head and says "Here," as he hands over six silvers. Then adds, "I understand."

Looking relieved the girl takes the money and then goes into the kitchen to get their food and drinks.

"How could you pay that much?" Miko asks as the girl disappears into the kitchen.

Shrugging, James says, "We're unlikely to get anything cheaper," he gestures to the people going by outside, carrying bundles or pulling carts. "Besides, we're lucky to be able to get anything at all. I'm surprised they're even open."

They sit back and relax as they wait for their food. James begins watching the people going by, mother's carrying babies alongside fathers pulling carts loaded with belongings and children. "Kind of makes you sad doesn't it?"

"What does?" asks Miko.

"The senseless destruction that war brings," he explains. "The ones who always pay the price of another's greed is the simple man who just wants to go about his life, take joy in his family, and find peace at the end. They didn't ask for it, don't understand why it's happening, but theirs are the lives ruined, turned upside down, families destroyed."

"I see what you mean," Miko says, reflecting on what James said.

The girl returns from the kitchen balancing a platter with heaping slices of meat smothered in thick gravy in one hand and a pitcher of ale with two mugs gripped in the other. She sits it all on

the table and then returns to the kitchen only to emerge with a large loaf of bread. "Here, this is extra," she says as she sits the bread on the table. "We'll probably just throw it away anyway."

Taking the bread James says, "Thank you."

Smiling, the girl begins to putter around the room, wiping down tables and keeping busy.

Starved from having little food the last couple of days, it doesn't take long before they completely devour their meal.

"Would you like anything else?" she asks when she comes over to remove the dinnerware.

"No nothing," James replies. "That was very good."

Miko nods agreement as he lets out a loud belch.

"Glad you liked it," she says before heading back to the kitchen with the dirty platter.

"Feel better?" James asks Miko as he relaxes back into his chair.

"Much better," he says contentedly, patting his stomach.

They sit and rest a little longer as they allow their food to digest. Continuing to watch the people going by, James spies a little girl running away from her mother, giggling and laughing, unaware of the gravity of the situation. Her mother calls her back but the girl keeps running around, thinking it's a game. The girl would slow down and her mother would almost get her only to bolt off through the crowd again.

The mother is getting extremely agitated and James feels sorry for the girl when she finally gets a hold of her. The little girl is racing again through the crowd, giggling and laughing when she runs into another of the mass of people on the street.

The little girl doesn't even realize she's bumped into someone until he grabs her by the arm. She gazes up to see who has a hold of her and looks into the face of a man with a patch over the right eye and a long angry welt running from his hairline to his jaw.

She looks like she's about ready to scream when her mother comes and words are exchanged with the man who let's go and the mother drags the child away, obviously yelling at her.

James goes cold when he sees the man, his memory flashes back to a man with a crossbow in a window and the snapped crosswire catching him in the face.

"Miko!" James says as he starts to get up. "I think I see the man who escaped when I rescued Perrilin."

"Are you sure?" he asks as he gets up too, grabbing their bags.

“Pretty sure,” James replies. “You see, his crossbow wire had snapped catching him in the face, along the right eye.” Pointing to the man in the road, he says, “And that man has a welt running in about the same area.” He then moves to the front door and leaves the inn.

“Goodbye,” they hear the serving girl say.

As Miko follows James out the front door he asks, “What are we doing?”

“I want to follow him and see what he’s up to,” James replies.

“I thought we were leaving?” Miko asks nervously. “You know, before the Empire gets here?”

“We are, this should only take a few minutes,” he assures him.

Not exactly happy about staying in the City longer, Miko says, “I hope so,” and continues following James as he follows the man.

They keep the man in sight as he continues down the street, then turning right at a main intersection. They briefly lose sight of him when he turns the corner but hurry to the edge of the building and peer around it, again catching sight of him as he makes another turn down a smaller side street. Running, they enter the side street and again pick him up as he continues walking down the road.

The road he is taking eventually leads to the docks where a veritable mob of people are trying to gain passage on the few vessels remaining in the harbor. All the ships have armed guards keeping the people at bay. Near the far end of the dock, in the opposite direction the man is going, a riot is in progress at the base of a gangway leading onto a ship. James can see guards using clubs and swords on the people as they surge toward the gangway.

“There he goes,” Miko says as he directs James’ attention back to the matter at hand. The man had just entered a warehouse standing back from the docks. It looks well maintained but closed at the moment. Seeing a window in the side of the warehouse, they quickly make their way over to it and peer inside.

Within, the man is talking to what looks to be two men in uniforms of the city guard. They see him handing a small vial to one of the men followed by a small sack, possibly heavy with coin.

James hears a noise behind him and as he quickly turns to see what it is, something strikes him hard in the side of the head and everything goes black.

Chapter Twenty Five

Gasping, James comes to as his head is deluged with a bucket of water. Next to him Miko sputters as he is treated similarly. His eyes are open but his vision is blurry. The side of his head throbs immensely from where he had been struck. He tries to move but finds himself to be tied to a chair with his arms secured behind him.

“Who are you?” he hears someone ask.

He looks around with far less than his normal 20-20 vision, trying to see the one that speaks when a strap comes from behind him and strikes him in the side, wrapping around his chest. He cries out from the pain inflicted and that’s when he realizes his shirt has been removed. An angry red welt forms across his skin where the strap had struck.

With eyes gradually regaining their focus, he sees the man with the patch over his eye step before him. The pain in his head explodes once more when the man grabs his hair and yanks his head back. “Now,” the man asks, gaze boring into James’ with his one good one, “who are you?”

“James,” he gasps, “my name is James.” He falters on the edge of consciousness from the pain, and starts to feel like he’s about to throw up.

The man lets go of his hair and asks, “What were you doing at the window?”

Fighting back nausea, James tries to think of a good reply when *Thwack!* the strap again scores along his side, creating another red, swollen welt.

“We were casing the place!” Miko yells out from the chair next to him.

Turning his attention toward Miko the man exclaims, “You expect me to believe you are a couple of thieves?” He signals the person behind Miko, and Miko cries out as the strap gives him a less than gentle caress.

“Well?” the man asks.

“In all the confusion of everyone leaving town,” Miko explains, “we thought we could score big.”

Looking at Miko intently, the man considers what he said.

“When we saw that there were people in here, we decided to find another place with no one around and that’s when someone struck us from behind,” Miko continues, trying to sound sincere.

“Perhaps,” the man says. He walks over to a table upon which their bags lay. He reaches into his backpack and pulls out the small amulet that James had picked up in Cardri. He dangles it in front of James and asks, “Then what are you doing with this?”

James has to squint in order to focus his eyes well enough to make out what it is that’s being shown him. “I bought that from a street merchant some time ago,” he replies when he finally makes it out.

Thwack! The strap hits him again, causing him to cry out.

“He’s telling the truth!” Miko exclaims from the chair next to him. “He just bought it to get away from the merchant.”

Thwack! A red welt begins to form across Miko’s chest. “When I want you to talk,” the man says to him, “I will tell you.”

A side door opens in the warehouse and the man looks toward the door. Another man walks in and comes over, quietly talking with their interrogator. Whatever he is telling him doesn’t make him very happy. After a few more moments of exchanging words, their interrogator says to their guards, “Keep an eye on them until I get back.” Then he turns angrily and stalks out the door with the other man right behind.

James leans back in his chair and closes his eyes, trying to relax as best he can, hoping the pain throbbing in his head will go away.

“James,” Miko whispers, “you okay?”

Unable to answer, he just silently shakes his head slowly.

James sits there with his eyes closed for several minutes before he hears a door open and close, then the sound of footsteps coming toward him. Opening his eyes, he’s afraid that it’s going to be ol’ One Eye again. When he sees who it is, he blinks a couple of times and finally decides he’s either dreaming or having hallucinations. For there walking toward him is Mickey Mouse.

He looks to his guards and they appear to not notice the new arrival, even when Mickey walks right past one of them. “I’ve gone crazy,” James moans aloud.

“No,” Mickey replies as he reaches up and removes his head, “you’ve not.” When the head comes off, it reveals the little creature who has already come to him twice before.

James begins to laugh, though he’s not sure why.

“Come on, James,” it says. “Let’s go.”

“You’re rescuing me?” he asks.

“No,” the little creature replies, “just borrowing you for a while.”

“Why?” asks James.

“You can’t stop asking questions can you?” the little creature says to him.

Unsure how to reply to that, he remains quiet.

“C’mon, get up,” the creature tells him.

“I’m tied,” James says.

The little guy looks at him silently, impatiently tapping one foot.

To show the little guy he can’t get up, James tries to stand and before he realizes it, he’s standing.

Putting his Mickey head back on, the little guy turns and motions for James to follow as he returns the way he came and exits through the door.

Following him outside, James stops suddenly and stares in absolute dumbfounded silence. “I know this place.”

“You should,” the little guy replies. “You’ve been here often enough.”

“Mommy, mommy!” a little girl squeals with delight as she runs over to the little guy in costume. “It’s Mickey!” She comes over and gives Mickey a big hug and then turns and poses while her mother takes their picture.

Mickey pats her on the head as she turns to him and says, “Bye, Mickey!”

“This is Disneyland!” James says incredulously, staring down Main Street USA, with Cinderella’s Castle at the end.

“Yeah,” the little guy says. “I love this place.” He begins to walk down toward the heart of Disneyland and kids continue to come up to him, giving him hugs and having their picture taken.

“How do you know about it?” he asks.

“I get around,” Mickey replies. “Besides, those of us who gravitate to what you call good, are drawn to such focal points in the universe.”

“Disneyland is a focal point?” James asks, astonished.

“Think about it,” replies the little guy. “What happens whenever someone mentions it? Those around them feel good, instantly. That makes it a remarkable place, there are few like it anywhere.” He pauses to have his picture taken with several children, their mother simply aglow with happiness.

“Everyone here on Earth knows of it and they continually direct good thoughts toward it,” he explains. “It’s almost a beacon in the night for those of us who can see it.”

“But why bring me here?” James asks.

The little guy pauses and glances back at James before more children requesting a photo op appear. When they are done he asks, “Would you like me to send you back?”

“No, not right now,” James replies hastily. He’s suddenly aware that his headache is gone as is the pain from the welts. Also, even though he is bruised, possibly bloody, and without a shirt, no one seems to give him a second thought.

“Ah, look,” the little guy says as he bends over to pick up something lying on the ground. He holds it up to show James, “Someone’s lost their wallet.” He walks toward one of the many workers and hands it over, saying, “My shift’s not over for a while, can you take this to Lost and Found?”

“Sure, not a problem,” the girl says as she puts the wallet in her pocket and then walks away.

“Sad when something gets lost,” he tells James. “When you lose something, you always hope an honest person will find it and work to get it back to you. All too often though, you never see it again. Such is life.”

“I suppose it is,” agrees James, not sure where this is going.

From up ahead, a group of teenage boys come running around the corner, hell-bent on getting to the next ride before their fast pass expires.

“No running in the park,” the little guy yells at them.

“Up yours, Mickey!” one of them yells as he swings around him and plows right into James.

Pain erupts in his head again and when he moves to get up, realizes he’s back in the chair strapped down. His headache is back though not nearly as intense as it had been. The pain of the welts across his stomach and chest on the other hand still throb painfully with every beat of his heart.

“James, thank the gods you’re finally awake!” Miko whispers with relief. “I was afraid you weren’t going to.”

The room seems darker and there are several lit torches in sconces around the room that weren’t there earlier. “How long was I out?” James asks Miko.

“A couple of hours or so,” he replies. “I’m not entirely sure. Night has fallen.”

“Was it all a dream then?” he muses to himself.

“Was what a dream?” Miko asks.

“Never mind, I’ll tell you later.” Looking around he finds there are still only the two guards that were there earlier. “We need to get out of here before ol’ One Eye returns,” he whispers to Miko.

“I think that would be a good idea too,” he agrees. “Magic?”

“I’ll try,” James says and then tries to concentrate but the throbbing in his head makes it nigh on impossible. He tries something simpler and concentrates on one of the torches on the wall that’s situated over many old crates and broken containers. The area looks to have been the dumping spot for anything that broke or was unusable.

As James concentrates on the torch, it slowly rises and begins to leave its sconce. He’s concentrating hard, focusing his will through the pain and inch by inch it continues to rise higher until the bottom is no longer inside the sconce. Gasping from the effort, he has it move a little to the side and then releases the magic, allowing it to fall amidst the crates and boxes below.

At first it looks like nothing is happening but then the beginnings of smoke start to rise from where the torch fell. “Now what?” Miko asks, watching as the smoke grows thicker and thicker.

“We wait,” he replies. Soon the flames are rising above the broken wooden crates.

One of the guards comes alert as he takes notice of the smoke. Turning toward the growing flames he yells, “Fire!” The other guard turns and sees the flames are licking the sides of the wall now and both run over to try to prevent it from spreading further.

James tries once more to wield the magic to break their bonds but his head is too muddled with the pain to adequately concentrate. When he sees Miko looking at him, he just shakes his head no.

Miko, realizing that James has done all he can, begins to rock his chair back and forth until he topples over. He then squirms around and eventually works the ropes off of him. Keeping an eye on the guards, who by now are fighting a roaring fire, he begins untying James from the chair. Once he’s free and they see that the guards are still preoccupied with the fire, they hurry to the table where their belongings lie and retrieve them.

The door on the far side suddenly swings open and ol’ One Eye comes in, coming to a surprised stop at seeing them there with their belongings in hand. “The prisoners!” he yells, drawing his sword

and races toward James and Miko. The guards turn and join the chase, giving up on the fire which by this time is beginning to burn out of control. It now covers most of the wall and has almost reached the rafters.

James and Miko race for the far door in the opposite side of the warehouse and reach it before anyone can get close. Bolting through it, they quickly lose themselves in the crowd of people outside. They don't get far before the fire consuming the warehouse is noticed by the crowds on the streets around it.

"Fire!" they hear someone shout and then it becomes total pandemonium. The crowds of people suddenly surge in panic as they try to get away from the flames now engulfing the warehouse. People begin shouting, and those that fall are trampled to death by those behind.

James glances back to the warehouse and sees ol' One Eye standing at the door they just vacated looking through the crowd for them. "Move!" he hollers when Miko suddenly pauses in front of him to avoid being trampled by a group of frightened people running by. Pushing him forward, they race down the street away from the warehouse behind them, dodging through the panicking crowd. After putting some distance between themselves and the fire, James grabs Miko by the shirt and pulls him through a door into a dark and empty warehouse. They shut the door and sink down against the wall to rest as they listen for any pursuit.

Miko scoots closer to James and whispers, "Maybe we should rest here for awhile, at least until you're a little better."

James nods his head and leans against the wall, trying to get comfortable. The adrenalin rush he experienced when escaping from the warehouse is quickly wearing off.

"I'll keep watch if you want to get some sleep," he offers.

Closing his eyes, James lies down on the floor and soon soft snores are telling Miko that he's fallen asleep.

Miko worries about his friend as he sits there in the dark. He listens to the noise outside, the sounds of people running and screaming. He remembers back to the times before he met James when he would sit in the dark, hoping not to be found by the constables or some street tough. He smiles at his memories, even though not all of them were good ones.

He sits there in the dark for quite some time, the only light being that of the fire coming in through the window. He goes over and peers through the window and sees several buildings adjacent to the

flaming warehouse have now caught fire as well. He watches as crews work to put out the fire and after a while they seem to have managed to stop it from spreading.

Suddenly, horns begin to sound in the night, dozens and dozens of horns. All the people out in the streets stop what they are doing and raise their heads for a moment, listening to the horns blaring all over the city. Then all hell breaks loose when the people begin racing off in different directions, bumping into each other. Some get knocked down and trampled by the panicked mob while others run and cry out in search of loved ones.

Feeling this may be too important to allow James to continue sleeping, he gently shakes his friend, rousing him. "James!" he whispers urgently, trying to wake him up.

Consciousness is slow in coming back to James. His head still throbs and he is unable to shake sleep's hold on him.

"What?" He asks groggily, trying to retain his tenuous hold onto consciousness.

"There were horns sounding," he whispers to his friend.

"Horns?" James asks, slurring his speech.

"Yeah, lots of them. Then it got all weird outside," explains Miko.

James looks at him, giggles a little and then lapses back into unconsciousness.

"Damn!" swears Miko. Realizing his friend will probably be out for some time, he makes his mind up to go and get some food and perhaps find out what is going on. Making James as comfortable as possible, he slips out the door and joins with the people outside.

"What's going on?" he asks one of the passersby.

Looking at him like he's stupid the man asks, "Didn't you hear the horns?"

"Yeah, but what does that mean?"

"It means the Empire's forces have been sighted nearing the city and now the gates have been sealed and barred. Now the only way in or out is by ship but some idiot set fire to a warehouse near there and took out a good portion of the docks before it could be put out."

"What are we to do?" Miko asks.

"What are you, stupid or something?" the man asks incredulously. "We're under siege boy! Not much to do but wait it out and hope for the best." Shaking his head, the man walks away, muttering about the idiots of the world.

Miko makes his way to a market of sorts that has sprung up near the docks. People are selling all kinds of stuff along with food. Miko goes to a seller of breads and purchases a loaf of bread for an exorbitant price of a silver and a half for one small loaf. When he tries to haggle, the man says, "Pay it or go away". Knowing James will need it he buys it as well as a jug of ale for five silvers.

"Extortion, that's what it is," he mutters to himself as he makes his way back to the abandoned warehouse. To his relief, he finds James exactly where he left him, undisturbed and still snoring softly. He sits down next to him and eats a little of the bread for himself, drinking a small portion of the ale to wash it down. Then he settles in to keep watch for as long as he needs to.

He manages to stay awake all night, keeping watch over his friend. When the morning sun begins to lighten the sky, to his immense relief, James begins to stir.

Moaning with the pounding in his head, he sits up and puts his head in his hands in the hope of keeping it from bursting apart. "Oh my god," he moans. "What I wouldn't give for some aspirin right now."

"We don't have any of that," replies Miko, wondering what an aspirin is. He offers the bread and ale to James and says, "But we do have this."

Seeing what he's offering, James takes it and slowly nibbles on the loaf and drinks the rest of the ale. "How long have I been out?" he asks between bites.

"All night," Miko replies. "And I've got bad news."

James looks at him questioningly as he continues to eat the rest of the bread.

"Apparently sometime last night the Empire's forces were sighted nearing the City," he explains, pausing a moment to see what effect his words are having.

"Go on," James prompts him.

"And they've shut the gates, no one is allowed in or out," he tells him. "We're under siege!"

Nodding, James says, "I was afraid of that. When I'm done we'll look around the City and see if we can figure our way out of here." Eating the last of the bread and beginning to feel better, he goes over to the bags and begins to dump out everything.

Miko comes over and looks oddly at what he's doing.

“We’re getting rid of everything but the most important stuff,” he explains. “One bag each.” So they begin to sort through what they have and finally narrow it down to just enough items to give each of them half a bag. James takes the money and divides it equally between them.

When he hands Miko his half he says, “Just in case we either get separated or one of the bags gets lost.”

Miko nods understanding and puts his money pouch within his bag.

“Now,” James says as he gets shakily to his feet, “let’s go see what’s happening outside.” He goes over to the door and looks out the small window next to it. Seeing no one close by he opens the door and they make their way quickly into the street. Smoke still rises from the charred remains of several buildings and about a third of the wharf area.

“Man what a mess,” James exclaims, shaking his head.

“At least we’re alive,” asserts Miko.

“True,” agrees James.

They walk down the street, away from the smoldering wreckage. They can hear the sound of horns on the fields outside of the walls along with the whisk of arrows being fired by the defenders atop the walls. All the townspeople are strangely absent, the streets vacant of the usual mass of people.

As they continue along a member of the city guard takes notice of them and says, “No one is allowed on the streets. You will have to return to your homes.”

“Alright,” James responds, “we didn’t realize.”

The guard stands there and watches as they turn around and head back the way they came. After going down a ways, they turn down a side street and James comes to a stop. “Damn!” he swears. “I hadn’t figured on there being a curfew.” He stands there thinking for a second before saying, “Makes sense though.”

“Should we go back to the warehouse where we were?” Miko asks.

Nodding his head slowly, James replies, “Probably would be the best thing to do. I doubt if they are going to breach the walls anytime soon,” he reasons. “So we’ll try again tonight when we are not so conspicuous.”

They return through the streets to the warehouse where they discover a stairway inside along one wall leading to the roof.

Hoping to get a good view of what is happening in the city, they climb the stairs and pass through the trapdoor to the roof.

Atop the roof they have a fair view of the city, the walls still rising higher than the warehouse's roof. Several thousand men line the walls, archers fire arrows down at the attackers. They see a crossbow bolt strike one of the archers on the wall and watch as he plummets off the wall and lands with a squishy thud on the street below.

The roofs of many buildings throughout the city have a number of people upon them as well, apparently having the same idea as they. Looking toward the remaining docks, James sees a ship disembarking soldiers and supplies. With the curfew in effect, there is no longer a mob at the docks, fighting to board the approaching ships. However there are several squads stationed in and around the dockside just in case of trouble.

"James, look!" Miko says as he points to five wagons making their way toward the dockside. They can see that the wagons are loaded with many boxes and crates. An old man sits on the lead wagon, "I guess Ollinearn finally got all his books packed. Glad he's going to make it out of the city."

"Maybe if we could get to him, he would take us with him?" Miko asks, looking hopeful.

James gazes out over the city at the many squads patrolling the streets between Ollinearn and them. Turning to Miko he says, "I doubt if we'd make it that far."

Feeling disappointed and mad, Miko watches as Ollinearn trundles to the docks and begins to load the last of his books on one of the waiting ships.

The clash of swords draws their attention to a section of the wall somewhat close to where they stand. Several attackers have managed to gain the wall and reinforcements are running to beat them back.

The fighting on the wall where the enemy has achieved a foothold is fierce, but the attackers are outnumbered and it isn't long before the last one falls. A cheer rises from the defenders as the wall is once again secure.

"That was close," Miko comments.

"I'd hate to be up there," says James, watching as men remove the dead and wounded. The enemy soldiers they simply toss over the side to land on their comrades below.

The rest of the day progresses pretty much the same. The Empire's army storms the walls, the defenders fight them back, and occasionally the attackers gain a foothold on the wall only to have the defenders cut them down, securing the wall once again. There were two brief respites in which the attackers withdrew, regrouped and then commenced their assault all over again.

They both take turns sleeping while the other keeps watch and by the end of the day, James is feeling much improved.

As the sun begins to sink toward the horizon, horns are heard from the field outside the walls as the attackers withdraw. When it becomes apparent that no attack is imminent, the men on the walls begin to be rotated off in shifts for meals and rest.

People begin to emerge from their homes and the streets once more become crowded. Many make their way to the Keep to see about loved ones who had been manning the walls.

"It seems the curfew has been lifted while the assault has stopped," observes James. "This may be a good time for us to see about getting out of here, if that's even possible."

"Do you feel better?" Miko asks.

"Some," James tells him. "My headache is only a dull throbbing now." He feels the bump on the side of his head and says, "I think the swelling's gone down from where they struck me. Being able to rest for a day has sure done wonders."

They come down off the roof, grab their bags and leave the warehouse to merge with the people now back on the streets. They make their way toward the docks and find that the east side has been cordoned off and is guarded by several squads of the city guard. They are told that area is for the unloading of supplies and men.

They make their way to the western side of the docks where a mass of people have gathered. A man stands upon a wagon and is addressing the crowd. "...are going to come and help evacuate the City. They will pull up to the dock and at that time, in an orderly fashion, those at the head of the line will board quickly. Anyone, and I do mean *anyone*, who causes trouble or becomes a nuisance will be dealt with severely."

Looking behind him, the man on the wagon sees the first of the rescue boats pulling up to the docks. He raises his hands to get the crowds attention. When they've quieted down he says loudly, "The first boat is here and more are on the way." He signals to a squad of guards on the docks and says, "Start loading."

When the crowd hears that, they surge toward the docks, pushing and shoving to be first to get on the boat. “Do not push!” the man says to the crowd, “the boats will be coming all night long and as long as needed to get everyone out.”

One man pushes an old lady down and runs for the boat, a guard sees him and moves to intercept. The man starts to fight with the guard, but is soon clubbed senseless. “Take him away,” the man on the wagon yells to the guards. Raising his voice even further he yells, “He will be the *Last* one allowed on the boats!”

When the people hear that they become a bit more orderly and soon an orderly line is formed as they wait for the first boat to fill. Other boats are waiting their turn to approach the docks to help evacuate the populace.

“Let’s get in line,” James says. “Looks like we’ll make it out of here after all.”

The boats are those of private citizens from neighboring cities. None of them are able to carry a lot of people, but slowly and surely, the line continues to move.

The sun drops behind the horizon and torches are lit to provide light for the people and the arriving boats. At one point a boat loaded with evacuees sails from the docks and no new boat takes its place. Several minutes pass and still no other boat approaches to continue the evacuation. A low murmur can be heard developing within the waiting crowd.

The man gets back up on the wagon and addresses the increasingly restless people. “Do not worry!” he yells out over the crowd. “They will return when they have dropped off their passengers at a safe port. More boats than what you’ve already seen are on their way. They must travel from farther away, but they will come!”

The crowd quiets down and settles in to wait patiently. Several more hours pass and more boats appear to take on passengers and then quickly sail away, making room for the next one in line.

Ta-TOOOOO Ta-TOOOOO

The sounds of many horns can be heard coming from the eastern wall, as well as faint sounds of swords exchanging blows. The crowd around James and Miko begins growing restless and the look of fear can be seen on many of their faces.

A rider approaches at a gallop and halts near the man who addressed the crowd. “My lord!” the rider cries out to him, “they’re in the city!”

“How!” demands the man.

“Someone poisoned the guards at the gate and then released the lock!” he explains.

To the guards the man yells, “To the east gate!” as he jumps from the wagon and breaks into a run. The guards fall in behind.

When the crowd hears that the enemy is within the city, all thoughts of orderly evacuation vanishes. As one, the crowd surged forward toward the boat that’s currently loading passengers. They swarm over it, knocking each other out of the way and into the water. A knife flashes and a woman screams as she falls into the Sea. They overload the small pleasure craft past its limits. The mass of people upon the craft cause it to tip over, spilling everyone into the water as it sinks to the bottom.

The other captains waiting in line to pick up refugees, after having witnessed what just happened, turn their boats around and sail away, not willing to risk their boats or their lives with the panicked mob.

The people on the dock cry out for them to return but to no avail. Then absolute panic sets in as they realize that rescue is no longer forthcoming. People jump into the Sea and try to swim while the majority of the people just run in every direction, trampling to death many of their neighbors.

James and Miko flow with the mob until they can get away from it down a side alley. “What are we to do now?” Miko asks, fear evident in his voice.

“Maybe we can swim out around the walls and past the armies,” suggests James.

Miko brightens at the idea and says, “Let’s go!”

They slowly make their way through the press of the crowd until they come to the water’s edge. The Sea is full of swimming bodies, many having the same idea as James. They get ready to enter the water when screams begin coming from out in the water.

Crossbow bolts are flying into those in the water, striking all who are trying to escape. James can barely make out dozens of enemy crossbowmen lining the shores, firing at the helpless people in the water.

“Not this way,” he says and they race off into the city.

Chapter Twenty Six

The sound of fighting increases as the enemy continues to gain more and more ground within the City. People are running every which way, no one seems to know where to go. James and Miko continue racing through the streets trying to stay clear of the fighting.

Several fires have broken out within the city casting an eerie glow to the night. James can see where the enemy has gained a foothold upon several sections of the walls, their crossbowmen beginning to rain bolts down upon the defenders from the height of the walls.

“This is going to be over soon,” he tells Miko as they pause for a moment to try to decide the best direction to go.

“How did they get inside the walls so fast?” Miko asks. “Everyone said that it would take them weeks to breach these walls, maybe longer.”

“Remember the rider who came up while we were waiting to board the boats?” James reminds him. “He said they were poisoned and I have a good idea who was behind it.”

“Who?” Miko asks.

“Ol’ One Eye,” James replies. “When we were looking through the window to the warehouse he was giving a vial and what looked to be sacks of coins to someone. My guess is that the vial contained the poison that was used on the guards at the gate.”

“Very good,” says a voice behind them.

Turning, they see ol’ One Eye standing there with a dozen enemy soldiers, three of whom have crossbows aimed straight at them.

“Greetings again, gentlemen,” he says. “Move wrong and you’ll have a bolt through you.”

“How did you find us?” Miko asks.

While his men tie their hands behind their backs, he says, “Fairly easy actually. I saw you in line at the docks waiting to board one of those damn boats. I set a man to watch in case you left the line. When the panic started, it was easy enough to follow and catch you.”

“Why bother with us?” James asks.

“I have my reasons,” he replies and then sets off with them in tow toward where the fighting is the fiercest. Heading for the east gate, they occasionally have to duck down alleys whenever soldiers of Cardri race past.

It was fairly easy for James to use magic as they walked to break the bindings holding their hands. When Miko felt his bonds part, he almost let the rope slip to the ground, but fast thinking kept him holding on to it to prolong the illusion that they were still bound.

Miko glances at James who winks at him and then continues following their captors. A group of defenders emerge at a run from a side street ahead with no effort in trying to maintain formation. It was a complete rout, enemy soldiers emerged behind them and gave chase.

One Eye has them duck into another alley, letting them pass. James glances further into the alley and finds that it opens on another street further down. He indicates with his head for Miko to look back to the main road. When Miko looks he sees a small glowing ball rolling toward their hiding place. He closes his eyes, remembering the last time at the inn back in Bearn.

“What the hell is that?” one of their captors asks.

“Shoot it,” One Eye says.

One of the crossbowmen fires a bolt and when the bolt connects with it, the ball explodes in a brilliant flash of light, blinding everyone.

James and Miko, having kept their eyes close, only partially lose their night vision. They shove out against the men surrounding them, causing them to trip and fall over themselves in their blinded state. James grabs Miko’s shoulder and directs him to the other end of the alley.

Behind them arise cries of “I’m Blind!”, “Can’t see!” and One Eye yelling, “Don’t let them escape!”

They race from the alley and turn down the street, making for the western side of the City. With enemy pouring through the eastern gate, to the west is their only hope of escape. Dodging around a corner to avoid an approaching group of enemy soldiers, they suddenly find themselves in a market square where a dozen small children have sought refuge. From the other side of the square, a dozen of the enemy appears.

James pulls Miko against the side of the building and into the shadows. He watches the soldiers enter the square and quickly take note of the children. Then to his horror, they attack.

Without thinking, James reacts and the ground under the charging soldiers erupts, throwing bodies every which direction. More soldiers enter the square behind the others. Coming out of the shadows, he yells to the children, "Come on! This way!"

The children see him and the older ones get the younger ones moving toward him. "Let's go! Move it!" he yells as the soldiers begin entering the square, circumventing the hole he blasted in the street.

The soldiers see the children running and race to catch them, their swords drawn. James reaches down, picks up several rocks and begins felling soldiers, using magic to give the stones speed and accuracy. One after another the soldiers fall, but still they come, their numbers steadily increasing.

The children finally reach James and with Miko in the lead, they flee down the side street, trying to elude the soldiers. At the next crossroad, Miko hesitates, asking, "Which way?"

One of the older children says, "This way!" pointing to the right, down a street with several tall buildings bordering it.

Miko looks to James who nods and they head in that direction, running as fast as the littlest can go.

James realizes that the soldiers will catch them if he doesn't slow them down, so he yells to Miko, "Find someplace to hide, I'll find you." He stops and turns to face the oncoming soldiers as Miko leads the children away.

A bolt flies past his left ear, shaking him up, but he steels himself and concentrates on the buildings bordering the street. When he releases the power, the buildings explode outward from both sides of the street, smashing into the soldiers as they enter between them. The rubble effectively blocks the street so James, whose head has begun to throb with that last spell, turns and tries to catch up with his friend.

He glances at the outer walls of the City as he runs and sees the enemy now has complete control of it. The fighting throughout the City is beginning to diminish as the defenders realize it's a hopeless cause and begin to surrender.

James races down the street when a squad of enemy soldiers emerges from a side street, blocking his path. They see him

skidding to a stop and one of them yells, “Stop! Stay right where you are!”

Not heeding the command James ducks in through a doorway and finds himself in a laundry. Racing past the empty tubs he locates the back door and comes out in very small alley, which is wedged in between two tall buildings.

He heads to the right, running down the alley as the soldiers enter the laundry behind him in pursuit. Light illuminates the alley from an open doorway up ahead and the sound of men’s laughter can be heard coming from the other side. He runs toward it and races inside.

There in the middle of the floor are two enemy soldiers holding a girl down on the floor while a third tears off the remainder of her clothes.

Anger blossoms like a red hot sun inside him and he releases a surge of power which picks up the men, slamming them into the wall. Their bodies hit with such force, they smash through the thin wall and fall lifeless onto the street on the other side amidst the rubble.

The girl looks up and sees James coming toward her. Screaming in terror, she gets to her feet and runs out the door and into the night.

James bolts through the hole in the wall just as the pursuing soldiers enter the doorway behind him. “There he is!” one of the men shouts.

He makes his way around the dead men lying amidst the rubble and flies down the street, enemy soldiers in hot pursuit.

James is getting winded, only the fear of dying keeps his feet moving at all. His breath is coming in gasps and a pain has begun to grow in his side. He glances behind him and sees the soldiers are gaining on him. Fear of being caught gives him a burst of adrenaline but it is short lived.

Ahead, the road comes to another intersection where another squad of the Empire’s soldiers are crossing from the left to the right. From behind he hears a pursuing soldier yell, “Stop him!” to the soldiers crossing the intersection. One of the crossing soldiers pauses and glances down the ally and sees James approaching. He yells to his commander and the squad turns into the alley, blocking his only escape.

James comes to a halt, trapped. Panting for breath, he pauses for just a moment to regain some of his strength.

The soldiers, seeing James stop, slow their advance. “Come on,” one of his pursuers says to him, all cocky. “There’s no use running. You’ve got nowhere to go.”

James concentrates and directs the magic, causing the ground under his pursuers to explode outward, throwing bodies every which way.

From the group coming from the intersection, he hears, “He’s a mage!” Two crossbowmen from the group let fly bolts at him as the remaining soldiers rush forward.

With a wave of his hand, he creates a barrier that deflects the arrows harmlessly to the side. Concentrating hard, he casts a spell, the effort of which brings black spots to his eyes and his pulse pounding from the amount of power being used.

Magic flows into the rubble littering the alley from when the ground erupted. Pieces are drawn together and in no time, a stone creature is formed. Body of stone given life by magic it shuffles toward the soldiers who strike ineffectively at it with their weapons. It swings its arms and when it hits, bones shatter.

It positions itself between the soldiers and James, repulsing every attempt the soldiers make to get past. Realizing that they’ll be unable to get to James, they retreat back to the intersection where they disappear around the corner. The creature follows as far as the alley’s entrance before coming to a stop.

James’ head is pounding, this last spell had taken everything he had, and then some. His strength and energy are all but depleted. He leans against the building behind him and sags to the ground, on the verge of passing out. Spots fill his vision as consciousness wanes. The last thing he sees before slipping away is a young man dropping to the ground near him and then start walking toward him.

Epilog

James awakens in a small dark room with only a single candle for light. The room looks like an old storage room with many boxes

lining the walls. A single old tapestry hangs upon the far wall, obviously having seen better days. He's lying on a blanket on the floor with another one covering him, his backpack sits beside him. He looks around and sees four people, two who aren't much more than kids. Two are young men still in their teens, the oldest being around seventeen the other being slightly younger. The other two are girls, one couldn't be more than sixteen while the other has an older feel to her.

As he sits up, they glance in his direction, gathering closer to one another as they watch to see what he's going to do. "How did I get here?" he asks.

The younger of the girl timidly replies, "Jiron found you and brought you here."

"You a mage?" the younger boy asks him.

He looks at each of them in turn and says, "Sort of, I suppose."

"Cool," he exclaims.

The older teen steps a little closer and says, "I was watching you when you fought those soldiers. That stone creature was something else."

Remembering, James smiles and says, "Yeah, that was Rocky."

"Rocky?" asks the older girl.

"That was what my friend always called him," James explains. "Never thought to actually see him in action though."

"When Jiron moved you," the younger teen says, "Rocky fell apart into a pile of stones and dirt."

Nodding, James sits there and thinks for a second then says, "Just where am I and who are you?"

"This is our hideout," the older teen says. "We stay here from time to time." Pointing to himself he says, "I'm Jiron and this here is Tinok," indicating the younger teen. Then pointing to the older girl, he says, "That's Delia and the other is Cassie."

"My name is James and I thank you for getting me out of there," he tells them. "Exactly what is happening out there?" he asks.

"The Empire's forces have completely taken over the City," explains Jiron. "Most of the younger people are being rounded up and taken south to be sold as slaves. Anyone caught on the streets runs the risk of being killed or captured. Some of the older ones are being left alone, but anyone they think could cause them problems is being dealt with, one way or another."

"How long have I been here?" he asks.

“We brought you here yesterday and you’ve been asleep ever since,” explains Delia, the older girl. “It’s now night again, so a little over a day.”

Miko! James thinks to himself. *What happened to him?* As he sits there in the cellar alone with the four kids, sadness comes over him as the possible fates of Miko run through his mind. Reaching into his backpack, he pulls out his compass and casts a spell to locate Miko.

As the spell is cast, the needle swivels and points the way. Then the needle begins to move slightly, indicating that Miko is on the move. “He’s alive!” James cries exuberantly.

“Who’s alive?” Jiron asks.

“A friend of mine who got separated from me during the attack,” he replies. “It looks like he is on the move somewhere.”

“If he was in the City last night and on the move now,” Jiron says, “then I would hate to think what that might mean.”

“What?” asks James apprehensively.

“He’s probably been taken captive and is being marched south to be sold as a slave,” he explains.

James thinks of the last thing he said to Miko, *‘Find someplace to hide, I’ll find you.’* With grim determination, he intends to do just that.

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The Adventurer's Guild

Jaikus and Reneeke are ordinary lads whose dream in life is to become a member of The Adventurer's Guild. But to become a

member, one must be able to lay claim to an Adventure, and not just any adventure. To qualify, an Adventure must entail the following:

1-Have some element of risk to life and limb

2-Successfully concluded. If the point of the Adventure was to recover a stolen silver candelabra, then you better have that candelabra in hand when all is said and done.

3-A reward must be given. For what good is an Adventure if you don't get paid for your troubles?

Jaikus and Reneeke soon realize that becoming members in the renowned Guild is harder than they thought. For Adventures posted as Unresolved at the Guild, are usually the ones with the most risk.

However, when they hear of a party of experienced Guild members that are about to set out and are in need of Springers, they quickly volunteer only to discover to their dismay that a Springer's job is to "Spring the trap."

If they survive, membership in the Guild is assured.