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UNWILLING
ADVENTURER

HEIDI WILLARD

THE UNWILLING ADVENTURER (THE UNWILLING #1)

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CHAPTER 1

Everything was normal for Fred until the old man showed up.

Fred was a fine lad with his dark brown hair, fair complexion and dark eyes. He was also a serf by occupation and title, and that left him with little other choice but to labor on Lord Damskov's estate. Fred hadn't been born a serf, though. He was a freedman until his parents died when he was ten, and they left their debt to the lord unpaid. By law he was forced into the servitude of the debt owner, and there he remained for several years. The first ten years of freedom had given him an independent streak, but he kept his mouth shut to keep the peace. Days slipped into weeks, and then months, and still he continued to live and work on his lord's manor. Now he was a young man of fifteen, and still chained to the estate. That is, until the old man came and wrecked his life.

The day started out as many others had before it. The sun rose and he along with it, and Fred had trudged out into the plots assigned for him to manage. There were several acres of crops to weed and water, and after that work was done he could manage his own little plot of dirt used to grow his own food. If Fred left the supply of food up to his lord then he would have died of starvation.

Beyond his fields stretched miles and miles of farmland that traveled over the rolling hills, interrupted only by sparse clumps of trees and bushes, and the occasional manor. A river ran close to the manor on which he lived and wound its way west toward a town he knew existed but had never seen. He didn't have any curiosity to see it, either; he was far too busy tending his small patches of rocks and weeds.

Fred was just setting to work when the old man came walking close by on the wide dirt path that led from the main road to the manor house. The boy was interested in this stranger, for strangers were a rare sight. Even more rare was such a stranger as this, what with his ragged brown cloak draped over his shoulders. The ends dragged along the ground behind him and covered any footprints he left in the dust. There was also the white, unkempt hair which trailed down over the old man's shoulders and draped over the front and back of the cloak. He had wisps of white hair over his head, but his eyes were well-covered by a pair of bushy gray eyebrows and he had a long, white beard that stretched down to his waist. The old man carried a staff in his hand, but though his pace was slow and feeble he didn't lean his weight against it.

Fred was startled when the stranger lifted his head and turned those old eyes on him. They were a bright blue, brighter than the clear sky above them, and held an energy which wasn't seen in his step. The old man tottered over to Fred and looked the lad up and down. A small smile graced his mustached lips, and he nodded his head. "Can such a fine lad as yourself tell me where I might find the nearest town?" the old man asked him.

Fred shook his head. "I haven't been farther from this manor than a mile, and the town is somewhere beyond that to the west."

"Can you help me find it? I am old and haven't much strength to be wandering over all these winding roads," the stranger requested.

"I can't. I'm not allowed to leave the manor without permission from my lord." Fred dared not disobey his lord's laws.

The stranger pulled at his beard, and the smile remained on his lips. "I see. Well, I suppose you wouldn't want to disobey your lord for a short adventure."

Fred was ruffled by this challenging patronage. "It's not that, it's just that I'm not

allowed to. I could get whipped for leaving the manor."

The old man held up a wrinkled old hand and nodded his head. "I see what you mean, young man. The risk certainly isn't worth it, not when you don't know what dangers lurk outside these peaceful fields." The stranger glanced out upon the plowed and fallow fields that were spotted with the pitiful huts for the workers. Fred's own home was a short distance from them. "But I thank you for the help and will leave you to your work."

The old man turned away back to the main road, and Fred had an urge to wander after the strange fellow. He shook off such a foolish idea, but he thought that perhaps he could give the man one small bit of advice. The boy wondered at such a stranger and why the feeble old man wandered the roads in such a condition. "What are you searching for, sir?" he called out to the man.

The stranger halted and half turned to the young man. Fred flinched back from those blue eyes so focused on him, and the stranger had a raised brow.

"What was that, boy?" the stranger asked Fred.

"I'm sorry if I've offended, but you seem lost. Were you searching for something in particular?"

The man softly chuckled and nodded his head. "Searching for something? Yes, I was searching for something. Perhaps I will find it in the next town."

"Well, if you were wanting better directions you might ask up at the manor house," Fred called out. The young man nodded to his right where lay the large house. "My Lord Damskov certainly knows the way, or any of the servants who go to the town."

The old man inclined his head in a short bow. "I am much obliged for the help, though I believe I have heard enough to know what to do." Fred thought the statement odd, but the man wasn't finished with speaking to him. "Perchance may I know the name of the serf who is so helpful so I may recommend a reward to your lord?"

"My name is Fred."

"Have you no other name?"

"None that I have been told," Fred replied, and the man nodded.

"I see. Well, Fred, it was a pleasure to meet you, and I hope our paths cross in the future."

The man moved up the road toward the manor, and when he passed Fred stepped out of the field onto the path. He watched the stranger far longer than he meant to, but the old man held such a strange fascination with him. He felt as though he had seen that face before, but a long while ago. Perhaps when he was younger and his father had taken him on his few short trips from the estate. The old man disappeared around the buildings which surrounded the manor, and Fred shook the thought from his mind. He had fields to hoe and bugs to fight.

Fred didn't think much of the old man while he toiled away the day, but the night was without distractions. He lay down on his bed of hay in his weathered hut of a home, a sorry mix of dried clay and wood beams with a hint of dilapidation. He stared up at the patched, wooden ceiling and sighed. He had hardly thought about anywhere away from this place he had always called home, but the stranger's questions got him thinking about the outside world. There were so many places he only knew the names, and so many sights of which he had only heard tales. The fine capital city of Tramadore, home to the ruler of the land in which he lived, and the large

Market Town with its wealth of goods from all over the lands. Fred turned his head to the side and glanced around at the four bare, thin walls around him. He wondered what lay beyond these plain, plastered walls.

The boy sighed and rolled onto his side to face the closest wall. He wouldn't find out what lay beyond them, so there was no sense thinking of such places. He was bound to his lord for life, especially with the debt his parents owed for several years of failed crops. He would marry when he found the right girl and have children, and be trapped to this small piece of earth for the remainder of his days. Fred closed his eyes and welcomed sleep. It helped him escape this empty sort of life, at least for a while.

The sun rose the next day as it had countless times before, and Fred rose with it. He trudged out into his fields and had been at work for an hour when a messenger from the manor house came up to him. "Good morning, Fred," the boy greeted him. The residents of the fields were few enough that everyone knew everyone else.

"Good morning, Sebastian," Fred returned. He was grateful for the relief from his hoeing. "What brings you out here?" Occasionally Sebastian would come out to chat if there were no messages to be taken to town or one of the neighboring manors.

"Lord Damskov asked me to fetch you. He said there's something important about which he wished to speak with you," Sebastian informed him.

Fred raised an eyebrow, but an order from the lord could not be long ignored. He set his hoe against his house and followed Sebastian to the manor house. Fred had only rarely been around the fine, tall buildings of house, barn, and stable, particularly the wooden lodge that made up the main home of the lord. Lord Damskov had no family, but his wealth bought him all the comfort he ever desired. This included fine wine and women, both of which could be found in large quantities in the nearby town when he was in the mood to acquire such diversions.

Fred was escorted through the open double doors and into the spacious dining hall in a side room off the high, raftered entrance hall. Lord Damskov was seated at the head of the long table in his tall chair. He was a man of about fifty with graying black hair and a thin, pinched face. His long nose looked down on his inferiors, and his thin hands counted his money with the precision of one highly trained in the art. The young man was surprised to see the stranger at his lord's right hand. He also saw there was a girl on Lord Damskov's other side. She wore a light-weight suit of armor beneath a stained traveling cloak. Her hair was long and golden, but tied in a tight braid and tucked into her armor. She had blue-green colored eyes, and looked to be about the same age and height as himself. Her face had a sour look to it, and Fred thought he wouldn't trade his spot with his lord's if it meant sitting beside such a girl.

Lord Damskov noticed them enter and waved off Sebastian. "That will be enough, boy. I wish to speak with Fred alone." Sebastian bowed and left the four to themselves. "Fred, come here. I wish to speak with you about an important matter." Fred moved to stand on his lord's left side, and the boy had trouble keeping his focus off the old man. The stranger had those bright blue eyes ever on him, and the gaze was unnerving. "You recall that I am owed a great debt by your family?"

"Yes, my lord." He could not very well forget it; his entire life revolved around the debt.

Lord Damskov gestured to the stranger. "This man has offered to pay your debt and be your new lord."

Fred's eyes widened and his jaw dropped open. He would never have believed his lord capable of selling him to any bidder. "But my lord, my parent's debt is owed only to you. It

can't be sold-"

"It can, and if I see fit it will be," Damskov interrupted him. "This gentleman offered more than you are worth to me, particularly since you are a mere boy, and only through my mercy have I asked for your opinion on the matter. I must guess by your outburst that you are not pleased?"

Fred stiffened. His lord's voice was low and threatening; Damskov dared Fred to outright refuse to the arrangement. Fred surprised him with a show of spirit. "I would much prefer to remain on your estate, my home for my entire life, and work out my debt to you and you alone."

During Fred's impassioned speech Damskov's face reddened until he was as flushed as a tomato. Just as Fred finished his final sentence Damskov sprang to his feet and knocked his chair over. He sputtered out his indignation. "W-what insolence from a mere serf! What disloyalty! I give you land to work as your own and a place to call home, and this is how you repay me?"

Fred noticed the old man watched him intently; the stranger pulled on his beard and had a smile on his wizened old face. "I'm not trying to be insolent or ungrateful, my lord, but I would rather work out my debt to you."

"You shall not!" thundered the lord. "I will not have such a serf on my land for a day longer!" He turned swiftly to the old man. "If you will pay the promised price then I shall be glad to have such an impudent boy off my hands!"

The old man nodded solemnly, though his eyes remained on the boy. "I am in need of a boy with spirit and energy. This one will do just fine." Fred saw the girl open her mouth, hesitate, and then snap it shut; her scowl deepened.

The old man's words gave Damskov comfort, and his anger cooled. He straightened his clothing and bowed to his guests. "Then I would like to invite you to dine with me before you leave."

The girl was alarmed by the suggestion, but the old stranger shook his head. "I'm afraid we can't take such an offer. Our business demands we hurry away." The stranger stood calmly from his chair, and the girl followed suit. He put his hand into his cloak and removed a large leather satchel. He untied the string and the sides folded out to reveal a large pile of gold coins.

Fred and his lord were in awe by the easy display of wealth; Damskov recovered first and coughed to hide his surprise. "Well, I've forgotten what we agreed to as a fair price. It was thirty gold coins, wasn't it?" Fred was taken aback by such a sum; his debt was not more than a few coins and he hardly guessed he was ever worth so much.

The girl, too, was stunned. "It is not! The deal was for half that sum!" She was calmed by a look from her companion.

"I see you are a shrewd man. As I'm sure the boy will be worth more than twice that sum, and certainly more than I will pay you, I accept your amendment to our deal." He fastened the bag shut and held it out to Damskov. "This satchel contains forty such coins. I'm sure you wish to count them."

Damskov eagerly took the bag and hugged it to himself. "I trust you, kind sir, and may you have better fortune with this boy than I find myself having."

The old man glanced over to Fred and his eyes twinkled with a strange light. "I'm sure I will."

With that simple exchange Fred's debt, and his body, passed hands from the life he had

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always known into the hands of this eccentric old man and his strange female companion.

CHAPTER 2

Fred wasn't sure whether to cry or be relieved. He was freed from one debt and cast into another. The only benefit to the first arrangement was he knew that devil, and now he found himself with a possibly worse devil in the form of this serf buyer. Damskov cared nothing for his former serf's feelings, however, as he pocketed the bag. "Seeing as how you wished not to stay for a meal, I must ask that you leave my estate with the boy as soon as possible. He is much too troublesome for me to want to keep him any longer."

"Troublesome?" Fred repeated. He found comfort in knowing that he was no longer indebted to such a greedy man as this one showed himself to be. "My lord, my indignation is understandable. I owed you a debt of money and you have sold my body to a stranger."

Damskov's eyes lit up, and he marched over to Fred. The boy didn't have time to react before Damskov wrapped his hand around his throat. Damskov pulled Fred's face up to his own, and his words spat spit into the boy's face. "Your body was the only form of payment you could give me that would fulfill the debt. Now you are indebted to this gentleman, and I expect you to be a loyal serf."

Fred squirmed in the strong grasp, but he was distracted in his thrashings by a stick that rose above Damskov's head. The knob slammed down onto Damskov's noggin; the lord gave a feeble cry and dropped Fred to the floor. The boy scurried out of Damskov's reach as the lord clutched his head and swung around.

The old man calmly stood there with his staff in hand and a smile on his face. "There's no need for such words and strangulations," the old man spoke up. "I'm sure I won't have problems with this fine young man, and considering he is mine now I would prefer that you not touch another hair of my property."

Damskov sputtered with indignation. "Y-you dare touch me, you filthy old man? Who gives you the right to do such a thing?"

"I make my own rights when I see that it will help another less fortunate soul than I," the old man replied. "However, if you would like to see my credentials-"

The old man held out one wizened hand and a bright blue flame shot forth from his palm. Damskov skittered back and Fred's eyes grew wide with wonder. The lord now looked at the old man not with hatred but with fear. "Castor!" he exclaimed. Fred was confused; he'd never before heard such a word used.

The old man closed his fingers into his palm and the light was extinguished. "Perhaps another time I may give you a better demonstration, but right now we are in a hurry." He toddled past Damskov, who jumped out of the way, and held out his hand to Fred. It was the same hand that held the light, and the boy cringed back for fear of being burned. The old man chuckled. "Are you planning on crawling out of the manor, or would you prefer to walk?" Fred preferred to walk, but he scrambled up on his feet without assistance from the old man. His new master wasn't insulted by the refused hand; those old eyes merely looked on the boy with interest and admiration. Then he turned back to Damskov and bowed his head. "Good day, my lord."

The old man walked out of the room, followed closely by the girl. Fred hesitated until he saw the fury return to Damskov's eyes. Such an insult had put him in a worse mood than before, so Fred scrambled out of the room and followed the pair out of the manor. The old man led them all toward the fields and Fred's house; the boy himself followed glumly behind the other

two.

The moment they were out of earshot of the manor the girl let loose her opinion. "What a stupid oaf!" the girl complained. She turned her furious eyes on her older companion who walked by her side. "And why did you give him so much money? Have we any left?"

"Perhaps that is better left for another time when we are at a greater distance from this estate," the man replied.

She stiffened and looked around; a few chickens and a pig wandered along the road but no one else. "Do you believe he has knights?"

The old man glanced over his shoulder at their follower. "If we want the answer to that question we should ask our young friend here."

The girl looked back and curled her lips up in a sneer of disgust. "I would rather take my chances with the unknown than this farm boy. I doubt he even knows what a knight is, much less if he's seen one around here."

Fred scowled back at the girl. "I know what a knight is, and I know Lord Damskov has six who answer to him," he replied.

"Then that is six problems I would rather avoid if you two would hold your arguing until later," the old man spoke up. The group arrived at Fred's home and stopped at the door; the old man turned to Fred and gestured to the entrance. "We haven't much time. Take what you can comfortably carry and we shall be off."

Fred paled at the thought of leaving his home, but Damskov had made it quite clear he was no longer welcomed. He reluctantly stepped inside and looked around his simple hovel. The bare earthen floor was well-packed by his feet, the table on his left filled with all the interesting rocks he'd found in the fields he tended. There was the shelf of food and the small hole in the floor where he kept his store of vegetables for the winter. All of it welcomed him home to a place he would no longer call home.

Before him was the small fireplace, and Fred wandered over to it. He ran his hand over the hearth, blackened with countless fires. He made many by himself, but others had been with his parents. With his separation from that house he felt a separation from their memories, and from them.

His new lord came up behind him and set a gentle hand on his shoulders. "We must hurry on our way."

Fred didn't know where the way would lead, but he understood he had to follow his new lord. He packed his spare clothes, food and the smallest of his trinkets, and wrapped them all in the blanket that covered his straw bed. The others waited for him outside, and the old man gave him a sad, small smile. "And off we go," his new lord whispered.

The companions set off down the same road the old man had walked up the day before. The entrance road to the estate was flanked by two large rocks, placed there long ago when the property was given to the family by a grateful king. They passed through these and traveled down the road in silence; the only noise was the sounds of their footsteps and the clack of the old man's cane against the hard-packed dirt. Fred stopped and ventured a glance back. His home, his former home, already lay a mile back. He could hardly see the cottage that had housed him since his birth. Regret set in; he wished he had been more polite to Lord Damskov and begged to stay. His companions noticed they were lacking one of their number and turned back toward him.

"What are you stopping for? We don't have time to waste on you, boy, so let's get

moving!" the girl snapped at him. Fred didn't reply, and she was about to make another demand for haste when a hand settled on her shoulder. She looked to find her older companion staring at the boy, and he shook his head.

The girl lapsed into sullen silence and her companion stepped over to stand beside Fred. Fred glanced at the old man and hastily wiped a few tears from his eyes. The old man chuckled. "Come on, my lad, no tears. There's a lady present."

"I'm sorry for stopping, my lord, it's just that I can't help looking back." His heart ached to stand before the hearth of his home.

"You needn't apologize. I won't beat you for a few tears of sadness, nor even those of joy," the stranger assured him. The old man's eyes lit up. "But here we are traveling together, and you bound as you are to me, and I haven't introduced myself." He stepped back and bowed his head to the surprised Fred. "I have been called many names, but for the present time you may call me Ned."

Fred blinked. "Ned?" he repeated, sure he'd heard wrong. He would never have imagined such a simple name for such an ancient creature.

Ned nodded. "Yes, Ned." He gestured to his female companion. "This is Patricia, though she prefers the name Pat." Ned slid up beside Fred and leaned in to his ear. The man had more speed and agility than Fred gave him credit. "She is testy about the whole name thing, so go along with whatever she likes or she'll be sure to use that nice sword of hers on you."

"I will not!" Pat protested.

Ned pointed a finger down at Pat's waist. "You notice how at the mention of an argument her hand goes to the hilt of her sword? Very imprudent of her to show us she has a weapon. We may be able to relieve her of it."

Fred moved away from his strange new lord and the weaponized young woman. Anyone who was armed like that was sure to attract trouble, and trouble was the last thing he wanted. "I-I'm afraid this must be some mistake. Surely you won't want me to come with you on your travels. I would be more useful to my previous master."

Ned straightened and raised an eyebrow; the humor vanished from his face. "You wish to return to your old home?"

"I wish to return to the only home I've ever known," Fred corrected him. He sighed and bowed down his head. "But only if my lord allows me to leave. My debt passed to you and thus I am bound to you."

"Right and proper words, but the intention is unwise," Ned scolded.

Fred glanced up and frowned. "I only wish to return home."

Ned shook his head. "Then you wish for the impossible. Now that that man you call your former lord knows your body is of value he's likely to take you to town and sell you to the local slave trader." Ned looked the boy up and down. "And he's liable to fetch enough gold coins to incite his greed for human selling if you return to him again."

Fred's heart fell into the pit of his stomach. He realized the old man's words were true, but where there was desperation and fear there was bound to be denial. "I'm begging you to allow me to return to my home. I'm sure I won't be of any use to you on your travels. I...I've never left the estate even as far as this. I have no knowledge of even the local town, as I told you yesterday."

Ned patted the boy on the shoulder and gave him a smile. "And it's just that naivety that I'm counting on. No one will try very hard to fool such a novice, and I will see through them

and avoid calamity." Fred was floored by this statement of his worth.

Even Pat's face fell at such horrid talk. "Surely that isn't the reason you paid such a ridiculous price for the boy."

Ned's bushy eyebrows shot up and he glanced over to the girl. "High price? I hardly call what was given a high price."

Now the girl's mouth fell open. "Have you forgotten that you gave that lord forty gold coins? Have we any left for tonight's lodgings, or food to feed our mouths and this new one?"

"Of course I do." Ned produced a bag similar to the one he'd given Damskov. He shook the container and the bag made the sound of coins jingling together. "See? We are very well off." He pocketed the bag back into his cloak, but Pat was still dissatisfied with his answer.

"If that bag is full, then what did you give that lord in exchange?" she asked him.

Ned cloaked his face in an expression of false innocence. "Well, shall we say that I am out a few pounds of pay-dirt?"

Pat paled, but Fred was confused. "Pay-dirt?" he repeated.

Pat's voice told her horror. "You gave a lord with six knights pay-dirt?" she asked him.

Fred held up his arms. "Wait, what's pay-dirt?"

Ned smiled and pulled out another bag from beneath his cloak; Fred wondered if the underside of the cape was covered in such bags. The old man opened the drawstring and dipped his fingers into the opening. He drew forth a pinch of dark brown mud, and nodded at Fred's hand. "Hold out your hand, young Fred." After a moment's hesitation Fred obliged, and Ned plopped the mud down into his palm.

All three of them intently watched the mud; nothing happened. Ned chuckled and swiped the mud from his hand, but Pat was dumbfounded. "Is there something wrong with the pay-dirt?" she asked the old man.

Ned turned to her. "Hold out your hand and we shall find out." She did as was asked, and he set the mud into her palm. This time something happened; the mud changed its shape and color, and became a gold coin.

Fred's eyes widened, as did Pat's own eyes. "What is this? How did it not work for him?" she asked Ned while she nodded at the boy. Ned shrugged, snatched the mud from her hand and put it back into its pouch. He tucked the container back beneath his cloak with only a smile on his face while his companions were very confused; Pat wouldn't be brushed aside. "Ned, why wouldn't the mud work on this boy? Is he immune to magic? Is that why he's coming with us?"

"Magic..." Fred repeated. That's what this old man could do; magic. He was a magician of sorts, maybe one who performed tricks to earn money.

At her questions, Ned smiled and shook his head. "I haven't any idea what you're talking about, but the mud is working just fine." Ned leaned in toward Fred and winked. "It changes to gold when it senses greed, and your former lord had quite an abundance. He didn't even need to hold the stuff to affect the change."

Pat stiffened, and her voice was strangled. "You gave him only pay-dirt in exchange for this boy?"

"Of course. Pay-dirt is much easier to come by than gold coins," Ned countered.

Fred and the old man jumped back when Pat let out a roar of frustration. Her eyes burned with her anger and she stomped up to Ned and shoved her face into his. "Do you have any idea what trouble this may cause? We could be thrown into the locks, or worse, be found

out! Would this boy be worth that much trouble? Would your brilliant plan look so brilliant?"

Pat's tirade was interrupted by the sound of a great cry of fury and anger; the noise dwarfed hers. They all stiffened and turned to the source of the anger; Damskov manor. Ned weakly chuckled. "It appears we had better make haste to some hiding shrubs, or Fred's former lord will have more words with us than we care to hear."

The three hurried on their way down the road, but the sounds of men shouting and horses pounding down the road told them they needed to seek shelter. Fortunately the path was well provided with bushes, and Ned led the way into one of the thicker bunches. Their hiding was none too soon because a troop of horsemen galloped toward them. The horsemen stopped a few feet from where they were hidden. Fred had a good view of the road through an opening and saw that one of the men was Lord Damskov. He recognized several of the others as the knights in the service of the lord, as they wore heavy silver armor that glistened in the sun and had long broadswords at their hips. Each one carried a helmet on their saddle, and they clanked whenever they so much as sneezed.

Damskov stood up on his stirrups and surveyed the area. "Where in all the hells have they gone?" he exclaimed.

"Perhaps they have reached the town?" one of the knights suggested.

Damskov whipped his head toward the man. "They left not more than half an hour ago. How were they to travel five miles in such a short time?"

"You did speak of one of the strangers knowing magic," the knight pointed out.

Damskov was cowed by his knight's comment, and seated himself back in the saddle. His eyes glanced over the road, but the hard-packed dirt didn't show any footprints. "Damn that castor and his filthy magic! He'll pay me what's due even if I have to search the world for them!"

Damskov kicked his horse and flew down the road, closely followed by his men. When the sound of the horses faded the three companions ventured forth from their hiding spot. Pat had a grave look on her face. "What now? We can't go to the town without them finding us."

Ned nodded. "I must admit I expected the magic to last longer and allow us a greater head start. Perhaps I'm growing rusty in my old age."

"Rusty or not, we can't go there," Pat insisted.

Ned shook his head. "The town may be large enough to avoid the lord and his knights. As it is, it's a chance we'll have to take," he replied.

"May be large enough?" Pat repeated. Her voice was filled with disbelief and anger. "What do you mean may be large enough? Do you not know the route we are taking?"

Ned grimaced and gripped his staff. "I must admit the way has changed some since my last visit. The town we are traveling to was a growing village on my last trip through it."

Pat exploded in ire. "You informed my watchers that you knew the route by heart! Have you deceived them as you deceived that lord?"

"I have not. I told them I had been along the route, and I have," Ned calmly explained.

The girl wasn't soothed by his words. "That is not how they took your words!"

"Then they were mistaken in their belief of my geographic skills, but not in my ability to get you where you need to go," Ned replied.

Pat threw her arms up in the air and paced around in circles. "What fools we have all been to trust this mission to you! What novices! This boy is less foolish than we!"

Fred scowled at the insult. "I was forced on this journey. I was not fooled into

accompanying this lord," he reminded her.

She paused. "Lord? Lord?" She gestured to Ned, who gave them all a wide grin of appreciation. "This is no lord. I have my doubts that he is even so much as a decent man!"

Ned straightened at such an accusation, and his eyebrows crashed down over his fiery eyes. Fred and Pat stepped back when a sudden wave of air rose up from beneath his staff and swept over them. The old man suddenly didn't look so old as his hand tightly gripped the staff. His voice was strong and firm; there was no hint of old age in the tone. "I will keep the promise I have to your watchers, my dear girl, even if it costs me my life. You have my word as a man and a castor that you will reach your destination." The wind died down and the old man leaned on his staff; his age returned to his body and voice, along with his humor. "But first we have a few miles to travel before nightfall. Let's get started."

He walked past the pair of shocked teenagers, who glanced at one another. Fred wondered what sort of trouble he'd fallen into, and how he'd get out.

CHAPTER 3

Ned walked a few feet and turned around. "Don't dawdle now! We must find lodgings before night or we may be robbed of more than our gold."

The pair, not wanting to anger him, jumped at Ned's command and hurried after him. They walked on in silence, each prepared to take cover along the road in case their new enemies should present themselves. The teenagers walked on either side of the old man, and Fred noticed Pat glanced at him several times. He scowled at her. "What? Is something wrong?"

"I want to know how you were able to avoid the pay-dirt magic," she replied. Fred shrugged, but Ned let out a chuckle. She shot him an ugly look. "What's so funny?"

"Haven't you guessed? He didn't fool or deflect the magic because he has no greed for money," Ned explained to her. "No doubt it comes from his having never had any."

Pat scoffed at the idea. "How ridiculous, of course everyone wishes for gold. It's man's greatest motivator."

"And woman's," Ned added.

Fred listened intently to their conversation. When the secret was revealed, he glanced down at his palm. It was true that he hadn't wanted the gold, but only what the gold represented; freedom. He wanted to be free of the servitude of any lord, to be his own man. That meant being free of money he knew he'd never earn, and wouldn't steal.

"Boy." Fred was shaken from his thoughts by the title; Pat was calling him. "What skills do you have? How much can you lift?"

"My name is Fred," he replied. He would be polite, but he wouldn't let himself be pushed around by a girl hardly older than himself, and wearing armor, too.

Pat wrinkled her nose. "Fred? What sort of a name is that for a boy? Haven't you any longer name, like Frederick?"

He shrugged. "Maybe, but my parents never mentioned it before the Boo took them when I was seven," Fred told her.

The girl frowned. "Boo? What in the world is that, some sort of monster around here?"

The old man chuckled and Fred looked at the girl as though she was a fool. "No, the Boo came for them. Haven't you ever had someone taken by the Boo?"

"How the hell should I know? I don't even know what the hell it is," Pat countered.

Sensing a headache-inducing argument about to erupt, Ned sought to intervene. "In some areas Boo refers to Death, probably stemming from the idea of one being scared to death," the old man informed her.

Pat cringed at her lack of sensitivity. "Oh. I...I didn't mean anything-"

"I don't care. It was a long time ago," Fred interrupted. Remembering his parents reminded him that he was traveling away from both his home and their graves.

The remaining four miles were crossed, and they rounded a bend to gain their first view of their destination. The town was set in a low plain beside the river that provided the area with irrigation and drinking water for Damskov's manor. The bushes along the road gave way to stands of trees that stood in patches, beneath which grazed cows in green fields. The town itself and its buildings were housed behind thick stone walls ten feet high and three feet thick. Gates led into the town, and were watched by armored men with swords at their waists.

The nearest gate was also watched by a few of the knights of Damskov. The three companions stopped at the side of the road behind a group of stones. Other travelers passed by

to sell wares in the town marketplace. Pat glared at Ned. "What now?"

Ned pulled at his beard and glanced around. His eyes lit up when they fell on a tall, covered wagon that rolled toward them. The driver on the box was an old woman, and the steed was a sorry mule. He stepped into the road and flagged the cart down with his staff. The old woman grudgingly stopped her vehicle, and her narrowed eyes looked at the old man. "What's wanted?" she snapped at him.

"We're in need of help, old mother," Ned politely replied. "Will you allow us to hide in your cart so we may enter the town?"

The old woman looked over the three, particularly Fred. He frowned in turn; there was something strange about the woman's face. Almost like it didn't fit right on her head. "And why are you wanting to do that? Got yourselves into some sort of trouble?"

"Something like that," Ned admitted. "It may be dangerous, especially if our foes finds us."

The woman straightened her small form and cackled. "You must think me a fool, but I'll go along with this joke." She nodded back toward the wagon. "Hop in and hurry, for I've fruit to sell. And mind you, don't squish any of my vegetables!" she scolded as they quickly climbed inside. No sooner had she said that than Pat stepped on a cantaloupe. The vegetable gave a soft squish and, as a last revenge, squirted its juice in Pat's eyes. The old woman turned her head and glared at the girl. "You'll be paying for that one, Miss Armor."

Pat scowled but didn't argue. They seated themselves on the crowded floor and pulled the extra cloth from the wagon covering over themselves. The woman cracked her whip and they plodded off down the road. The wagon rocked from side to side at a pace equal to a toddler's. The distance was short and they soon heard the noise of people and commerce; they'd reached the town gates.

"Whoa there, old mother," a man's deep voice called out. The wagon slowed to a stop. "What have you here?"

"Vegetables as always, now let me pass," she shot back.

"I'm afraid there's been some trouble along that road you came from, so we'll have to ask to search your cart." Fred's heart pounded and he heard the sound of armor clank alongside of the wagon.

"Now wait a minute! I won't have your filthy hands on my vegetables!" their driver protested. "If'n you're going to touch them then you need to wash your hands!"

There was a general murmur of laughter from other people who passed by the wagon on their way into and out of the town. A crowd even formed to watch this affair. The lead guard stepped forward and uneasily glanced at the onlookers. "Listen, old mother, we will only take a moment to look for-

"-to look for nothing with your grubby hands!" She waved her hand back to the river outside. "You go wash your hands in there or you're not touching my food!"

The crowd burst into glee at the old woman showing up the guards and ruffians. The men shifted uneasily and clinked in their armor. "We only want a quick look, old mother. We'll only lift the tarps."

"And ruin my good tarps with your hands? I say wash them and look, or let me pass. You're keeping me from selling some damn good vegetables to these fine people."

The lead guard scowled at her obstinance. "I've been patient enough with you, old mother, but you'll do what we say, or we'll turn you back."

The onlookers murmured their disapproval at his threat. The woman was old and hadn't harmed anyone; the guards were demanding a look only because their knight friends wanted them to do so. The crowd pushed in on the knights and the guards whipped their heads around at the people; they saw only angry faces.

The old woman saw the crowd was on her side and smiled. "Will you let me pass or no?"

The guard growled, but waved his hand toward the entrance. "Very well, get along with you, you old hag!"

"And a good day to you, too, gentlemen!" she cackled. She took the whip to her sorry mule and the wagon lurched forward into the town.

The three passengers breathed a sigh of relief; they'd made it past the worst spot, and now only needed to avoid their enemies. Their driver took them to the marketplace, and climbed down from her perch. She opened the rear of the wagon and swept off their covers. "All right now, out with you! You've had your fun, and I've had mine, but now it's time to get to work." They climbed out, but the woman firmly grabbed onto Pat's arm. "Hold a minute. You owe me something for the cantalope. That was my best and I expected to get a silver out of it."

Pat scowled; she'd hoped to use some of the pay-dirt to give to the old woman, but it only turned to gold. The girl dug into her pocket and pulled out a silver coin. "Here," she flatly replied, and tossed the coin into the old woman's hands.

The old woman clicked her tongue and shook her head. "Not even a thank-you for my efforts? You need to learn some manners, girl."

Pat blushed at the scolding, and opened her mouth to snap a retort. Ned swept up to her and held his hand over her mouth. He smiled at the old woman and bowed his head. "We're very grateful for your kind help, old mother. May your vegetables sell well this day."

The old woman smiled and bowed her head. She tottered off to ready her wagon, and the three companions were left on their own. Fred now had a clear view of their surroundings, and he looked in awe at the sights around them. The wooden houses with their thatched or tiled roofs were crowded together with no thought to design, creating angled streets and dark, narrow alleys. The buildings were three or four stories tall and housed every sort of person. Women of infamous houses sat themselves on the wide windowsills and showed off their wares, dwarves worked their forges on the ground floors, and there were even a few stray elves in their brown cloaks who mingled with the aristocratic merchants in their homes.

The marketplace lay in one of the few open areas in the town, and the stalls crowded in one each other in mimic to the houses. People, carts and animals bustled about. Small children herded geese and chickens, adults tugged cows and oxen to the sale yard situated on a wide street off the marketplace. People shouted their wares and prices, others haggled and still more merely browsed the wide selection of food, trinkets and tools.

"Keep your eyes out for a castor," Ned warned them.

Fred wanted to ask what that was exactly, but his companions hurried forward and all he could do was follow them. They wound their way through the stalls, hagglers and shoppers, and went into a narrow alley. The doors to the buildings lined the walls on either side of them, and wares were set out for perusal. Ned led them to the shop closest to the alley entrance, and paused at the battered, half-rotted door. He turned and looked over the youngsters. "Mind you, don't touch anything unless I've given you permission. There are some unusual items in this shop, and some of them aren't friendly," he advised them.

Fred and Pat glanced at each other, and followed their guide into the shop. Fred was presented with new and strange sights. Shelves upon shelves lined the walls of the small shop, and those were filled with jars and books. The jars were made of a murky glass that distorted the contents, but Fred was grateful for that; he swore some of the jars contained eyeballs and pickled bats.

A counter stood in the back with an old woman behind it. Ned went up to the old woman and gave her a smile. "Good afternoon, old mother. Have you any pay-dirt in stock?" She nodded at a barrel close at hand, and Ned opened the lid. He dipped his hand in and brought up the mud. "Pat, will you give me your hand to test this?" Pat grumbled, since she knew and envied Fred's immunity to the greed charm on the mud, and went over to assist.

That left Fred on his own, and he browsed a shelf close at hand. There were only books there, and he took down a large tome. He opened the book and was disappointed when there weren't any pictures. His interest quickly faded, he closed the book and put it back on the shelf. However, when he pulled away the book came with him. Fred turned and stared at his hand; the book's spine was attached to his fingers. He jumped back and waved his hand wildly in the air; the pages of the book flapped and the covers slammed together, but the tome remained pressed to his hand. He grabbed the book with his other hand and felt his trapped hand slip from the binding, but now his formerly free hand was stuck to the book.

With all the commotion Fred caught the attention of the other three, particularly the old woman. "Mind the jars, boy!" she scolded.

Ned sauntered over to Fred and caught him by the shoulder before he flung himself into a couple of barrels full of acid. "Whoa there, Fred. What's bothering you so much?"

"I can't get this book off! It won't let go!" Fred yelled. He pulled and yanked, but his hands only traded places with being bound to the book.

Ned chuckled and patted the boy on the shoulder. "Some books just can't be put down until they're read all the way through. Perhaps you should just read what's inside and see if that breaks the spell," he commented.

Fred paled at the suggestion. "But I can't read!" he told Ned.

Ned jerked back and his eyes lit up in surprise. "Well then, that is a problem," Ned mused. He stroked his beard and nodded at the back of the book. "Perhaps you should finish the book anyway."

"But I told you I can't read!" the boy insisted.

"Open the book to the end," Ned suggested. Fred stood there in disbelief, but the old man only grinned. "Go on, open it to the last page."

Fred thought the plan sounded foolish, but he did as was asked. The moment he opened to the last page the book, in its precarious position, slipped from his hand. Ned swiftly stooped and caught the book before it hit the floor. "A relatively safe lesson in curiosity. Mind you heed it," he lightly scolded.

"I'll heed it outside," Fred replied.

CHAPTER 4

Fred hurried out of the shop and was grateful to breathe the stagnant air of the town. His eyes wandered over the shoppers and stall keepers close by, and he ventured out into the main market area. Fred hardly moved a few yards from the alley before he heard a commotion around the corner. His curiosity swept aside his caution, and besides, he wouldn't go far and would be back before the others were done with his shopping. He went around a nearby corner, and found a group of men and women who stood at the entrance to one of the darkest and narrowest alleys. They had their attention on something in there; Fred jumped up and down, but the crowd was too packed around something on the ground for him to catch a glimpse of it himself.

Fred noticed a pile of crates along one of the walls and jumped on top of one of them to get a view. He reached the second tier and the moment his foot stomped down on the wood he felt the boards shift beneath him. The movement threw him off balance, and he flailed his arms as he fell down into the crowd. His hands knocked into faces and limbs, and the people pushed back against him. They inadvertently shoved him along their shoulders to the front where he was unceremoniously dropped to the ground on his back. The air was knocked from his lungs, and Fred wheezed and rolled over onto his stomach. He stuck his face into that of a dead man.

The man lay on his back, and his eyes were open and stared lifelessly up at the sky. There was no sign of what had killed him, but Fred noticed that a dirty, multi-colored cat sat beside the man's waist. Its golden eyes watched him with the same interest as he watched it.

Somebody behind him gave him a kick closer to the dead man. The boy yelped and fell back on his rear away from the corpse; there was no telling what killed him and Fred didn't want to take any chances with disease. The crowd roared with laughter over his fear, but their humor died when they heard the clanging of metal. The guards of the town soon arrived and pushed their way through the crowds. Fred scrambled to the side before they booted him with their pointed metal shoes. One of the men, the captain by the higher crest on his helmet, knelt beside the body and frowned. "It's a pimp," he informed his men.

"And one of the lower ones. I know him from his gambling debts," one of his men remarked. "He was as bad at cards as he was at wooing women."

The men chuckled at the joke until their leader glared at them. "Unlucky pimp or not, this man's been murdered and we need to find the murderer." He pulled something out of the man's neck and held up a small dart. "Unless you men believe he stuck himself with a poison dart."

"Sorry, sir, we'll get on it," his man replied.

Fred heard a man murmur to another close at hand. "It must be Sins," he whispered to his companion.

"Sins?" the other one asked.

The first man rolled his eyes. "You know, the deadly assassin, the Deadly Sins, the one who only takes on jobs to kill men who commit sins. I bet you a gold coin the pimp's debtors must have wanted to collect on this man's debt and had Sins do him in."

His friend chuckled. "Well, being a pimp and a gambler definitely would've made him a good target."

Their conversation was interrupted when the guards turned their attention on the crowd, and suddenly everyone had somewhere else they needed to be. The men grabbed those closest to the body before they could flee, while the others at the back spilled out into the streets. Half

the crowd managed to escape, though with the lead guard close at their heels. Unfortunately, Fred was in the half that were rounded up. One of the guards picked him up by his collar and tossed him together with the others.

"Wait a moment, that's my boy," a voice spoke up.

The guards and Fred turned toward the alley entrance, where stood a tall man with long black whiskers and slicked-back black hair. Fred had never seen the man before, but the stranger walked up to him and put his hand on Fred's shoulder. "This is my son. I'm sure he wasn't involved in any of this."

"Oh yeah, and who are you?" one of the guards asked him.

The man pulled out a bag that jingled with coins. "Someone who doesn't like questions, but would like this boy released," he replied, and jangled the bag for good measure.

"Well, those credentials work out for us," the guard answered with a laugh.

Fred watched gold exchange hands, and he was quickly handed over to the stranger. The man hurriedly led him out of the alley and turned down a side street close at hand that skirted the marketplace. "Why did you do that?" Fred asked the stranger.

"Oh, let's just say I like the look of you," the man told him. "Ah, but where are my manners? My name is Slavino."

"My name's Fred."

"Fred?" the man repeated. "Just Fred? No family name?"

Fred shrugged. "I don't have family," the boy replied.

Slavino's eyebrows raised and the edges of his mouth twitched. "No friends or acquaintances that might get you out of a tight spot?"

"I have a lord who just bought me. I should return to him right now." Fred made to leave, but the man put a heavy hand on his shoulder.

Slavino patted the boy on the back. "Well, Fred, perhaps we'll do something about that later. For now how about you step into my house and take a drink? I'm sure that after such a scare you're parched."

"I haven't had anything to drink in a while," Fred admitted. Not since his companions and he were on the road, and they happened to pass close to the river.

"Then let's get you some of my special drink. That will pick you right up," Slavino offered. Fred followed the man into an old, rundown house, very different from what he expected for a man so rich. There was a simple table with two broken chairs, and a trunk in one corner. Slavino offered him a chair while he pulled out a flask from his coat. "I'm afraid I don't have any glasses, but I'm sure you're not used to too much finery."

"It's fine," Fred replied with a smile. He took the flask and put the bottle to his mouth. His nose caught a whiff of the contents and he started back. For the first time he worried about his predicament. "What's in this stuff?"

"Oh, just some herbs and spices. It adds to the flavor," Slavino told him.

Fred frowned, but he was too thirsty to argue. He took a few sips, wrinkled his nose at the flavor and handed the flask back to the man. Slavino pocketed the flask without taking a sip himself. Fred slipped off his chair and smiled at his kind benefactor. "Well, thanks for the drink. I guess I'll just be going now."

Slavino stepped in his path. "Going? Why leave me when you have no one else to turn to?" the man asked him.

That cloud of doubt drifted over Fred's mind; his stomach also began to hurt. "I'm sure

my lord will be worried-

"Oh, but I must insist you stay with me," Slavino replied. He grabbed onto the boy's shoulders in a grip tight enough to make Fred squirm. "I'll be sure you're well taken care of."

Fred tried to break free, but the pain in his stomach and the man's strong grip combined to make him a prisoner. "Let go of me!" he shouted.

Slavino pushed Fred back into the corner near the trunk. "Well, no matter with your friends. They won't be able to recognize you soon, anyway."

The man stepped over to him and Fred crawled back against the trunk. "W-what do you mean?" The boy's eyes widened when Slavino pulled a knife from his belt; he would be cut up and left for dead. "P-please don't! I won't tell anyone about this, I swear!"

"I'm sure you won't, girl, because nobody's going to believe you."

Fred blinked; the man just called him a girl. However, the pain in his stomach distracted him from any other thoughts. He clutched at his gut and doubled over. The agony traveled over his entire body, and he grit his teeth when his skin began to tingle. "What-what did you do to me?" he asked Slavino.

The man ignored him and knelt down in front of Fred. Slavino brought the knife down on the boy's clothing and tore it away, stripping him of everything except his underclothes. Fred looked down at himself and his eyes widened in horror; his skin pushed and flowed over his bones like waves of water. His flat, tanned chest bulged out in two points beneath his nipples; he now had a pair of fine breasts. His hair tumbled over his shoulders and covered the breasts. The skin on his legs and arms stretched and smoothed out while his feet narrowed. He raised his shaking fingers and watched them thin and lengthen. A coughing fit overcame him, and he heard his voice change from a low register to a higher one.

The transformation took only a minute, and when the pain left him Fred glanced down at himself and didn't recognize the body. He was a girl in every physical sense of the word. Slavino looked over him and rubbed his chin. "A little too tan for a high price, but the face and body are good," the man mumbled to himself.

Fred looked up at the man and tears sprang to his eyes. "What did you do to me?"

Slavino waved away his question. "Nothing much, just turned you into a girl." The man turned to the trunk and tossed out a few dresses of fine quality. "Now get up and try these on. The sale starts in a few minutes and I don't want to wait another day for it to come around."

Fred crawled away from the dresses and shook his head. "Just change me back! I want to be a-"

Slavino turned and smacked Fred across the cheek. His voice was low and dangerous. "You'll get into those clothes, girl, or I'll finish the job I started with this knife." He held up the weapon to emphasize his point, and Fred saw that there were red stains on the blade.

Fred saw no mercy in the man's eyes, so he did as he was told. Slavino was pleased when a bright yellow dress fitted him, along with a pair of matching shoes. He had Fred stand still while he combed the girl's hair and tie it into an intricate, braided hairstyle. Slavino washed the boy's face and hands, all the while he gave instructions to his captive. "Your name is now Frederica, or Erica for short. You will follow me to the slave sale and say nothing. Even if you get a chance to talk to someone nobody's going to believe I changed you into a girl, so don't try anything stupid." Fred didn't reply, so he gave a hard yank on her hair; the girl gave a cry of fright and pain. "Do you understand?"

"Y-yes," Fred replied. Never in his worst nightmares could he have ever imagined

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himself being sold as a slave girl.

CHAPTER 5

Slavino finished Fred's clothing and hair, and pulled a manacle out from the trunk. He snapped the metal band around Fred's neck and held the short chain in his hand. "Come on then, slave girl. Time to see how much you're worth."

Slavino dragged Fred out of the house and down the street. They entered the main part of the market and Fred dared hope that his companions were close at hand. Unfortunately, they were there only moment before Slavino tugged on his neck and led him down a large street to the sale area. Here there were no stalls, only platforms on which sellers placed cattle, birds and, worst of all, people. Other people stood before the platforms and called out their bid while an auctioneer or the owner handled the bidding wars.

At the far end and set aside from the other platforms stood a tall, long boardwalk. Humans were lined up like cattle with guards on either side, and the grand auctioneer handled the sales of these fine specimens. The largest crowd and the highest bidders stood before the platform, and offered gold for the flesh of another human. Slavino yanked Fred toward the stairs on one side of the platform and a man armed with a club stopped them. "What's the hurry?" he asked the slave trader.

"I have this girl I wish to sell today," Slavino replied, and pulled Fred up beside him.

The guard looked Fred over with an appreciative gaze. "Nice, but have you paid the fee?"

"I have it right here." Slavino dug into his purse and pulled out a few gold coins. Money was exchanged and they were allowed onto the platform.

Fred was set next to another slave, and his fear made him shiver. He just knew he would be sold to a cruel master who would force him to do disgusting acts. The leers from the men in the crowd confirmed his fears, and several pulled out their money pouches in preparation for his auction. The lives of the other slaves fell beneath the auctioneer's gavel, and one by one they were all sold until Fred was the only one left on the platform. Many had been dragged crying from the platform and given into the brutal arms of their new master. Fred cringed when Slavino shoved him to a low pedestal at the front of the large platform, but he had one hope; his friends could save him. That is, if they only knew it was him.

Fred had his chance at freedom when he saw his two companions enter the auction area. Their eyes scanned the crowd; they were looking for him. Fred's heart beat fast and he rushed forward to the edge of the platform. He reached the end of his chain and was pulled back to the platform by Slavino.

"A feisty young lady here, ladies and gentleman," the auctioneer called out. "Very good strength, and would be a nice addition to any bedroom frolicking." The men in the crowd, and even some women, cackled. "Now for such a fine specimen such as this I'll start the bidding at ten gold coins. Do I have any offers?"

"Ned! Pat!" Fred cried out.

The roar of the bidding drowned out his calls, but Slavino heard him. The man pulled the girl to himself and clapped a hand over Fred's mouth. Slavino noticed where Fred's gaze lay and frowned at his friends. They were trouble for him, but he had the upper hand; Fred's voice and appearance were so changed as to be almost unrecognizable, even to close family. Indeed his friends continued their search through the crowd until Ned glanced up at the platform. He tugged on his beard, and Pat followed where his eyes lay. She frowned and spoke a few words

that couldn't be overheard, but Ned waved her off by gesturing for her to wait a few minutes. That wait made Slavino nervous and Fred hopeful.

Meanwhile the auction continued and the price went higher and higher. Slavino's attention was turned away from the girl's friends to the price when somebody yelled out an extraordinary sum. "One hundred gold coins for the girl!" The crowd went wild; never before had they heard of such a sum for a slave meant only for the bedroom. Slavino's eyes were as wide as the gold coins he would receive from this trick.

"Have we any more bids?" the auctioneer excitedly asked the crowd. He would receive a percentage of the sale.

"I will trade one boy!" came a voice from the crowd.

The onlookers fell silent, and even the grand auctioneer was dumbfounded. "Who said that? Who trades a girl for a boy?" he called out to the people.

Fred almost collapsed from relief when Ned pushed his way through the crowd. "I wish to make the trade," he told the auctioneer.

"This is most extraordinary." The auctioneer glanced over to Slavino, who glared and shook his head. "But I'm sorry, my good sir, we only take gold in this transaction."

Ned stepped up onto the platform, and there was a mischievous grin on his face. "I'm afraid it's the only exchange you can take. You see, this girl really isn't a girl."

A hush swept over the crowd, and Slavino's face drained of its color. His words sputtered out like a choking engine. "T-that's impossible! I'm sure I'd know if this was a girl!" he protested. "I'll prove to you it's a girl!" He grabbed hold of Fred's dress and pulled down the already low neckline to reveal her breasts. The men in the crowd came to life and crowded against the platform.

Ned raised his staff and knocked Slavino's hands away from the dress. "Yes, very impressive, but I have an even more impressive trick."

Ned's staff came squarely down on Fred's head, and the girl yelped and shut her eyes when a tickling jolt scurried down her body. When he opened his eyes he found the crowd with their mouths agape staring at him. He glanced down at himself and a bright smile lit up his face when he saw his boyish body had returned. Slavino dropped the neck chain and raced off the platform. The crowd came alive and many raced after him down the nearest side street.

The auctioneer stepped up to the front of the platform and held up his hands to what remained of the crowd. "U-under these circumstances, ladies and gentlemen, the auction is closed for the day."

Fred didn't think he would be so glad to hear those words. Ned patted him on the back while Pat climbed the stairs to them. She came over and looked the boy up and down, and shook her head. "I can't believe you actually look that clean," she quipped.

Fred scowled. "Nice to see you, too," he retorted.

"You looked nicer as a girl," Pat countered.

"I think I can live without looking that nice."

"And you were told to look out for castors," Pat scolded him.

Fred wasn't in the mood for this girl's pushy attitude. "If I knew what they were I could look for them," he shot back.

The girl rolled her eyes and scowled at him. "You don't even know what a castor is?"

Fred folded his arms across his chest and stared right back at her. "Well, you didn't even know what the Boo was!" he countered.

"That knowledge wouldn't have helped him," Ned spoke up. "That man wasn't a castor. He only used potions to change people, and any herbalist can do that."

"He still should have been more careful!" Pat protested.

"Come come, children, no fighting until we've gotten off the stage," Ned scolded the pair.

He escorted them down to the ground just in time for another commotion to catch their attention. This one proved to be about them, too, as Damskov's knights pushed their way through the remains of the slave crowd and stood before the three companions. The lead knight, the one from the gate, looked over them; his eyes fell on the boy. "Are you Fred, formerly of the estate of Damskov?" he asked the boy.

Fred cringed back, but Ned stepped forward and shielded the boy. "He is, and what business is that of yours?"

The knight glared at Ned. "You must be the old man Damskov demands to see. He charges you with false payment, and demands good money or the boy back."

Ned looked from one knight to the next; they flinched beneath his firm, unwavering gaze. "I'm afraid I can't oblige either way, and would rather you good knights tell your master to return to his estate without so much as a piece of silver or a strand of hair from this boy."

"I refuse," came a voice from behind them. The knights turned to see their leader, Damskov, stalk toward them. He sneered at the old man and his companions. "You've inconvenienced me long enough, old man. Give me the money or the boy."

Ned nodded at the lead knight. "As I was telling your men here, I can't oblige either way."

Damskov smirked and slowly drew out his sword from its sheath beneath his cloak. He clasped the sword in both his hands, and the sharp blade glistened beneath the hot sun. "Then I'm afraid there's only one punishment for thieves when I'm involved. I'll take the boy back, and take your life."

Damskov charged Ned, and he swung the sword to cut the old man down. Ned calmly raised his wooden staff and the blade collided with the stick. The onlookers expected the staff to be sliced in two and for the sword to cut Ned's skull in half. Instead the sword hit the staff and bounced back with a great enough force to fly out of Damskov's shocked hands. The weapon hit the ground a few yards away, and both groups were silent.

Damskov's wide eyes traveled over to his sword, and back to the old man and the staff. "H-how?" he stuttered.

Ned set his staff back on the ground and shrugged. "I must have a goddess on my side." Then his eyes narrowed and his voice dropped to a low, threatening whisper. "You should leave before she becomes vengeful against you for harming one of her servants."

Ned performed the same wind trick now that he had for Pat and Fred as the swirling whirlwind jumped up from the ground and wrapped itself around him. Damskov and his men stumbled back with cries of fear and shouts of terror. Ned smirked, raised his staff with the end pointed at them and stepped toward the knights. The men scrambled away from the pointed end as though a mere touch would kill them. They tripped over each other and scattered in all directions. When none remained, Ned set his staff down and turned to his two young companions. Their eyes were wide and they blinked in shock; they could hardly believe they'd gotten out of that mess without some damage. Pat's hand was frozen on the hilt of her sword, ready for action.

Ned glanced between the pair and chuckled. "You two look like a cute couple, but I can't

figure out who the wife is."

The youngsters paled and jumped away from each other. Pat looked at Fred's dress and wrinkled her nose. "Get out of that stupid getup immediately," she ordered him.

Fred scowled back. "I can't, that guy tore up my other clothes."

Ned put a hand on Fred's shoulder and turned him toward the market. "Then I suppose I had better properly attire my young serf. After all, I wouldn't want my lie-detector to be stolen away because of his feminine beauty."

CHAPTER 6

New clothes were procured for Fred, more comfortable than his old ones and with fewer patches. When he showed himself to his companions, Fred noticed Pat looked him over with more attention than she'd ever shown before. He whipped his head around to find any faults, but saw nothing. "What? Is there a hole somewhere?" he asked her.

"You actually look like a human instead of a pig," she answered before she turned away.

Ned smiled, and glanced up at the sun overhead. "We have enough daylight to gather supplies and find lodgings," he told his companions.

"Or gather supplies and head out," Pat corrected him. "With you two causing so much trouble I don't feel we're welcome in this place."

The tales of Ned's confrontation with the knights and Fred's transformation from girl to boy ran rampant throughout the town. Rumors sprang up of both evil and good magic infecting the citizens, and the people were uneasy. The market was less crowded than usual, and people hurried about their errands and constantly glanced over their shoulders. Ned stroked his beard and nodded. "Yes, I can see what you mean." He sighed. "What a pity. I was hoping for a nice, soft bed rather than the hard ground."

Pat rolled her eyes. "We'll be sure to find a nice haystack for you," she quipped.

They gathered their provisions and wound their way to the opposite end of the crowded town. Another gate lay at the back, and they had no trouble leaving the city as they had entering it. The dirt road curved and continued to follow the river, and they'd traveled far enough to see around the stone walls when Fred paused. He glanced back at the front road far off, the one that led to Damskov's estate. He wondered if he'd ever see his old home again.

"Come on, boy!" Pat yelled at him.

He whipped his head around and scowled. "My name's not boy, it's Fred!"

"Hurry up or I'll call you a girl," she replied.

Pat grew quiet when Ned passed by her and stepped up to Fred. He looked over the young man with that odd smile Fred had seen the first time they met. "It comes down to this every time, doesn't it?" he asked Fred

"What comes down to this?" Fred asked him.

Ned nodded toward the road that led back to the estate. "Every road before you means there's one behind, and we're always looking back wondering if we should have stepped forward at all. Maybe we would have been better standing there." Wagons passed by them, and other people walked in and out of the gate. "It's fear and regret that keep us rooted to one spot, and we miss much of life standing there watching the world pass by." Ned leaned forward and glanced into the boy's eyes. "I think you're one of those who doesn't want to just watch. You want to know those people and see those places."

Fred leaned back and frowned. "How do you know I won't just run away?" he challenged the old man.

Ned had a twinkle in his eye as he tilted his head to one side. "Because I know you." A chill ran down Fred's spine; those words sounded so familiar.

Pat's shrill voice ruined the moment. "Are we going to stand here all day? The sun will set in a few hours."

The boy rolled his eyes, but Ned laughed. "Yes, I suppose we had better get moving. Are you coming, young lad?"

Fred shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

Fred had no better place to go than with them, so he followed his new companions. To distract himself from the homesickness he focused his attention on the old man known as Ned. This strange person had terrifying abilities, ones he'd never before heard of, and sometimes Fred swore the old man was familiar. The sense of déjà vu and those strange abilities scared and yet interested his unlearned and curious mind. Fred wondered how someone so ordinary in appearance could acquire these skills, and perhaps teach them to a certain young boy.

These abilities, however, didn't leave Pat in awe for very long; she was more angry with the old man than curious. She walked by Ned's side and glanced over to him. "You know, you're going to have to be more careful about throwing that staff around," she scolded him.

"Oh? Was my show too much?" Ned asked her.

"I'll say," she retorted. "What if a real castor had been around and saw you doing that? They might have been on the other side, you know, and told someone about what and who they saw."

"What's a castor?" Fred spoke up. He hadn't received an answer at his last question.

Pat looked over her shoulder at the boy with one eye on Ned. "A castor is an old man who doesn't know how to show restraint. We might have been able to have them let us go for a few gold coins."

Ned grinned and chuckled. "I had no idea the term castor was so exclusive. I'm afraid a great many people will be disappointed in knowing they aren't one."

"So you're a castor?" Fred asked the old man.

Ned stopped, spun on his heels, and gave a flourish of his arms as he bowed. "A castor is me, and I am indeed a castor."

Pat slapped her forehead. "Must you broadcast it to every waif you pick up?"

"I'm not a waif, I'm a serf! There's a difference!" Fred protested.

"You're right, you're not a waif. You're just useless," she snapped back.

Ned stepped between them and held up his hands. "A moment, children. Let's have less arguing and more talking about me."

His words were meant to be a joke, but Pat turned to him with such a look of fury that the humor in his face died. "Yes, let's talk about you and how well of a job you've done protecting me" She marched up and poked him in the chest. "So far you've managed to pick up a boy we know nothing about, anger a local lord and his knights, and stir fear in an entire town." Each point was punctuated with a finger poke. "How the hell is that getting us to-" She paused and glanced over to Fred. "Getting us to where we need to be," she rephrased.

"Patience, my dear Patricia. We won't get to our destination overnight, and the boy here may prove more useful than you believe," Ned replied.

Pat sneered at the boy and turned away from them. She marched down the road, and Ned slid over beside Fred. "There's nothing so terrifying as a woman," Ned whispered.

"You mean a woman scorned?" Fred asked him.

"No, I meant a woman. That one's absolutely terrifying when she's angry, and to see her scorned would frighten us all to death." Ned glanced at Fred, and the humor in his face dropped off. "But you truly don't know what a castor is? Not even a gut feeling about them?"

Fred shook his head. "I've never heard the word before."

"But what does your gut tell you? Nothing at all?" Ned prodded.

Fred thought over the question, then shrugged. "Some sort of magician?"

Ned sighed and turned his face away; Fred wondered if he'd said something wrong. "Yes, I suppose that's one way of looking at castors. They're able to perform amazing feats. Some call it magic, others call it tricks. I for one prefer to call it a gift from the gods to be cherished and used wisely."

"So not everyone can be a castor?" Fred asked him. His heart fell when Ned shook his head.

"No, not everyone has the gift, and many who do can only perform simple tricks such as using the pay-dirt." Ned turned back to him and grinned. "There are normal humans who use potions, as you experienced for yourself with that slave seller."

"How do you know if you're a castor? Is there some sort of a test?" Fred wondered.

Ned looked the boy over carefully and pulled at his beard; his eyes twinkled with that mischievous look. "Now why would a simple lad such as yourself be asking that question?"

Fred lowered his head. "I'm just curious, that's all, my lord." He'd forgotten his place with this strange man.

Ned laughed and patted the boy on the back. Fred stumbled forward and nearly fell. "That's one fact Pat got right. I'm not a lord, and am not fond of the title. You call me Ned from now on and nothing else. Well, unless you're mad at me. Then I can't stop you from calling me all sorts of things."

"But you bought me, sir," Fred pointed out.

"With fake money," Ned countered. "You're as good as a freed man, or an escaped serf. If anyone asks, I would take the freed man title. It causes fewer questions and less time in a cell."

Fred blinked. "Freed man?" Never in all his short years would he had expected that title to be confirmed upon himself.

"Yes, and that means you can go anywhere you'd like, though I would advise you to put some distance between your former lord and yourself. He's liable to miss you so much that he'll try to drag you back again if he saw the chance."

"Anywhere I'd like..." Fred glanced up at the sky; the only place he wanted to be right then was in his little hut by the warm hearth.

"It hurts leaving everything you've ever known, doesn't it?" Ned's voice was so soft Fred hardly recognized it. The boy only nodded; he didn't trust himself to speak as tears pooled in his eyes. "Perhaps you were meant to know and see more."

Fred looked back to the ground and shrugged. "I guess, but what am I supposed to do? I don't know a trade, and if I went on to another estate I'd be a serf again."

Ned pulled at his beard and watched the boy. "Well, you could follow us for a while. That is, until we reach a large enough town where you can find work," he suggested.

Fred sighed. "What other choice do I have?"

"Are you two stopping again? We only have a few more hours of daylight!" Pat yelled from her spot far down the road.

Ned chuckled. "It seems she's taken a liking to you, or she wouldn't care that you're falling behind." The old man didn't wait for a reply, but walked forward to catch up.

Fred didn't see it that way, but he hurried after Ned without argument. The three met up and continued on their journey down the dusty road. They passed small farms and large estates, and wandered through villages that were only small huddles of houses. The road wound its way beside the river with only a few dozen yards of lush green grass and large trees that separated

the travelers from the water. Here and there the river bent away from the road and made for a nice camp spot. Night was coming on when they stopped at one of those picturesque spots that was comfortably concealed behind a large swath of tall, wild bushes. The grass there was soft, the trees a comfort against any threat of rain, and the hurriedly abandoned campsite was a very interesting mystery.

The three companions stood at the outer ring of a campfire circle and looked about them at the mess. Bags lay torn open over the sitting logs and blankets, spread out for sleeping, were tossed around the whole area. A teakettle lay smashed beside the fire rocks, and there were a few unburnt logs stacked in the pit. Ned bent down beside the prepared logs with Pat behind him, but something out of the corner of his eye caught Fred's attention.

Fred saw marks in the dirt made by the frantic clawing of a man. He followed the marks out of the campfire ring and toward the river, where the man's nails dug into the green grass and tore up clods of mud. The trail led to a tall, wide tree with a large hole in the trunk. The marks ended at the base of the tree, where there was a small pile of bark. Fred stood on the roots to take a look into the hole.

The other two by the fire examined the debris and unused fire. Ned's lips were pursed together and he shook his head. "Whatever attacked these people struck without warning."

Pat noticed a boot laying not far from the fire and picked it up. "Yes, but what do you-ah!" She screamed and dropped the boot. Fred and Ned whipped their heads up and around at the girl, who pointed a quivering hand at the boot. Her face was pale and she stuttered out her words. "T-there's a foot in there!"

Fred's face lost its color, but Ned stood up and walked over to the boot. He carefully lifted the clothing item and glanced inside; his face grew more grave. "It seems we have a larger problem than I guessed."

Fred trembled and froze; the problem with his trembling was that he hadn't moved. He heard a noise behind him and slowly turned his head back to the tree. His eyes widened when a pair of large, unknown eyes stared back at him from the trunk, and the limbs bent down to grab at him. The tree was alive, and the hole he stood in front of was the mouth. Fred screamed and lost his grip on the trunk. He fell back onto the ground among roots that tore from the ground and tried to grab at him. He kicked and dodged, and managed to roll out of their reach toward the fire pit.

Ned and Pat rushed forward and helped Fred to his feet, where he turned around and his mouth dropped open. The tree tore itself out of the ground and stretched its limbs high above the foliage on its head. The mouth let out a great roar and its roots burst up beneath the companions' feet. Ned and Pat avoided the clinging plant, but Fred didn't snap out of his stupor quick enough. A root tangled itself around one of his legs and pulled him off his feet. He had the wind knocked from his lungs, and he didn't have time to recover before he was dragged along the dirt to the creature. He reached the tree and was lifted off the ground, his back scraped up and his shirt torn. He twisted and turned in midair, but couldn't catch onto anything.

The tree crashed its way toward the other two and Pat pulled out her sword. The blade shone in the fading sunlight and she stood ready for a fight. At the sight of the slicing weapon the creature screamed in anger and its branches barreled down on the pair. Ned deflected the branches with his staff while Pat cut into them. The sliced branches spewed out green slime and covered them both with its blood. Their efforts kept the monster at bay, but did nothing to help Fred. The creature whipped him about like a rag doll.

They had another problem, the pair were getting tired. Pat realized she couldn't keep up the swinging of her sword for much longer, and turned to Ned. "Ned, your staff!" Pat shouted to him.

The old man was making a game of dodging the branches and pounding them into the ground where they stuck. "But you advised me to use it less," he countered.

Pat sliced another large branch and a smaller one caught her foot. She trapped the tip beneath her free foot and sliced it off. "Forget what I said! Just use the damn thing!"

The pair jumped apart to avoid a massive branch that pounded the ground where they'd just stood. They picked themselves up and hurried out of the way as the roots tried to grab them and pin them to the ground. Ned looked over his shoulder at Pat. "But I must show restraint!"

"Forget restraint, just burn this tree!" she shrieked.

Fred yelped when the creature twirled him around its head and raised him high above the ground. It meant to slam him down against the dirt which would have been the end of him. Ned pointed the top of his staff toward the creature, and a jet of fire spewed from the tip of the wood. The stream of flames hit the tree creature and lit the bark on fire. The creature roared with pain and anger, and dropped Fred the dozen feet to the ground. Pat slipped her arms beneath his and dragged him off while he pushed with his feet to scurry away. They watched the uneven fight between castor and tree from a safe distance.

The fire spread along the creature's branches and leaves. The flames consumed every part of its trunk, but not before the creature turned and vented its fury on Ned. The old man jumped back when the large limbs crashed down where he'd stood. Ned's face took on a seriousness Fred had never before seen; the mouth thinned to a narrow line and his eyebrows crashed down over hard eyes. Ned raised his staff into the air and a great wind swept up around him. The gales fanned the flames of the fire and the creature gave a final roar before it collapsed to the ground. The earth shook, and then there was only the sound of crackling flames.

Fred and Pat moved over to stand on either side of Ned, and they all watched the flames rise up into the sky as night came down on them. Ned wiped his brow, straightened himself, and glanced between his companions. "It makes for a very nice fire, doesn't it?"

CHAPTER 7

With the creature gone, and after they'd cleared and buried the remains of the campsite's previous occupants, the three settled down beside the burning tree. Fred leaned on his side close by the fire with his head on a piece of wood he used as a pillow. His shirt was pulled off and Ned and Pat were looking at his back. The skin was covered in flesh wounds caused by the grass and dirt, and deep gashes from a few loose rocks. Ned reached out and tapped on one of the gashes that was closed up with blood. Fred flinched.

"Did that hurt?" Ned asked him.

"Just a little," Fred replied through gritted teeth.

Pat shook her head. "This is what you deserve for getting curious again," she commented. "At this rate your curiosity is going to get us killed."

Fred whipped his head around and glared at her over his shoulder. "I was just looking around like you two and-"

Ned softly put a hand on Fred's shoulder. "Wait a moment. His curiosity saved us here, otherwise the creature may have waited for nightfall and attacked us in our sleep." He nodded at the disturbed dirt where they'd buried what they found of the campsite's previous occupants. "That's probably what happened to them."

Fred relaxed and put his head back down; Pat turned away. The boy sighed. "So how bad is it back there?" he asked his two companions.

"Time will heal them, but until then you will be very uncomfortable," Ned replied.

Fred shifted his weight and winced when his wounds protested. "Great..." he mumbled.

Ned opened up his cloak and pulled out a few bags; Pat sniffed the air. "Herbs?" she guessed, and Ned nodded. "Did you have a specific medicine in mind?"

"Just one to comfort him and keep the sickness from his wounds," Ned told her.

Pat opened her mouth, shut it, and then opened it again. "Did you want me to do it?"

Ned turned to her with a raised eyebrow. "Are you sure? He deserves a gentle hand."

"I'm pretty sure I can handle that," she assured him.

Fred heard their conversation and looked back at them. "What? What's going on?"

Ned handed the bags to Pat and stood up; there was a mischievous smile on his face. "I leave you to your nurse, Fred."

"Nurse?" Fred was alarmed and glanced over to Pat; she may have saved him, but he didn't trust her to gently touch his wounds. "Why can't you do it?"

Pat scowled and crossed her arms. "What's wrong with me?" she countered.

"Well, it's just, I don't know, you hate me," Fred pointed out.

Pat rolled her eyes and set to work with the two bags of herbs. "That doesn't make me bad at medicine," she replied.

Ned toddled off to tend to the fire, and left the pair to their bickering. Seeing he had no choice but to agree to her as his doctor, Fred turned away in a huff. Pat mixed the ingredients into a paste and dipped her finger into the medicine. She took a glob of the stuff and softly applied it to the wounds. Even with her careful hands Fred flinched away from the pain. "It's okay. This won't take long," she soothed.

"I feel like I've been raked over by a rake..." Fred muttered.

"Have you ever been hit by a rake like that?" she asked him.

Fred shrugged; bad move. His body pulsed with pain and he ground his teeth together.

"A couple of times, when some of the other men had too much alcohol."

Pat frowned and paused with her finger in the bowl of paste. "That's horrible. Didn't you ever try to tell your lord?"

"You saw my lord, he's not exactly a caring guy," Fred replied. "So I was told to solve my own problems."

"And you never thought of leaving that place, even to escape such treatment?"

Fred sighed; the paste calmed his wounds and he was finally able to relax his body. "You can't leave places like those. You're not allowed to leave without permission, and if they catch you they drag you back like he tried at the town," he told her. "Then you're given lashings and extra work. I've seen it. They whip you until your back is soaked with blood and your hanging there by your wrists, too weak to stand. The knights made big men weep like babies."

Pat shuddered at such a picture; it must have made a stinging mark on Fred's memory. "So you've really never been from that estate? Not even with your lord's permission?" she wondered.

"Never." Fred shifted and was glad when the gashes didn't freeze up his body with pain. He glanced over his shoulder. "But you've been to a lot of places, haven't you? At least, you seem to know your way around people, and dealing with that monster."

Pat smiled and shook her head. "I've never been very far from my home, either. I just read a lot of books so I know what's out here."

Fred blinked. "Really?"

"Really," she replied.

"Oh." He looked to Ned in the distance. "So how long have you been with him?"

Pat put the remaining paste on his wounds and wiped her finger on her pants. "Only a few weeks. He's taking me to-well, to where I need to go."

"So he's not your grandpa or anything?" Fred asked her.

Pat cringed and furiously shook her head. "No way. He's just a guard, someone to protect me."

"Protect you? Are you in some sort of danger?"

Pat laughed. "I will be if you keep finding trouble for us. If you get any better at it you're going to lead us right into-well, into something worse."

Fred frowned. "Is there something wrong with where you two are going?"

The girl stood up and tossed his raggedy shirt onto him. "No, but don't ask any more questions so I don't have to lie."

Pat walked off to help with dinner, leaving Fred very ill at ease. He wondered what sort of a mess he'd been dragged into, and how to get out of it. There was Ned's suggestion about going their separate ways at the next town. If his companions remained secretive then he'd take up that offer and leave them. The night passed without incident and day broke to find Fred in much better condition. He received another plaster cast of paste, but he had a problem with his lack of shirt. That was solved by a show of kindness from Pat.

"Here, you can have my cloak," she offered, and tossed the clothing to him.

He barely caught it because his eyes were on her; this was the first full view of her body he'd seen. The armor he'd seen over her chest and leggings also covered her forearms, and at her waist on the opposite side of her sword was a pair of leather gauntlets. He saw a hint of chain metal beneath her breast plate, and there was a hood in the back made of the same metal.

Pat glared at his intense gaze. "What? Have you never seen a girl dressed as this?" Fred

didn't remove his eyes from her, but he shook his head. Pat grabbed the remains of his shirt and pulled them over herself. The front and her arms were covered, though the back had the holes from his dragging. The spell was broken; Fred was released from his staring.

"Let's be off, children," Ned called out to the two.

They returned to the road and set off to their next destination. Ned fell behind to Fred and looked the boy over. "If you expect to protect this damsel then you're going to need a weapon," Ned told him.

The old man's words jolted Fred from his ogling of her back. "Protect? Why am I protecting her?" He was slightly panicked by the suggestion; this pair ran into trouble at every turn and the villains were getting worse.

"Think of it as a trade for our feeding you until we reach the next town," Ned replied.

Fred gestured to Pat, who glanced back suspiciously at the quiet pair. "She has a sword, she can handle herself,. I'm just a serf. The worst I've had to deal with are some angry gophers," he protested.

Ned ignored the boy and dug into his cloak. He pulled out a stick about two feet long. The top six inches were broken off and hung only by a thread of the leather wrapped around the entire pole. Ned admired the stick with a strange, almost sad look in his eyes before he held it out in front of Fred. "I think this will work perfectly for you."

Fred looked at the old man like he'd gone senile. "A stick? You expect me to protect somebody with a stick?"

"A broken stick," Ned corrected him. He pushed the stick against Fred's chest and let go; the boy instinctively grabbed it before it dropped to the ground. "And mind you keep good care of that. It belonged to an old friend of mine and I wouldn't want anything to happen to it."

"Then why did you give it to me to fight with?" Fred asked him in panic.

"Because you're supposed to keep care of it when you do fight with it," Ned scolded the boy.

"Maybe you should keep it," Fred insisted. He held it out for Ned to take, but the old man pushed it back against Fred's chest. The boy pushed against him. "She doesn't need anyone else to protect her when you're around," he pointed out.

Ned frowned and leaned in toward him. "But what if I'm not around, hmm? What then? Could she handle herself alone? Could you handle watching her fight alone with nothing to help her-"

"-except a broken stick," Fred replied. He didn't want to do it, but he tucked the broken stick into his belt; he wasn't going to win this argument.

Ned smiled and patted the boy on the back. "That's the way! You'll make a fine guard for-"

"What are you two talking about?" Pat spoke up. She stopped ahead of them and turned with her arms folded across her chest; her foot tapped the ground and she glared at the pair.

The smile slipped from Ned's face and he quickly shook his head. "Nothing, nothing at all."

Pat narrowed her eyes. "Uh-huh, like I'm going to believe that. Your faces look guilty of something."

"Perhaps it's just the sun." Ned glanced up at the sky and squinted into the day star. "Very bright today, isn't it, Fred?" When the boy didn't reply, Ned nudged him with his shoulder.

"Oh? Yeah, real bright." Fred didn't want to be in this conversation; heck, he didn't want

to be on this road with this strange pair. The boy promised himself that when he left them at the next town, he'd be sure to give back the stick.

"But what are we doing dawdling along like this?" Ned asked them. He hurried forward past Pat with his cloak billowing behind him. "We have places to be and people to see. Come, children, let's be off!" Fred hurried after the old man, and when he passed Pat she glanced down at his waist. He took hold of the stick, gave her a sheepish smile and sped up. When he looked back she followed, but with her suspicions written all over her face.

The journey was a continuation of yesterday's walk. They passed by small and large houses, small villages and through fields of trees and grass. Beyond the trees and grass could be seen hills, and beyond them lay snow-capped mountains with their stony sides. Fred wondered how large the world was with such far afield landscape. He was also curious when they'd reach the next town; his plan was still to separate himself from the pair, but he hadn't thought about it the entire day. Maybe he was getting used to their strangeness.

Fred ventured to ask about the distance when they stopped for camp. "How much farther until we reach the next town?" His feet felt like he'd walked dozens of miles; he didn't even know where he lived anymore.

Ned furrowed his brow and glanced up at the sky. The skyline had a heavier supply of trees; the farther they went the more forested the area became. "I would say another two days of travel should get us to Tramadore."

Pat groaned and sat herself down on a nearby log. She stretched out her stiff legs and winced when her feet cracked. "That far?" she complained.

"That far," Ned assured her.

"Two days..." Fred murmured.

Ned seated himself on a rock and smiled at the boy. "Were you expecting to be rid of us so soon?" he teased Fred.

Pat furrowed her face. "Rid of us? Where's he going?"

Fred held up his hands in front of himself. "No, well, it's just, maybe?" he squeaked out.

The girl glanced between the two men. "What's going on? I thought you bought this boy for a better reason than to take him for a short trip."

"I bought him in bad faith, and can't very well force him to stay with us," Ned pointed out.

"Then you should have left him where you found him. It would have meant a lot less trouble for us," she snapped.

Ned raised an eyebrow at her outburst, and she turned away from his inquisitive gaze. "Yes, well, what's done is done and we should try to make the best of it." He stood up and glanced around. "I'll go look for some wood, and you two try not to kill each other while you make a ring for the fire," he teased.

Ned toddled off into a clump of trees, and the pair got started on the fire pit. They worked silently while they gathered the stones, but when they went to arrange them Pat glanced at Ned's waist. She nodded at the stick. "Did Ned give you that?"

Fred followed her gaze and nodded. "Yeah. He said it'd be useful."

Pat wrinkled her nose. "It looks kind of broken." She held out her hand. "Let me see it." Fred stopped his arranging of the rocks and handed the stick over to her. She examined the ends, the wood, and even the thin strip of leather wrapped around the entire thing; then she handed it back. "Looks strong enough to beat a chicken. Is he expecting us to run into some

fowl trouble?"

Fred shrugged and put the stick back into his belt. "I don't know. He said it'd help if he wasn't around and trouble came up."

"Help? Help how?" she asked him.

Fred shook his head. "I don't know, he just said it'd be useful in protecting-" The boy winced and slammed his mouth shut.

Pat wouldn't let him off that easily. "Protecting what?" When he didn't reply she grabbed his wrist and yanked him over the ring of rocks to her. "Protecting what?"

Fred cringed. "You."

The girl frowned, but released him. Fred pulled away and rubbed his wrist; she had enough strength in that hand as two men. "Me?" she asked him, and he nodded. Pat looked the boy up and down. "You're supposed to protect me?"

"That's just what Ned said, I didn't say it," Fred defended himself.

Pat shook her head and went back to stacking stones. "Just...just forget about it. Doesn't matter, anyway. You're leaving us in a few days, right?"

Fred wanted to ask what didn't matter, but he didn't dare. "Yeah, I guess I am." The joy he expected at saying those words didn't arise. Instead, the boy found himself wondering if he'd be forced from the group.

Fred shook off the feeling in his stomach and went back to work. By the time Ned returned with an armload of firewood the circle was done. He admired the work and smiled at the pair. "You two work very well together when you're not arguing." Fred wished Pat wasn't so good at multi-tasking, then at least he'd only have to deal with working with her or arguing.

The companions settled down for the night. Fred, feeling the odd man out and with new paste attached to his back, went to bed first, but he couldn't sleep. He lay there for an hour with thoughts of Ned's gift to him and Pat's anger at his being made her temporary protector. His insomnia rewarded him when he heard Pat speak to Ned in a hushed tone. "You really made that boy a protector for me?" she asked the old man.

"Maybe," was the mischievous reply.

"Pat's voice wasn't filled with such humor; she was mad. "Do you think this is some sort of a joke? That we can pick up a bunch of farm boys and use them as human shields to protect me? Because that's what they're going to be, meat shields. That boy there doesn't know the first thing about fighting, so he's going to die if we run into some real trouble."

Fred heard a stick play in the fire and cracked open his eyes. Ned had the fire stick in his hand, and the old man stared at the flames and contemplated her statement. "So you think he'll die?" he asked the girl.

"How can he live, especially if Lord Canaver manages to find us?" Pat asked him. Fred was intrigued by this new name; he'd never heard of it before, but from the tremble in Pat's voice he guessed the fellow was someone to fear. Pat sighed and shook her head. "You know I speak the truth, Sir Ned. The boy can't stay with us, even if he chooses to. When we come to the next town, he must go."

Ned chuckled and set the fire stick aside. He took his own staff in hand and stood. His eyes looked down on the girl with a smile. "I told you a title doesn't suit me, and you're always to call me Ned," he softly scolded.

Pat didn't flinch from his gaze. "I'm sorry, Ned, but my argument for the boy still stands. He must go."

Ned pursed his lips together, closed his eyes and nodded. "Yes, perhaps you're right. He isn't trained to fight. Yes, we'll leave him at the next town." Ned moved around the fire and Fred stiffened when the old man passed close by him. Ned paused just beside the boy, and turned back to Pat. She had her eyes on the fire now, and her face showed years of worry premature for her age. "I suppose no amount of proof can change your mind?"

Pat sighed and glanced up at the old man. "Only if a miracle happens and he grows a pair."

Ned smiled and Fred felt the tip of the man's staff softly nudge him in the side. "A lot can happen in a day's time," Ned pointed out.

"I doubt that much could happen," Pat countered in a tone of finality.

Ned took the hint, and soon the pair retired for the night. Fred stayed awake for a while longer thinking over their conversation. It looked like he had no other choice; come the next town, he would leave them.

CHAPTER 8

The next morning broke dark and gloomy. Thick, black clouds hung over them, and for Fred so did the constant realization that he would soon be completely on his own in this large, unknown world. The companions went on their way along the deserted road. No one else dared venture from their homes except to tend to necessary chores. There were also very few houses along the way, and none on the stretch of road they now found themselves.

Pat glanced up at the sky and frowned. "Do you think we'll make it to Tramadore before this storm hits?"

Ned, too, looked up and furrowed his face. "The speed of the clouds is too great. It will strike us tonight."

The girl turned her head from side to side along the road. "Then we'll have to find a shelter or something to sleep in. Keep your eyes out for anything that can hold at least two of us."

Fred winced at the number; as the least important to the group he'd be the odd man out. The companions only stopped for a brief lunch and continued down the road. The trees grew closer to the dirt road and obscured their view of the mountains that crept ever closer. Fred stayed close to the others, fearful another of those tree monsters would snatch him away. He unconsciously reached up and grasped the broken stick at his waist. The feel of the wood beneath his fingers gave him comfort.

The weather worsened with the lengthening afternoon. The companions pushed onward while the wind picked up and tried to push them back. The clouds blocked the sun completely and the smell of rain permeated the air. Shadows crept from the trees over to the three, and in the darkness they grew cold.

Pat sidled up to Ned and nodded toward the trees. "We need to seek shelter in there," she yelled above the wind.

Ned shook his head. "I know of a small stone shelter beyond here. We can rest comfortably there."

"If that shelter still exists. You said you haven't been along here in ages," she reminded him.

"If I'm wrong then we will go into the trees," he acquiesced.

Fred wandered behind them, bundled in the borrowed cloak and miserable. The exhilaration of adventure languished beneath the harsh realities of road travel, and all he wanted was to be home. Hope revived in him when the pair ahead stopped; the shelter had been found. He hurried forward, expecting them to turn off, but they stood in the middle of the road. Fred saw they stared at something ahead on the road and followed their gaze. His eyes widened when he saw the road was covered in trees. The flora were tall, ancient oaks, and there were a half dozen with their roots firmly planted in the ground.

Pat glanced over to Ned. "Were these here the last time you went through?" Ned shook his head, and her lips pursed together. "Didn't think so."

"So what do we do now?" Fred asked them. Rain droplets bounced off of them; they would soon be caught in the full force of the storm.

The ones to answer his question were the trees. Their limbs groaned when they stretched out toward the companions, and their roots cracked as they broke from the hard soil. Fred's heart stopped beating when he realized these trees were the same as the one from last night, but

there were a lot more.

Ned flung back his arms and herded the other two back. "Get back!" he commanded them. "These creatures must have heard the cry of their brethren and wish to avenge it!" He stepped forward and raised his staff above his head in a challenge to the angry trees.

Then Ned tripped over a rock and fell face-first into the hard dirt. For a few seconds Fred and Pat stared at him in disbelief. They snapped out of their daze when the trees roared with anger and stomped toward them. The pair rushed forward and each took a shoulder; they shook Ned hard, but he didn't awaken.

"Come on, Ned!" Pat cried out. She turned him over and held his head in her lap. Blood dripped from a small wound on his forehead. "You have to wake up!"

A smile slipped onto Ned's face, but his eyes didn't open. "Oh mommy, I saw a pretty tree today," he murmured.

Pat growled and whipped her head around to their oncoming enemies. She pushed Ned's head back into the dirt, stood and grabbed an arm. "Help me!" she hissed at Fred. Fred grabbed Ned's other arm, and together they tried to pull their unconscious companion away from the monsters. Ned's body didn't move an inch. "What's he got in that stupid cloak of his, a house full of pay-dirt?" Pat cried out. They tried again, but with the same result. She tossed Ned's arm aside and unsheathed her weapon. "Stay with him," she ordered Fred.

She didn't wait for Fred to nod before she stepped forward to face the creatures. They roared and let loose their limbs at her. She hacked what she could, leaving a pile of flopping, twitching branches at her feet. The creatures were hardly slowed by her efforts and formed a semi-circle around her. They sacrificed smaller limbs and followed them with the larger ones. Pat's sword sliced through the air as fast as she could manage, but a large branch blind-sided her. She was tossed to the ground and her sword slid off beneath the creatures. Their roots grabbed the weapon and dragged it beneath their bodies, and the companions heard a terrible snap as the blade broke in half.

Fred watched the horrific scene unfold as he knelt beside Ned. Pat flipped over onto her stomach and scrambled to her feet, but one of the trees caught her foot. She fell hard back to the ground and clawed at the dirt when it dragged her back. Fred shook Ned hard, but the old man didn't stir; maybe he was dead, or badly wounded. Either way he couldn't help Pat; the only one who could do that was Fred.

The boy looked around for something to help him, and remembered the broken stick at his waist. He pulled it out and the end held by the thin thread of leather knocked him in the face. Fred rubbed the bruised spot and dashed over to Pat. Other monster limbs had attached themselves to her arms, and they pulled back in different directions; they meant to tear her limbs off. Fred gave a great cry and whacked at the branches with his broken stick. Like a ruler on fingers, the creatures screamed and flinched back. That allowed Fred enough time to grab Pat and tear her from their grasp.

The trees weren't affected for long, and they came back with double the anger. Fred furiously swung his stick in every direction, deflecting and bruising the branches that came close. Pat climbed to her feet and he pulled her behind him. She didn't argue; he was the only one with a weapon. Fred and Pat stumbled backwards, and the creatures followed. The trees encircled the pair, blocking off their route to Ned and sealing them in a wall of whipping branches.

Pat pressed her back against Fred's and she clasped her hand in his; he felt her tremble

with the fear of the horrible death that awaited them. "I-I'm sorry about all the bad things I said," she told him.

Fred squeezed her hand; he knew she hadn't meant any of it. "Don't give up just yet," he encouraged her.

She let out a barking laugh. "I'm pretty sure now's a pretty good time to give up." The trees edged closer and their mouths gnashed at the pair. Their branches shut off the light above them and slunk along the ground toward them. They were trapped; doomed.

Fred scowled and glanced at the thrashing creatures around them. He never imagined himself dying in such a gruesome, unheroic way; what would their deaths accomplish here? Nothing, and that made him mad. His hand gripped tightly the broken stick, and he was surprised when a sudden light pulsed at his side. Pat and he glanced down, and saw that the stick glowed. Fred raised the stick in front of him and watched in shock as the leather around the weapon untied itself. The feeble appearance of a broken stick fell away to reveal a long, smooth staff with a crook at the very top. Atop the crook lay a small, blue gemstone that gave off a new, brighter light. The creatures cried out against the burning brilliance and retreated a dozen yards.

Pat glanced over Fred's shoulder and her eyes widened. "Is that a castor staff?" she asked him.

Fred furiously shook his head. "I don't know, it just changed to this!"

The creatures covered their faces with their limbs and rekindled their attacks. The branches swept back toward them, but this time they had a different focus; the staff.

Pat ducked behind Fred and nodded at the oncoming enemies. "Well, whatever you did you'd better do something like it again!"

The smaller branches shot out ahead of the larger ones, and pointed their sharp ends at the pair like wooden daggers. Other limbs went for the staff to wrap themselves around the stick and break it apart. Fred thought about what he did to make it change; he'd gripped it tight. The boy did likewise, and this time with both hands. The light didn't grow brighter, and the creatures kept coming. The monstrous branch at the head of the onslaught propelled itself at his head, ready to stab right through him. Fred instinctively held up the staff in front of him to block the blow, and he slammed shut his eyes.

He heard a terrible scream and opened his eyes in time to see the end of the limb disintegrate. The creature's limb had collided with his staff, or rather with the pulsing shield of light that surrounded it. The branch shuddered and pulled back, but that didn't stop the rest of it from crumbling. The destruction swept up the length of the limb and into the main body of the tree. The creature cried out in agony when its body fell away into a pile of dust, and that was quickly taken by the wind. The other creatures scuttled back, but the shield of light expanded toward them like a giant wall of shimmering brilliance. The light swept over their branches and their bodies, sweeping them all away into oblivion. In a moment the danger was gone, destroyed by the staff that had been a broken stick a few minutes before.

Fred and Pat stood dumbfounded as the storm above them finally loosened the rain. The droplets fell on the remains of the creatures and sizzled atop their smoldering ashes. The boy glanced down at the staff in his hands. The light softened and faded, and with it went the magic. The staff transformed into its original shape of a broken stick wrapped in leather. Then the pair heard a slow clap. They whirled around ready for another fight, and saw Ned standing there with a smile on his face and no longer a wound on his forehead. "Bravo, my lad. I couldn't have

done it in a flashier way if I'd tried."

After their initial shock at seeing him unharmed, Pat's eye twitched and her voice held a promise of violence. "You were never hurt, were you?"

The old man straightened himself and puffed out his chest. "Quite a good actor. I should have taken up theater."

Pat's fists clenched at her sides and Fred stepped away from her. "And you knew it would do that? That the stick would save us?" she asked him.

Ned sheepishly grinned. "Well, I knew Fred here had the talent, and the stick had the ability. Whether or not they could come together was a bit of a question."

The girl growled and launched herself at the old man. She grabbed his cloak and pulled their faces together. "You crazy old man! You could have gotten us all killed!" With each point she gave him a good shake.

"B-but I didn't!" he protested. "Besides, if things would have gotten worse I would have stepped in."

"How?" she challenged him.

Ned smirked and held out his hand that grasped the staff. "Like this." His staff was illuminated by a brilliant light like the one from Fred's stick, but much more intense. The heat itself forced Pat to release Ned and stumble back with her hand shielding her eyes. Fred did the same with his arms, and the pair blinked like hoot owls until Ned lowered his staff. The light faded and they were able to see Ned had a big grin on his face. "See? There was never anything to worry about."

Pat's anger wasn't quelled. "If you could do that than why didn't you do it from the start?"

Ned raised an eyebrow as though her question was foolish. "How were you both going to believe Fred was useful unless you witnessed it for yourselves?"

"Useful? You call dumb luck useful?" Pat snapped back. She waved her arm at the boy with his broken stick. "He was just lucky that that stick changed and saved us."

"Really? You think it was an accident?" Ned asked her.

Pat frowned. "No, I think anybody can save the day with the right weapon. He had the right weapon because you gave it to him. You wanted him to succeed so you could keep him around for some purpose I can't imagine."

Ned looked into her face, saw the seriousness of her accusation, and glanced over to Fred. "Fred, come here." Fred hesitated; he would rather hide away from this argument. Ned sternly looked the boy in the eyes. "Come here. I need to show you both something." Fred shuffled his way over to them, and Ned held out his hand. "Give me the stick." The boy did as he was bidden, and Ned turned to Pat; he held out the stick to her. "Show me how you are able to perform the same trick."

Pat scowled and swiped the stick from his hand. She looked it over for some secret button or magic touch spot, but saw nothing. Her hands felt all over the broken stick, going over every inch, but still nothing. She held it out as Fred had done; that added another failure to her list. Pat looked to Fred. "How do you get it to work?"

Fred held up his hands and shook his head. "No idea," he replied.

She glanced over to Ned. "What sort of trick is needed to open this up?"

Ned leaned on his staff and grinned. "No tricks, no lies. That is a castor staff in disguise."

"Very funny, but how do you get it to open?" she demanded to know.

The old man nodded his head toward Fred. "Ask him, he's the only one of us here who's ever been able to open it."

Pat blinked and glanced between the men. She pointed a finger at Fred. "Wait, so he's the only one who can do that. You can't?" Ned smiled and gave a nod. Pat looked back to Fred, and he cringed when her eyes narrowed. She marched up to him and shoved the stick into his hands. "Show us how you did it."

Fred was at a loss. "B-but I don't know how I did it. It just sort of happened."

"A castor staff appearing out of this old stick doesn't just sort of happen. You have to make it happen, now make it happen again," she ordered him.

Fred glanced over to Ned, who leaned over his own staff and shrugged. "Why does this matter, anyway?" Fred asked Pat. "We're alive, why should we care about an old stick that does that? His does that." He pointed at Ned.

"Don't you know anything about magic?" Pat scolded him. "These things just don't grow on trees."

Ned held up a finger. "Actually, castor staffs do grow on trees. The trees just have to be special."

Pat rolled her eyes. "Well, wherever they come from they're rare, and not everybody can use them. I want to know how you can use one."

"Isn't it obvious?" Ned asked her playfully.

Fred looked to Pat, Pat looked to Fred, and they both glanced at Ned. Pat gestured to the boy. "You're serious? This boy can't be one."

Ned chuckled. "And why can't he? You've seen the proof yourself. He has talent."

Fred's head swiveled between the pair. He had an inkling of what they were talking about, but couldn't grasp the enormity of it. "Wait, what? I've got talent for what?"

Pat sullenly scowled and didn't turn to Fred when she spoke. "This old man here says you have talent to become a castor."

The boy blinked. Then he glanced between them and their expressions, one amused and the other in angered disbelief. "So is this supposed to be a big deal? You two act like the color of the sky has changed."

Ned stepped forward and patted the boy on the back. "Maybe one day you'll see it do just that, but until then you have a very important decision to make."

"What's that?" Fred squeaked.

"You have to decide whether to go on with your normal, boring life, or becoming a castor."

CHAPTER 9

Fred shook his head. "I don't even what that means. Is it a big deal to be a castor? What do they even do?"

Pat huffed and stalked off over to where her broken sword lay. She wrapped up the remains in spare cloth from their provisions, and tucked them into a bag. Without another word she returned to the road and went off without the men.

Fred frowned and looked to the old man at his side. "Why's she mad at me? I didn't mean to do any of this," the boy asked him.

Ned leaned in and dropped his voice to a whisper. "She doesn't like surprises, especially one this extraordinary."

"Why does that matter? You two are going to leave me at the next town," Fred countered.

Fred paled at his outing of himself, but Ned's eyes own twinkled. "So you heard that, did you? I supposed you had, but you'd better keep it a secret from Pat. She won't like it."

"She doesn't like *me*," Fred corrected the old man.

Ned pulled at his beard and watched the girl disappear down the road. "Maybe that's what this whole sullen show is all about," he mused. Then he wrinkled his nose and shook his head. "No, nothing that extraordinary could happen." He turned back and found Fred gazing down at the broken stick. Ned's humor softened and he put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You don't have to make the decision just yet. There's always time. Well, until it's too late."

"I don't even know what those words mean. The ones about the decision," Fred replied. He looked over the stick, and a fear slowly built up inside of him. He'd wondered if it was possible for him to become a castor, and now that he knew the answer all that power scared him. Maybe he'd end up hurting someone the next time, rather than saving them. Fred held out the stick toward Ned. "Take it."

Ned frowned. "It was meant to be a gift," the old man pointed out.

Fred shook his head. "I was planning on giving this back to you when we got to the town. I'm just doing it early."

Ned looked into the boy's eyes and slowly gave a nod of his head. He took the stick and placed it back into his cloak. "Very well, I'll hold onto it for you."

"No, just keep it," Fred firmly replied.

The old man bowed his head and gestured down the road. Night would soon be upon them and they still hadn't found shelter from the storm. The rain pounded down and soaked the pair to the skin. "We had better follow her before more trouble pops up," Ned advised.

The men followed and soon caught up to Pat. They were quiet as they walked along the muddy road; each one was stuck in their own thoughts. Fred was consumed by the memories of the battle, and more than once he glanced down at his hand. His fingers were like they'd always been, a little stubby but normal. He still couldn't quite believe that he'd made that staff change like that, but the proof was right there in his memories. A small part of him was tempted to try out the stick again, but his mind was mostly made up. He didn't want to touch something powerful enough to destroy monsters with only its light. Maybe in the next town, this Tramadore, he could pick up some smaller tricks and make a living off of that. If anything, he could entertain kids.

The companions reached the stone enclosure, and settled themselves beneath its sturdy

roof. They slept well, and the next morning Fred awoke to the sound of screaming. His eyes shot open and he bolted up. He looked wildly around and saw there was no one else around; his companions were gone. Then he heard the noise again, but this time it was more faint, like a whimper. He bolted up off the stone floor and looked out toward the river.

Fred was sure the sounds came from that way, so he sped off down a path that led to the water. He saw a pile of clothes by the riverbank, neatly folded up and with a simple towel on top of them. That's when he realized that maybe things weren't as he'd assumed them to be, but by then it was too late. He skidded to a stop at the river's edge and stared straight at Pat, who stood in the water completely naked. Without her armor she had all the curves of an aspiring beauty. Rounded hips, nice breasts, pale skin.

They looked at each other for one long, surprised moment, and then she let out a scream like the one he'd heard and ducked down into the water to hide everything below the neck. He spun on his heels, and his face felt like it was on fire.

"W-what the hell are you doing here!" Pat screamed at him.

"I thought you were in trouble! You were screaming!" he shouted back. He heard her huff.

"That's because this water is freezing," she grumbled. "I tried to walk in quickly, but the cold temperature surprised me, that's all."

"If it's so cold then why are you in there?" Fred asked her. When she didn't reply, he worried and cast a chance glimpse over his shoulder. Her eyes drove daggers into his own, and he whipped his head back.

"It's because she wishes to be clean for our arrival at the castle," a voice spoke up. Ned surprised both of them when he stepped out of a patch of bushes close by Fred.

Pat glared at him. "How long have you been standing there?"

Ned held up his hands. "I never assumed the danger was in the water, so I kept my eyes on the forest," he promised her.

"I'm sure..." she mumbled with her scowl still on her face.

"What about a castle?" Fred asked the old man.

Ned waved off Fred's question. "Oh, it's nothing. We were merely invited to Lord Tramadore's castle for a banquet and entertainment. His family has ruled over Tramadore since its founding, hence the identical names."

"M-must you tell him e-everything?" Pat chattered out.

"You should finish your bath, my dear Pat, before you catch your death of cold," Ned scolded.

Her face heated up so that Ned wondered it didn't boil the water. "I can't because you two idiots are standing beside my clothes!"

Ned slipped a puzzled expression onto his face until he noticed the pile close to Fred. "Oh, these are your clothes, are they?"

"You know damn well they are, now get away, both of you!" Pat hissed back.

Ned pulled at his beard and glanced between the two youngsters. "You know, I expect Lord Tramadore will serve up a very great feast at every meal." Fred salivated at the thought of a feast put on by a great lord, but he snapped himself to attention and scurried out of there. Ned chuckled at the boy's hasty retreat and turned back to Pat. "If we're to abandon the boy in Tramadore, shouldn't we have the decency to make sure he's well fed before we part?"

Pat scowled at him. "I know what you're g-getting at, and the answer is no. He wasn't

invited to the c-castle, and he wouldn't belong there."

"Oh, I don't know," Ned mused as he glanced down at her clean clothes. "He's not a bad looking fellow. A few nice clothes, a good bath, and he'll look the part of a prince."

"I said no, now I leave so I can get out of here," she ordered. Ned promptly turned and sat down atop her clothes and towel. Her mouth dropped open. "What in the world are you doing? Get off those and return to the enclosure! I demand it!"

"I want only this last concession," he asked of her. His voice was soft, almost pleading. "Let the boy come with us to Tramadore Castle, and then we can be rid of him afterwards."

Pat sighed and shivered; she wrapped her arms around herself, but her skin was too chilled to warm up with her cold hands. "Fine, but after the castle he's gone."

Ned smiled, stood up and gave a bow at the waist. "I will have a warm breakfast when you return to the campsite."

"You'd better," she grumbled.

At his retreating back Pat eagerly raised herself from the water. Ned paused and turned back, forcing her to dunk herself back into the freezing icicle river. "Oh, and don't forget to relinquish your armor to me. We wouldn't want others to know you for who you really are."

Pat scowled at him. "I know, now leave!"

Ned scurried off back to the campsite and Fred; the boy remained unaware of this deal, but he still hoped to have a taste of the hinted-at feasts. His hopes rose when, after breakfast, Ned advised him to clean his appearance. "Why would I do that?" Fred asked him as they sat around the warm fire.

Ned leaned forward on his staff and gave a wink. "I'm sure you'll figure it out."

Pat rolled her eyes, but had to hide a smile when Fred bumbled about to gather a towel and rush down to the water. When he'd gone she turned to Ned. "Are you sure you're not setting him up for disappointment? Lord Tramadore is generous with his hospitality, but he is very protective of his chair."

Ned waved off her concerns with a shake of his head. "I foresee no problems with Lord Tramadore, and as for his chair, perhaps Fred here can amuse the company by trying to sit in it." Ned looked at Pat with a twinkle in his eyes. "Perhaps you want to try your hand at sitting in the chair?"

Pat frowned and looked away. "Maybe, if I'm invited to do so," she replied.

Fred returned in short order, his body clean but his clothes still filthy from the first encounter with the tree monsters. Ned wasn't worried. "We'll get you a new set at Tramadore."

"It seems we're spending more gold on his wardrobe than on food," Pat grumbled.

A short time later the companions set off down the muddy road. The sky that day was clear, and the sun hung over them like a bright flame and warmed their body and spirits. Fred watched for this town called Tramadore, and by midday he noticed a strange mountain off in the near distance. Ned noticed the boy's gaze focused on the towering object in the sky. "Have you never seen a castle before, not even in pictures?" he asked the lad.

Fred blinked and glanced between Ned and the gray thing in the sky. "Is that what it is?"

"Aye, and a very grand one to match with the city," Ned replied.

"City? I thought Tramadore was another town," Fred wondered.

Pat rolled her eyes and glanced back at the men; she led the way. "Tramadore is the largest city in Ralcott."

Fred blinked. "What's Ralcott?"

The girl stopped and stomped her foot on the ground. "This is Ralcott. Everything we've seen is in Ralcott. It's one of the regions close to Sterning, the most important province in all the world." Fred stared at her with all the ignorance he could muster. She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Haven't you heard of any of these things?"

"Nope," was his reply.

Ned laughed and herded them onward. "The world is a very large place, my dear Fred. People like to split it up into regions to better remember where they've been, where they are and where they're going." He gestured to the tower. "That is the peak of Tramadore Castle, which lies at the top of the city of Tramadore in the region of Ralcott."

"Have they no other name for places around this city of Tramadore?" Fred wondered.

"Well, the Tramadore family was also a like of conceited men, so no," Ned replied. "If they could, the family would change the region to their name."

"You shouldn't speak ill of Lord Tramadore," Pat scolded him. "He's a gentleman and a good knight."

Ned smiled and bowed his head. "I accept the reprimand. Lord Tramadore is indeed a good man, and I'm sure he'll show his goodness by stuffing us all full of food and giving us a fine bit of entertainment."

Fred was nervous and excited for their arrival, and when they rounded a bend he received his first full view of the city. Tramadore lay with its back to a large, stony, gray mountain, and its front faced a few small, green fields separated by thin strands of trees that followed the winding river. The river itself ran away from the city, for the source of its water emerged from those same gray stones.

The city was a vast maze of thirty thousand people packed behind a single gate and a fifteen foot thick, twenty foot high stone wall that ran around either side of the front until the walls met the mountain at the rear. There was a moat in front of the single gate, made by diverting the river around the front of the walls. Above the walls the city rose in steppes, each taller than the last and closer to the mountain. The castle itself was at the very peak, and its walls were carved from the very stone of the mountain. Colorful banners flew from the tops of the gray towers and from most every house, and music drifted over the walls and spilled out onto the fields.

Fred didn't realize he'd stopped until Pat yelled back at him. "Come on. We're a day late as it is."

Fred hurried forward and the companions reached the moat. The bridge was down and a steady procession of people walked over the large boards to pass under the gate. Knights decked out in full regalia stood beneath the archway and smiled at those who passed. They passed inside and were met with a lively atmosphere of dancers and shoppers. The gate opened up to a wide, circular marketplace with big and small stalls around the outer edge. A stage stood in the middle of the marketplace, and on that was a band playing a merry jig while dancers performed in front of the platform.

Ned sidled up close to Fred and nodded at the area. "They call this the Square. For the life of me I still can't figure out why."

Pat glanced around the crowd, but her short stature meant even on her tiptoes she couldn't see above most heads. "Which way is it to the castle?" she asked Ned.

The old man pulled at his beard, and looked from left to right. "I think perhaps we head up the steepest road and we'll find our way there in good time. For now, let's see what we can

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get for this boy's clothes."

CHAPTER 10

Ned bought for Fred clothes of an even finer quality than what they'd bought at the last town. Fred felt as fine as a prince, and he noticed Pat stared at him often, and with a glint of admiration in her eyes. A new cloak was also bought for Pat, and then they were off to the castle. Each city steppe was accessed from above and beneath by a single road that wound its way along the streets. Between each steppe was a ramp, and the ramps grew steeper the higher the traveler climbed. By the time the companions stood before the castle they were exhausted.

"Perhaps next time we should hire a cart," Pat conceded.

Ned wheezed and shook his head. "None are allowed in the city during the Festival."

"Festival?" Fred repeated.

Ned nodded back where they'd come, and Fred followed his pointing to the celebrations below. "It's the Festival of the Mountain. Every autumn they celebrate the god of the mountain's birth so he will protect them for another year."

"Superstition..." Pat muttered. "Their well-trained army keeps them safe better than any fabled mountain god."

Ned leaned on his staff and chuckled. "You may think so, but they've been performing the festival for four hundred years and have yet to be taken by an enemy. I'd say that's a better record than any army, and much more fun."

The old man toddled off ahead of the others and glanced at their surroundings. The castle was set back from the road, which created an open area between itself and the lower steppe. The only defense was the high walls around the castle; if the enemies made it that high then the rest of the city was lost and there would be little hope for those within the castle. A pair of tall, wooden doors led into an inner courtyard, and these were wide open. Inside were rows of tables piled high with good food; Fred drooled at the feast and Pat rolled her eyes.

City-folk lined up with plates and took their share from the tables while guards looked on to intercede in fights. A very well-dressed man walked among the people and spoke with everyone he met, shaking hands and smiling at them. The stranger happened to glance through the gates and noticed the three standing outside. His face brightened and he stepped out to greet them.

"Edwin, you old coot!" he greeted Ned. The stranger wrapped his arms around Ned in a bone-crushing hug.

Pat stifled a snort but Fred was confused. Ned separated himself from the other gentleman and put a finger to his lips. "It's Ned now, old friend."

The man caught something in Ned's eyes and the smile slipped from his face; he nodded. "I see, sorry about that, Ned. I guess with all the ale I've drunk it slipped my mind. And speaking of ale-" The man slung an arm around Ned's shoulders and turned them toward the gates. "-how about a gallon or two, for old time's sake?"

Ned smiled. "Have you forgotten again why I'm here? Why we're here?" Ned nodded over his shoulder and the man followed his gaze; his eyes fell on Pat, who bowed.

"Oh!" the man exclaimed. He dropped his arm and hurried over to Pat, where he took her hand and kissed it. "My apologies, my dear lady. You must forgive a drunken old fool and his poor memory."

"There's nothing to forgive," she replied. Fred was glad to see Pat looked as confused over this man as he.

The stranger caught her blank stare. "Ah yes, but where are my manners. I am Lord Tramadore, my lady, and ever at your service."

Pat smiled. "Well, Lord Tramadore, if you're at my service then I demand you call me by my name. It's Pat."

Lord Tramadore glanced up into her face, and nodded. "Very well, Pat. I hope I will make your stay here very comfortable."

"I'm sure you will," she answered him.

Ned stepped over and put his hand on Fred's shoulder. "And this is Fred, a boy we managed to pick up."

Tramadore laughed, and swiveled around. "You don't just pick up-" His eyes settled on Fred and he froze. Tramadore cast a glance at Ned, who grinned and put a finger to his lips again. "I see, well, it's a pleasure to meet you, Fred." Tramadore stepped over and offered his hand, which Fred shook. "I hope we get to know each other very well," the lord added, but his eyes dodged over to Ned.

"Yeah, me, too," Fred replied. He had no idea how to act around lords and ladies, but this one seemed especially strange with the way he cast those glances at Ned.

Fred wondered what silent communication traveled between them, but he would have to keep guessing because Tramadore stepped back from the group and held his arms out toward them. "And now let me invite you into my humble abode, Tramadore Castle. During our Festival I'm sure you'll find your palate well taken care of and the company tolerable, so long as you're drunk through the boring conversations."

Ned chuckled, Pat tried hard not to roll her eyes and Fred stood there with all the confusion of a country boy thrown into a group of eccentric aristocracy. Tramadore led them inside and, much to Fred's regret, skirted the tables, and they traveled through a pair of closed doors open for them by servants. The companions walked into the grand hall, a spacious area with curved stairs on either side of the rear wall, and doors leading off to all parts of the castle. Off to the right side they heard more talking and revelry, and Tramadore guided them to a smaller room with a long table; it was the dining hall.

This table had chairs, and the seats had ladies and gentlemen in fine clothing. There was much talk going on between chewing, but all that was interrupted at the entrance of their host. Many of the men stood and the ladies politely nodded at Tramadore. The lord stepped forward and greeted three gentlemen, who he then guided to the three companions. "Gentlemen, may I introduce my new guests, here for a few days to enjoy our festival." He gestured to each as he introduced them. "Ned, Pat, and Fred, weary travelers all three." Then he turned to the gentlemen. "These are Lord Anthony Brighton." The aforementioned gentleman was short and balding, and had a cheery countenance with too much drink on his face. The middle man was much younger than the first, about twenty-five, and had dark hair with matching eyes. He smiled at Pat, who blushed and looked down at the floor. "Percival Clavier, with his father Lord Henry Clavier, fifth lord of Sturgeon. I'm sure you know Lord Sturgeon is one of our city's finest merchants." The final man was a tall, thin lord about sixty years old and with piercing black eyes.

Percival leaned forward and gallantly took Pat's hand. He gently kissed it and gave her a wink. "Please call me Percy."

The other men nodded at the new guests, who returned the gesture. "A pleasure to meet you all, I'm sure," Lord Sturgeon greeted them. "I'm familiar with Ned. Who in Ralcott

wouldn't know the great castor? But these young ones are a mystery to me. Are you all old friends to our Lord Tramadore?"

"Very old," Ned spoke up. He grasped Fred around the shoulders and hugged the boy against himself. "This young man here has known Lord Tramadore for a good twenty-five years."

A laugh went up from the group, and from others at the table who overheard the joke. "Well, you look quite well for that age," Lord Sturgeon complimented Fred.

"Thank you, sir," the boy mumbled.

Lord Tramadore rubbed his hands together and nodded at the table. "Let's say we dig in, shall we? I've been so busy entertaining my people that I've forgotten to entertain my guests."

Lord Brighton chuckled and nodded toward the front of the room. Behind the head of the table where sat Lord Tramadore there was a short, empty pedestal. "We've been waiting for the last day, my lord. When are you going to let us get a chance at the chair?"

The other conversations died down and a murmur of interest went up from the crowd. "Yes, do let us have a chance at the chair," one of the women, a younger member of the group, pleaded with their lord. Most joined in and the conversations lit up about the chair. Fred had no idea what they were talking about, but Ned and Pat were as interested as the others in the room.

Lord Tramadore held up his hands and silenced them. "I had planned for the chair to be brought out this evening, but if you insist."

"We insist, we insist," Lord Brighton repeated with a jolly laugh.

"Very well then." Lord Tramadore clapped his hands and two servants at the doors behind them left the room. He turned to his three new guests. "Sit where you will and make new friends," he invited them.

Fred was glad when Ned put a hand on his back and led the boy to a pair of empty chairs. Pat, strangely shy, captured a seat nearly opposite them. Fred glanced over all the delicious food and had a fine pile on his plate before the servants returned with four knights in accompaniment. All the attention was on what the knights carried; a large, old chair crafted from wooden beams. It had a low back and thick, short arms with short legs. The knights hefted the piece of furniture around the table and up onto the pedestal.

Lord Tramadore moved his chair so everyone had a good view of the large seat, and he turned to his guests. "All right, who would like to sit in it first?"

The young woman who made the earlier plea jumped from her seat. "Please, if you all would allow me, please let me be the first."

The other guests gave their consent and the young woman gleefully caught up her dress and hurried to the head of the table. Ned leaned in to Fred with a smile on his face. "Watch carefully. This is bound to be very entertaining."

Fred didn't have any idea what the old man meant, but he watched with interest as the girl reached the chair. Lord Tramadore stood close at hand as the young woman stepped up to the chair and turned in front of it to face the audience. She had a nervous smile on her face, and her hands shook when they latched onto the wide, thick arms of the chair. The girl slowly lowered herself onto the seat. Fred couldn't visually tell when she touched the seat because of her bundle of dress, but she soon let out a great yelp and jumped up. The other guests broke out in laughter and many more stood to give the chair a try.

Lord Tramadore laughed at some of them. "Hoping for a different result?" he teased the older ones.

Fred frowned, but Ned was there with an explanation. "The chair has an interesting curse attached to it. No one may sit in it unless they are the one to lead a great change to the land. If they are not the one, then the chair is bewitched to be the most uncomfortable seat in the world. That's why it's called the Uncomfortable Chair, though not so much of doom as of awkward distress."

The scene was repeated for everyone's pleasure until Pat scooted back her chair. Fred and Ned watched with interest as she took her place in the dwindling line, and got her chance at the chair. She stood for a moment beside the seat, and her hand slid over the smooth arm. Her eyes showed their eagerness as they traveled over every speck of wood and nail. The other guests had taken the legend lightly; Pat took it very seriously. She turned around and gently lowered herself onto the seat. Like all the others, she jumped up the moment her derriere touched the wood planks. The crowd laughed; Pat blushed and hurried back to her seat.

When she sat down Ned leaned over the table to her and spoke in a whisper so low Fred could hardly hear him. "Hoping to change your fate?" he asked of the girl.

Pat shrugged. "I thought perhaps they were intertwined."

Then there was nobody left to try but the small young man beside Ned, and nobody paid any attention to him. Fred himself didn't have enough courage to go up there and make a fool of himself in front of all these fine ladies and gentlemen. After the laughter and teasing died down, the guests finished their meal and scurried on their way to other festivities. One of the few to remain behind was Lord Sturgeon, who approached the three companions with Lord Tramadore.

Sturgeon glanced over them with a careful, but friendly eye. "I'm sure these two young ones have never seen the show before. What did you think of it?"

"It was very interesting, my lord," Pat replied.

Sturgeon laughed. "Is that all? Surely you, too, were hoping that the legend would apply to you."

"I don't believe I would make a good leader, sir," she politely answered. Fred thought she would make a perfect leader; she was bossy and reveled in giving orders.

The lord raised his eyebrows. "How strange. I expected you to say the complete opposite."

Pat feigned surprise. "Me? Oh no, I'm not fit to be a leader. Why would you believe such a funny thing?"

Sturgeon shrugged. "Perhaps a strange fancy of my addled brain, or perhaps I believe that is the wish of everyone who tries the chair. To lead the land in a great change would be a marvelous position, fraught with perils and equal, if not greater, rewards."

"I wouldn't know of such things," Pat replied.

"Ah well, I must be wrong then." Sturgeon turned his eyes on Fred, and the boy shrank beneath them. "I don't believe I've seen this face before. Is he a relative of yours, Ned?"

Ned patted the boy on the shoulder. "No, merely an orphan I picked up on some half-rotten estate. I hope to make a good workhorse out of him, provided he lives that long."

Fred paled, but Sturgeon only laughed. "He will have a tough time of that with you, my good sir. You have had more adventures in a day than many of us have in a lifetime, myself included."

The old man smiled, though Fred noticed the expression didn't make it to Ned's eyes. "I'm sure you've had a great many adventures in your long and interesting life, Lord Sturgeon."

Sturgeon nodded. "Perhaps, but as an old man I have very little now to entertain me,

which is why I ask a favor of you. May I have the honor of showing you around the city? I don't know as Ned would like to see the old sights, but surely these two young ones would enjoy the beauty of our city."

"I'd be delighted to go," Ned assured him.

Sturgeon's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, but he bowed. "Then if you and your companions are not so tired, what say you to going now? A stroll through the streets will work off the wonderful food our host provided us."

Ned stepped aside and gestured to the room's exit. "Lead the way, kind sir."

CHAPTER 11

The party left the castle and walked down into the city. Though Fred had seen the sights of the road only a few hours before, there was so much to see he wondered if he could ever glimpse it all even if he had a lifetime of leisure to do it. Houses short and tall stood side by side, some with balconies and some without. People hung out windows and leaned over railings, and watched their fellow revelers dance and shop beneath them. Each tier was a city unto itself with several blocks of buildings filled with people. The upper districts housed the residential areas, minus those people who slept above their shops, and the three companions were given the grand tour by their guide.

Lord Sturgeon knew a great deal of the history, and Pat was fascinated by the small stories of nobility. Fred and Ned politely nodded when they needed to, but were generally uninterested. For several hours the group wound their way down the city and came upon the lower two districts. Those were the shopping districts, and to this Lord Sturgeon eagerly led them. Pat made one detour to have her sword placed in the hands of a competent blacksmith; she would return later when it was repaired.

The lord gestured to the houses above them and the shops around them. "As you can see by the packed buildings, our forefathers never expected the population and mercantile businesses to grow to such heights, so we are trapped within these walls, unable to expand anywhere but up."

"For an industrious man there is never such a trap," Ned commented. Fred started to get the feeling that Ned didn't trust their guide.

Sturgeon smiled and nodded toward the old man. "Quite right, my dear sir, quite right. That is why I've expanded beyond Tramadore, but I still keep myself here for festivities and the like." He stopped their small group at a small sweets shop crowded with children. Further down the street was the wall of the city, and in front of it was stacked a pile of crates. Sturgeon gestured to both the shop and the crates. "My sweet shop, my lady and gentlemen, with shipments from all over the world to stock the shelves, even as far as Crutchen to the east."

Fred had no idea how far Crutchen lay, but Pat was politely impressed. "That's very far. How do you manage to keep your goods safe along these roads?"

"That is a trick of my trade, my dear lady," Sturgeon replied with a wink.

The whole conversation bored Fred, so he wandered off toward the wall. Its massive construction attracted his attention, and he wondered if there were any cracks in the walls where he could see out to the fields. Being cooped up among all that rock, even for such a short time, had him longing for open fields. He reached the crates at the foot of the wall and was disappointed to find not a single sliver of light between the giant boulders that made up the wall. They were expertly wedged atop and against each other. He wondered if they hadn't used giants to create such a large and perfect defense.

While he stood there a dozen yards from the others, Fred's eyes caught on a movement among the crates. He thought perhaps it was a cat, but the color was odd. It was less of a flash from a disappearing cat, and more of a shimmer. He edged closer and realized the movement wasn't among the crates; it was one of the crates. One of the wooden boxes at the front moved and caught the light of the sun, causing a ripple of color.

Sensing they'd been spotted, the crate fell away to reveal itself as some strange cloak able to reflect the appearance of a crate. From the cloak arose a tall man dressed completely in

black. He wore a wide-brimmed hat, and over the lower half of his face was a bandanna. The skin on the upper part of his face was pale, almost white, and the man's eyes burned as red as coals. He raised his arm and Fred saw he held a small crossbow with a black dart as its projectile. The boy couldn't run; his surprise and fear froze him to the spot. Everything slowed down; the man pointed the weapon straight at him and pulled back his finger.

A strong arm wrapped around Fred and pulled him out of the line of fire. Fred realized it was Ned from the billowing cloak around him, and Ned's face above him blazed with his light of anger. The dart shot harmlessly into the ground, and in a flash the man in black jumped backwards onto the stack of crates. He rearmed the weapon and pointed the miniature crossbow at Lord Sturgeon. "What's going on here? Who are you?" the lord demanded of the stranger.

Pat noticed where it was pointed and jumped at him, forcing the lord to the ground just in time to avoid another dart. The crowds around them saw the attack and a cry went up; panic and confusion reigned as everyone ran in every direction. The man reloaded, but Ned sat up over Fred and slammed his staff into the ground. That entire section of the city shook with the reverberations, and the stranger turned to glare at the old man. Ned stood and the tip of his staff glowed. The man in black's eyes widened; he pocketed his weapon beneath his cloak, turned to face the wall and made a great leap. His hands caught the smallest crevices and outcroppings, and he climbed his way up to the top. He slipped over the wall and out of sight.

A few moments later a retinue of guards atop the wall, hearing the commotion, rushed up; the leader leaned over the battlements of the wall. "What's going on here? Is anyone hurt?" he called down to the onlookers.

Sturgeon picked himself up off the ground and brushed himself off. "We're all fine, captain, but an assassin just escaped your clutches. He climbed up the wall and went out of sight."

The captain glanced around the wall, and several of the men looked over the other side onto the river below. "No one here, sir," one of the men informed their captain.

The lord fumed. "He was there, I tell you. He climbed right up that wall."

"Then he can't have gone far," the captain soothed the angry lord. "We'll be sure to check the fields around the city."

The men dashed off to search the perimeter and the area quieted down, though mostly because the crowds had fled. Lord Sturgeon stepped toward the crates, and his fists were clenched at his side. "Damn whoever did this! If they think they can kill me than they have a thing to learn."

"But who would wish to kill you?" Pat asked him.

Sturgeon waved his hand to brush aside her question. "You can't run a business as large as mine without making enemies. Perhaps it was my lesser competitors," he suggested.

"Perhaps," Ned spoke up. "But under the circumstances you had better retreat to your home, and we to the castle."

The lord hesitated. "Are you sure you're not better protected at my home? It's closer, only a few levels up."

Ned closed his eyes and shook his head. "This must be reported to Lord Tramadore immediately. We will be the messengers, and you must protect yourself with your guards."

Sturgeon pursed his lips together, but nodded. "Yes, I suppose your wisdom is sound. I shall double the guards around my house and see to it that this matter is investigated to the fullest extent of my power," the man agreed.

The three companions followed Sturgeon as far as his house, a fine, three-story mansion with a small park out front in the center of the city. The festive mood and busy streets were replaced with an eerie quiet; word had spread about the attack, and so had the rumors. Sturgeon's household came out to greet him fearful that he'd been mauled by a tiger.

He smiled at them and held up his hands. "I am fine, and no, a tiger was not involved."

The worried household included his son, who rushed through the servants to his father. "What happened, father?"

Lord Sturgeon glared at his son and turned him around back to the manor. "This is better left for a talk inside," he replied, and pushed his child toward the doors. Sturgeon turned to the three companions. "Are you sure you won't seek safety in my home?"

Ned nodded. "We will report what we can to Lord Tramadore."

Then they parted ways, with the remainder of the group hurrying to the castle. They found Tramadore himself outside his gates with the captain they'd met earlier. When Tramadore saw the three he rushed forward and looked them over. "Captain Spalding here told me what he could, but I wish to know the full story. Is Sturgeon still safe?"

"He is, but anything else must wait until we are inside," Ned promised.

Lord Tramadore led them into the castle, and the great doors to the courtyard were closed behind them. The lord took them to the entrance hall and turned to the left, where lay a large study. He showed them their seats around his large wooden desk, and settled himself in for the tale. Ned briefly explained what had occurred, and when the story finished Lord Tramadore shook his head. "That someone such as that would be in my city. Do you or Sturgeon have any inkling who it might have been?" the lord asked him.

Ned pulled at his beard, and solemnly nodded. "Judging by his skills and weapon of choice, I believe it was the assassin known as Deadly Sins." Fred started at the name; it was the same one he'd heard around the dead man in the previous town.

Lord Tramadore leaned back in his chair with his mouth set in a firm line. "This is very serious, but it brings up more questions than answers."

Pat straightened up and frowned. "More questions? What other one can there be but motive and the culprit?"

Their host held up a finger. "First, I have never heard of this particular assassin failing in any of his missions," the lord pointed out.

"Nor have I. An assassin's reputation depends on success. This one gave up rather quickly," Ned spoke up.

Lord Tramadore raised another finger. "The second problem is the target."

Pat was greatly surprised by the lord's statement. "The target? Lord Sturgeon? What could he have to do with this?"

"That is exactly what I wish to know," Lord Tramadore countered. "He is a very important man, even beyond the walls of this city. He's made a great deal of enemies, but none have tried their hand at killing him. Rather, the moment a whisper of suggested foul play leaves their lips they are found dead."

"Lord Sturgeon is such a man?" Pat exclaimed. Fred was less surprised than the girl. The man had a shifty way about him.

Lord Tramadore crossed one leg over the other and cupped his chin in one hand. "He is not a man to take lightly, and I always guessed him to have Deadly Sins in his purse. Either this assassin has found a higher buyer, or what you saw was not what it seems." Fred's head spun at

such a revelation; commerce and assassinations were a disgustingly intertwined and confusing business.

Ned sighed and leaned forward on his staff. "Unfortunately we have only speculation, and a very scared city. What will you do about the festivities?" he asked the lord.

Lord Tramadore shrugged. "I will post more guards on the walls, but I can't see any reason to stop it, not when it means a great deal to my people. Fortunately, the festivities end tomorrow night, and the assassin had, or has, only one target. In the meantime I will make a full inquiry into the matter, and send the knights to all the houses with words of encouragement."

Ned stood and smiled. "A very good plan, Lord Tramadore."

The lord nodded. "I try to stay true to my heritage, regardless of the oafish face I put on in public. And for you three, what will you do? If the assassination was real then you've angered a very dangerous foe. He may seek revenge."

"And be given a warm send off," Ned replied with a chuckle. His staff glowed for a moment, and quickly faded.

Lord Tramadore laughed and rose to his feet. "I must admit he chose the worst castor to deal with." The lord looked to Fred. "And you were very fortunate to find him. How did you manage to catch such a highly skilled assassin?"

Fred shrank down in his chair and shrugged. "He moved, and I noticed his cloak."

Lord Tramadore rubbed his chin and gave a side-glance toward Ned. "Just happened to notice it, eh? Very lucky of you."

Ned frowned. "Yes, very lucky indeed." He tapped the youngsters on the shoulders and they stood. "But if you'll excuse us, I think we'll have our dinner alone and be off to bed. Fewer questions from other nosy guests, you see." Ned turned toward the door, froze, and glanced back; he had a sheepish look on his face. "By the way, where are our rooms?"

Their host laughed and walked around his desk. "Let me show you them myself, and arrange for food to be brought up."

CHAPTER 12

Lord Tramadore guided them up the curved stairs to the second floor of the castle. The wings were occupied by guest rooms, and he showed them ones on the far left side of the castle. Their positions allowed them a magnificent view of the fields beyond the city, and for that Fred was relieved. He still felt stifled in such confined luxury as the city and the castle. Ned's room was in between those of the youngsters, and when their tour of their abodes was finished food was brought up to that room. Lord Tramadore left them to attend to his peoples' worries, and the moment his echoing feet silenced Pat turned to Ned.

"Were you and the others aware of such troubles when you decided on this route?" she questioned him. Fred's ears perked up; he wondered who the others were.

Ned took a plate and rummaged through the platters of food placed on a small buffet. "Every route has its dangers, and this had fewer than others."

"Is that all you're to say about this trouble we find ourselves in? About this trouble you've caused us?" Pat gestured to Fred, who slumped over and frowned; he was a person, not a trouble.

Ned followed her arm and looked over the boy. "I see no problems other than a hungry boy to be fed. You should eat some yourself," he advised the girl.

The old man piled food on his plate, and Pat's hands balled into fists. She growled, stomped forward and whacked the plate out of Ned's hands. The silver clattered to the floor and food flew everywhere. Fred managed to catch a drumstick before it hit the ground, but he lost his appetite when Pat stepped up to Ned's side and stuck her face into his; the anger in the room was palpable. "I asked you this once before and allowed myself to be deceived, but you truly believe this is a game, don't you? That somehow everything will work itself out for the better and all you need to is wave your staff a few times? Well, why don't you wave that staff and send us to Galaron? Then we would be rid of each other and everyone would be as lacking in worries as yourself."

Ned looked down at his empty hand for a long moment, and then he raised his eyes. They bore into hers, and she scuttled back out of shock and fear. Fred shuddered at the thin line made by Ned's lips, and the brow furrowed in barely-restrained anger. He'd never seen Ned so angry, and it was terrifying to behold. The old man's voice was soft, a ghost of a whisper, but the words carried a heavy weight that made them both pay attention. "You believe it's that easy, do you? That as a castor I can wave my staff and rid myself of my problems?"

Pat pressed her hands against her chest and meekly shook her head. "No, that's not what I meant-"

"Then say what you meant and don't waste my time with foolish words," he snapped at her, and she cringed back. He saw her fear, and he swept some of his ire back inside of him. "I gave my word that I would protect you to the best of my ability, and I still swear by that. You have come to no harm, and we have only a few day's journey to the border of Sterning. After that we are guaranteed safety, and you shall arrive at Galaron to assume your responsibilities. Does that schedule suit you?"

Pat nodded; Ned sighed and glanced over to Fred. The boy both dreaded and hoped for a mention of his future, but Ned only turned away and left the room. The pair didn't move until his footsteps retreated down the hall, and then Fred heard a strange noise come from Pat; it was a snuffle. He looked to her and saw she'd turned her face from him. "You okay?" he asked her.

The girl nodded, but her voice sounded nasally, like she wanted to cry. "Yeah, I'm fine, just caught something in my eye. I think I'll go try to wash it out."

Pat hurried out of the room, leaving Fred alone. With all the food. He wouldn't let all of it go to waste, but his appetite was dulled by the confrontation. Still, as he stacked his plate high as Ned had done, he wondered at the tense atmosphere that surrounded those two. They hid secrets, and he both hesitated and was eager to know them. Fred shook himself from those thoughts; he didn't need to worry about them, they'd be gone soon. In his sort of life, leaving usually meant never seeing them again.

Fred took his meal to his room and gobbled down the food. Satiated, and with night setting, he decided to retire. There was a comfortable, four-post bed made ready for him, but his body was unaccustomed to such a soft bed, so he tossed and turned for several hours. His mind did little to help as it bounced around from one of the day's events to another. There was the early feast, and the hair-raising adventure in the city with the assassin. He wondered if there was ever a normal day to be had in the companionship of Ned and Pat.

A few hours later he finally gave up and dressed himself; perhaps a stroll along the hall outside his door would help tire him. He peeked out of his room and saw that many of the torches were extinguished, casting much of the passage into darkness. Still, he was no stranger to the night and ventured out of his room. His exit would have been quiet except for a loud squeak of the door hinges. Fred hadn't gone more than a yard before he noticed a shadow of a man climb down a winding set of stairs at the end of the hall. The man had a familiar beard, it was Ned. The boy wondered what would have the older one up at such an hour, and dodged behind a rusting suit of armor.

Ned's cane lightly tapped the stone floor, and his head was bent down at a contemplative angle. The passage was accessed from the main entrance hall through a short, narrow hall to Fred's right, and the boy saw a man step out in front of Ned. The old man jerked to a stop and both his hands flew to his staff.

"Easy there, old friend," Lord Tramadore's voice whispered.

Ned visibly relaxed. "You risk giving me a quick death with such greetings."

"Or giving me a quick death, though I don't believe you need my help. You seem intent on worrying yourself into an early grave," Lord Tramadore countered.

Ned chuckled. "My bouts of worry make up for the many instances where I do not worry enough."

"And I don't take these bouts of yours lightly." Tramadore folded his arms across his chest. "What bothers you now?"

The old man glanced around them and Fred ducked down further behind the suit. "Perhaps a hall is not the best place for a tete-a-tete."

Lord Tramadore stepped aside and swept his hands down the passage leading to the entrance hall. "My study is very private."

The pair disappeared down the hall and Fred hurried after them. Their shadows danced along the walls, and he snuck a peek down the corridor. They disappeared down the turn in the stairs, and he risked scrambling down the corridor so as not to lose sight of them. Fred was in time to see them reach the study door beneath him in the entrance hall and enter, then the door was shut. No other soul was around, so he slunk down the stairs and reached the entrance to the study. He pressed his ear against the wood, but the door was solid; he didn't hear a thing. Then his eyes caught the area between the two doors; there was a small gap and here he could listen in

and see the participants of the conversation.

Hardly had the men seated themselves than Lord Tramadore got down to business. "Is it the girl that bothers you, or the boy?"

"Both, I'm afraid," Ned replied. "One believes she knows the world, and the other doesn't know enough. I haven't figured out which is worse."

"I would say the false belief, unless the boy thinks he knows the world, too," Tramadore pointed out.

Ned shook his head. "No, he knows he's ignorant, but so much so that I can't even guess where to start his learning."

"Start his learning?" the lord repeated. Ned was quiet for a moment, Lord Tramadore leaned over his desk. "I've waited long enough, old friend, now tell me. Is this boy truly him?" the lord asked him.

The old man sighed and pulled at his beard. "If it isn't then the world is a stranger place than even I guessed."

Lord Tramadore leaned back in his chair, awed by Ned's answer. "He did find that assassin through the veil of that magic cloak, but have you tested him? Given him the staff?"

Ned waved his hand. "Yes. He performed beautifully with the staff, like I thought he would, though Pat was given a fright."

"Pat? Oh yes, her name. I'd forgotten. So now you have two troubles on your hand, one of them long-awaited and another unexpected?" Lord Tramadore asked him.

"They were both expected, but to be together on such a dangerous journey, and with the boy so ignorant, has given us some challenges," Ned admitted.

"Will you make the deadline to Galaron?" the lord wondered. Fred's ears perked up; there was that name again.

Ned shook his head. "I do not know, but we have no choice. To do otherwise would risk some catastrophe, I know it."

"And Lord Canavar? Does he know of your journey?"

The old man shifted in his chair and sighed. "And stalks us even now. I wouldn't put it past him to have called forth those tree demons we found. They reeked of his handy work. The further we go the worse it will get until after we've passed through Salaron."

"Did you wish for accompaniment?" Lord Tramadore offered. "I can go myself and-"

Ned held up his hand. "I thank you, old friend, but you have troubles here you must attend to. Lord Sturgeon created this false assassination for a reason, and I believe that he aims to gain the sympathy of the people. Should you leave, he may very well use his influence to control your household."

"You believe it's that serious?" the lord asked him.

Ned gave a nod. "I do." A smile crept across his face. "But until we leave, I expect to be useful to you, and you to me, and we shall drink your fine mountain wine until it comes out our ears."

Lord Tramadore was quiet for a moment. He leaned over the desk and his unwavering eyes fell on his old friend. "You take these matters lightly, but in the passage upstairs you appeared consumed by your worries. Why were you not asleep?"

The old man turned away, the first time Fred saw the man turn from a challenging stare. "Old memories become dreams for most people, sweet reminders of what was."

"And yours?" the lord asked.

Ned lifted his staff and ran an old, withered hand over the wood. "Mine are nightmares. You know a part of the cruelties I've seen. None of that has gone away, and the dreams loose it upon my mind."

"You're a haunted man, but I wonder if this boy doesn't shed some light on your soul," Lord Tramadore replied.

The old man glanced up at his old friend. "Perhaps, if I find him to be worthy of the staff."

"Can I see it? For old times' sake?" the lord requested.

Ned nodded and leaned forward; he pulled forth the broken stick and handed it to his old friend. Lord Tramadore ran his hand over the worn leather, and stopped at the broken parts. "And this still works? Even with this break?"

Ned shrugged. "It was always cracked. He made it that way so no one would steal it. It broke the night-well, that night, but the boy was able to use it."

"I see." Lord Tramadore returned the weapon. "And you will take this boy with you if you can?"

Ned sighed. "If Pat will allow it, I will. He has potential, even if he doesn't have his soul."

"The soul of-"

"What are you doing there!"

At the cry Fred swung around and saw a guard standing at the other end of the entrance hall. The man hurried forward and Fred stumbled toward the stairs. He didn't make it more than a foot before the doors to the study swung open and whacked him in the ass. The boy tumbled forward and landed in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. Ned and Tramadore stepped out of the study and their eyes fell on Fred as the poor boy was roughly pulled to his feet by the guard.

Lord Tramadore smiled at the boy and waved off the guard. "Release him. He's no harm to anyone, my good man."

"Very well, sir." The guard retreated to perform his rounds, leaving the three alone.

Fred shrank from the stairs of the two imperious men. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean-"

"Of course you did," Lord Tramadore interrupted him. "It's just a matter of how much you heard and understood."

The boy shook his head. "Very little, my lord, I promise."

Lord Tramadore rubbed his chin and looked to his quiet compatriot. Ned leaned heavily on his staff and his blue eyes bore into the boy; the lord couldn't tell whether Ned was amused or angry, but that was always the way with the old man. "I believe that, but perhaps we should finish this conversation in the study. With our resident eavesdropper inside we're sure to have a safe conversation."

CHAPTER 13

Lord Tramadore herded Fred into the room and Ned followed. The boy feared the old man's silence; he hated to have his disapproval, and even worse his anger. Fred flinched when the doors shut behind him with an ominous thud, and he was led over to a chair at the desk. Ned took the seat closest to him, and Lord Tramadore opposite them both behind the desk. Fred sank down in his chair and wished he could disappear into the seat.

Lord Tramadore leaned forward and gave the boy a careful glance. "How much of the conversation did you hear?"

"E-everything," Fred admitted. He noticed Ned wince.

The lord's eyes dodged over to Ned, and back to the boy. "And what did you understand?"

Fred shrugged; he was too frightened to recall much of what was said. "I heard you talking about taking Pat somewhere, and somebody following, and-and stuff about me and that broken stick."

Ned pulled out the stick and held it in front of the boy. Fred shook his head; he didn't want it. "Take it," Ned ordered him.

The boy cringed at the deep, commanding voice, and raised his arm. His fingers hesitated over the leather for he feared this was some sort of punishment, and he glanced up into Ned's face. The old man stared straight at him; he didn't even blink. Fred took a deep breath and grabbed the stick; he was relieved when he felt nothing save for the old leather.

Lord Tramadore was disappointed nothing had happened, but he continued on with his questions. "Do you remember enough to repeat it to anyone?" he asked the boy.

Fred shook his head. "No, my lord." Right then he could hardly remember his own name.

"And you will keep what little you remember to yourself, and not divulge it to anyone else?" the lord questioned.

"Yes, my lord." Fred would have agreed to anything had it gotten him out of there faster.

Lord Tramadore turned to Ned, who still stared at the boy. "Do you consider him a danger to you?"

Ned glanced over to Fred, who stared uneasily back. Then the old man slowly shook his head. "I would trust him with my life, what's left of it."

"Then what will you do with him? From your account he has talent," Tramadore asked him.

The old man leaned back and pulled at his beard. "Fred." The boy looked to him. "I wish to take you with me on my journey. I can't promise you the way will be as easy as it is now, what with Tramadore's hospitality at our disposal, but I feel you may be of great use where I am going. That is, with a little training."

Fred frowned. "That depends. Where are you going?" the young man asked Ned.

"To Galaron, the capital of our kingdom. After that, I cannot say because I do not know." Ned gave that mischievous smile and glanced between his staff and the boy. "You would see a great many sights, wondrous and terrifying."

"You make it sound as though it's an adventure for the lighthearted when it isn't," Lord Tramadore scolded him.

"I would-I would rather stay here, if you please," Fred spoke up. The smile dropped off

Ned's face, and Tramadore raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps I can be apprenticed to someone. There are a great many shops here. Maybe one of them needs a boy."

Fred expected the old man to object, but Ned only stood up. "The hour is late. We should discuss this when we have our wits about us." Ned stretched out to set his hand on Fred's shoulder, but the boy dodged his hand and stepped out of his reach. The old man's arm dropped to his side and he nodded; his voice was soft, but understanding. "Very well then. Let's be off."

The pair walked up to their rooms and found Pat standing out in the hall. She was fully dressed, including armor, and alert; her voice held a tone of urgency. "Did you find what it was?" she asked them.

"Find what?" Ned questioned.

Pat leaned back and frowned. "Didn't you hear the noise?" she countered.

The men stared at each other; they hadn't heard anything. Ned looked back to the girl. "Was it perhaps the sound of a guard yelling?"

Pat straightened up. "Definitely not," she replied. She glanced at Fred, who sheepishly turned away. The girl turned to Ned. "What have you two been doing?"

Ned shook his head. "That's a tale for another time. What noise did you hear that worried you enough to put your armor on?"

"I heard a door creak," she told them. The two boys blinked; that wasn't the eerie noise they expected. Pat rolled her eyes. "It was a muffled creak, like someone put their hands on the hinges, and it cut off very quickly."

Ned and Fred glanced past her at their doors; they were both shut. The boy paled when he remembered one very important pointed. His voice shook when he spoke. "My door creaks," he informed his companions.

Ned and Pat looked at him, then at Fred's door; there wasn't anything unusual about it. The old man straightened himself and grasped his staff. "Well, we'll have a look in there, shall we?"

With the youngsters behind him, Ned marched over to the door and tried the handle. It was unlocked, and when he pushed it open the hinges creaked. "That's the noise I heard," Pat whispered to them.

Ned's head disappeared inside, and the two waited breathlessly. He pulled back and pulled at his beard. "Something not quite right in there..." he murmured. The old man glanced over to Fred, and raised a brow. "Care to take a look?"

"Me?" Fred squeaked out.

"Yes, you. It's your room, after all," Ned pointed out.

Fred shot him a dirty look, and nodded at the man's staff. "But you've got a staff."

"So do you," Ned countered. He glanced down and Fred followed his gaze; Fred realized he still held the broken stick.

Fred paled, and Pat looked between the two of them. "What is wrong with you two? You both look like you've seen a ghost."

Neither replied; Ned watched Fred and waited for a reply. The boy wrestled with dual emotions; one to flee and the other with the knowledge that he held a kick-ass weapon in his hands. Fred tightly gripped the stick and glared at the room. He took a deep breath, and stepped inside. The room was dark but for the window that looked down on the fields. A soft, cool breeze blew in and rustled the flimsy draperies atop his four-post bed. Fred squinted and clutched the stick as he looked over every inch of the room. His eyes settled on the corner

beyond his bed; something stirred there that wasn't controlled by the wind.

Fred stiffened and raised a shaking hand as his companions came up behind him. As they followed his pointing, a shadow stood up behind the bed and a cloak fell away to reveal a man dressed in dark clothes. Ned pushed in front of the youngsters and held out his staff; the stick glowed and revealed the murderous man known as Deadly Sins.

"Good evening," the assassin greeted them. His voice was deep and suave; Pat wondered how someone with such a voice could be a killer-for-hire.

Ned nodded at the man. "Good evening, dear sir. What brings you back into the pleasure of our company?"

The hooded figure turned those dark eyes on Fred, who slunk behind Ned and looked over the man's shoulder. "That boy is a problem for me. I solve all my problems." The man swiftly pulled his miniature crossbow from his cloak and pointed it at Ned's shoulder. "Now step aside, castor. I've only come for the boy."

"My weary old bones ignore such orders. Even I can't get them to move when they've made up their mind to stand still," Ned replied. He lifted his staff higher and the room brightened; the assassin stepped back further into the shadows. "But if you would be kind enough to set your weapon down, we may talk this over."

The assassin crouched down and pushed off the floor, propelling himself toward them. Ned swung his staff down at the man's head, but the assassin was too fast; he jumped aside and backhanded the staff. The assassin's hand sizzled when it connected with the wood, but the staff flew out of Ned's hand and the light vanished. Pat unsheathed her weapon and dodged around Ned. Their foe pushed on Ned's side and the old man stumbled into her. They fell to the floor in a mess of thrashing arms and legs.

The assassin raised his weapon and aimed it at Fred's chest. Their enemy pressed the trigger and a deadly dart flew from the weapon. The boy held up his arms to shield himself, and with them came the broken stick. The stick transformed into its alter ego staff and the room was illuminated by its brilliant light. The poison dart hit the pulsing heat from the staff and disintegrated only inches from Fred's chest.

The assassin jumped back from the heat and lifted his arm over his eyes. "So that's how you did it. Good to know." The man reached into his cloak and pulled out another dart; this one was different. The color was a shimmering gray, and atop the point was a small, faintly-glowing crystal. He armed his weapon and pointed it at Fred.

The boy had had enough; he hadn't survived so many other attempts on his life just to be shot in his own bedroom by some guy with a handkerchief over his mouth. Fred lowered his arms and slammed the bottom of his staff on the floor. The air vibrated with tremors and a thin beam of light swept out of his staff and across the floor. It barreled into the assassin, and carried him across the stones and out the window. His hands clawed at the frame, but he fell backwards into the abyss of the night. The last they saw of him was his cloak slipping over the sill.

Fred stood frozen for a few moments, and then he fell to his knees. He grabbed the staff with both hands, and leaned on it while his heart thumped madly in his chest. Behind him Pat pulled on Ned's arm and hefted him onto his feet. "Please tell me you weren't trying to protect me," she half-joked to the old man.

"No, my promise to protect you still stands," he replied. His eyes fell on Fred, who still sat there shocked by what he'd done. "But I failed to protect him."

Pat followed Ned's gaze and her lips pursed together. She walked over and knelt in front

of him. Fred faced forward and his eyes stared unblinking right through her. She put her hand on his shoulder and gently shook him; Fred lifted his gaze to her, but she didn't see any recognition in his face. "Are you all right?" she whispered.

His voice was deeper, and echoed through the room. "Who are you?" he asked her.

Pat started back. "It's me, Pat. Remember?" He continued to stare at her as though she was a stranger; she shook him harder. "Come on, Fred! Remember me!"

At the mention of his name Fred blinked and winced. He clutched at his head and slumped over; Pat caught him before he fell to the floor. The staff in his hand reverted to its useless form, and Ned shuffled over to them. He leaned down and frowned. "Do you remember who you are?" he asked the boy.

Fred squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his teeth. He shook his head, and afterward nodded. "Fred," he choked out. "My name's Fred."

Ned smiled, but it was full of sorrow. "Let's get him onto the bed."

The pair pulled Fred to the bed and hefted him atop the covers. The boy closed his eyes and was asleep in a moment; the stick remained clutched in his hand. Pat sat down next to him and frowned. She didn't turn away when she asked her question. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's exhausted from the effort. He used a very powerful spell to knock the assassin back," Ned replied.

By this time they heard commotion in the castle, and footsteps ran down the hall outside the entrance. They heard the doors to their other rooms open until Fred's bedroom door flung open. Lord Tramadore rushed inside with a contingency of guards behind him. "There you three are," he breathed, relieved at finding them well. He noticed the boy on the bed, and Ned turned and glanced over the guards.

Lord Tramadore took the hint and waved them off. "Calm the other guests. Tell them it was merely the old castor practicing spells," he instructed his guards. They left and Tramadore approached the bed. His lips pursed together and he cast an accusing look at Ned. "What happened?"

"We had a guest, the assassin from earlier," Ned replied. He nodded at the boy. "He was after the boy, and Fred knocked him out the window. The effort took most of his strength."

Tramadore furrowed his brow. "After the boy? What for?"

"For his ability to see through his cloak. Fred appears to have an innate gift of seeing through sorcery," Ned revealed to them. "This perhaps better explains his inability to use pay-dirt."

Pat's eyes widened and she glanced over her shoulder at the old man. "That's why you wished for Fred to go into the room first! He would see the trap before any of us!"

Ned nodded. "Precisely."

"So the assassin waited in this room for the boy?" Tramadore guessed.

Ned set his hand on Tramadore's shoulder. "I'm afraid so, old friend. Your castle defenses have been breached, but there's no cause for alarm. Most other assassins are not so skilled as this one, and the fellow has learned his lesson against dealing with this castor."

"So what now?" Tramadore asked them. "What will you three do?"

"Our chances against our foes are decreasing," Ned commented. He turned his eyes on Pat; her hand lay atop the boy's. "Has this convinced you that he needs to come with us?"

Pat stood up and continued to stare at the boy. He looked peaceful sleeping there. "This has only convinced me that we've brought trouble to this boy. He deserves a normal life, and-

she turned to Tramadore, "-I ask that you use your influence to give him an apprenticeship somewhere in your fine city."

Tramadore glanced over to Ned, who turned away, and he returned his gaze to Pat; the lord nodded. "Very well. I will use all my resources to make his life comfortable."

"Thank you," Pat replied. She stood up and covered Fred with blankets. "May I ask another favor of you, Lord Tramadore?"

"Anything, my dear," he answered.

"Please put a guard on this boy. He needs protecting for this night, at least."

Lord Tramadore bowed his head. "It shall be done," he promised.

"I will stay with him until they are in place, so there's no need for you two to remain," Pat pointed out.

The men bowed their heads and left her. Guards were quickly procured and sent into the room. Ned paused in the hall outside his own door, and turned to his old friend. He had a sad smile on his face. "It seems I am getting too old for these sorts of things."

"That's the way of the world, old friend. We must make way for the young," Lord Tramadore replied.

Ned closed his eyes and nodded. "Yes, and we must hope they have the strength to fix the troubles we have caused."

CHAPTER 14

The next morning broke bright and clear. The shadow of the attempted assassination was swept away by the dazzling sun, and the festivities continued in the merry town. Inside the castle Fred groaned and turned over. A beam of sunlight shot into his eyes and they creaked open. He saw a figure close by the window, and the memory of the previous night came back to him. He sat up and his hand missed the edge of the bed; he tumbled to the floor and knocked his head hard on the harder stones.

"Damn it!" he cursed. Fred sat back on his legs and clutched at his head. He remembered he wasn't alone and his head snapped up; a guard stood near him with a suppressed smirk on his face.

"Did you need help, sir?" the guard asked him.

"What? Oh, no, I'm fine. I meant to do that, it's my morning stretches." Fred stood and looked around; his companions weren't in sight, but the door was open. He glanced back to the guard. "Could you tell me-"

"-where your friends are?" a voice finished. Fred swirled around and he saw Captain Spalding in the doorway. "They are down in the dining hall eating their breakfast. Would you like me to accompany you?"

Fred frowned and narrowed his eyes. "Why would you need to do that? This place isn't that big."

"We have orders from Lord Tramadore to protect you. Until we're told otherwise then you must have a guard with you at all times," Spalding explained.

Fred cringed. "At all times?" he repeated.

The captain smiled. "At all times," Spalding confirmed.

"If I can't get out of this then I guess you can come with me," Fred agreed.

Spalding, the guard and Fred went to the dining hall and found the room as jovial as the night before. The guests were all aflutter with the news of the assassination attempt on Sturgeon and the earthquake from the night before. Fred wondered why they stared at Ned, and not him; not knowing the lie Lord Tramadore told his guests for the previous night's tremor. They were curious about his armed entourage, though, and he received his fair share of attention.

Pat noticed his entrance and watched him move down to take a seat beside Ned. "How are you feeling?" she asked him.

Fred shrugged. "Like somebody hit me on the head with an anvil."

"That may have something to do with the fall out of bed," the guard spoke up.

Fred glared at him, and Spalding intervened. "If you're comfortable, we'll be on our way." The captain and the guard left them.

"You fell out of bed?" Pat asked him.

He appreciated the concern in her voice, but waived off his humiliating awakening. "It's nothing," he mumbled. He glanced between the two. "So what happened last night? I don't remember anything after-"

Ned put his hand over Fred's mouth and his eyes darted to the other guests. More than one conversation died down to focus on theirs. "For another time," Ned advised the boy.

Lord Sturgeon was conspicuously absent from the breakfast, but his son, Percy, was one of the guests. After the three companions finished their meal and rose to leave, he came up to them with a bright smile on his face. Percy held out his hand to Ned. "I wanted to personally

thank you for saving my father's life," he told them.

Ned ignored the extended hand. "We were merely fulfilling our duty to protect those who needed it," he replied.

Percy dropped his hand but shook his head. "Not everyone would do the same, especially for my father. He's made a great many enemies in his dealings, and I'm grateful that at the first attempt you were there to intercede." He looked to each of them and stopped on Pat; his smile brightened. "But I hope this won't cut short your stay here. Tonight is the fireworks display, and no place in the world can beat our men with gunpowder."

Pat blushed and looked down. Ned glanced at her and raised an eyebrow. "We had planned to stay here one more night, but our plans may change," Ned replied.

The girl's head shot up. "Surely we can stay here one more night," she pleaded with him.

Ned frowned but bowed his head. "Then it's settled. Our plans will remain as they were."

Percy grinned and grabbed Ned's hand in his own; he roughly shook the old man's hands and his voice bespoke his pleasure. "I shall be glad to host a dinner in your honor this evening. Say you will come."

Pat was disappointed when her guardian shook his head. "That can't be. Lord Tramadore expects us here, and we can't refuse his invitation on such short notice."

"Then you must allow me to finish the tour my father gave you," Percy begged them. "Or at the very least to take this lovely young woman to the market. Our jewelry is the best in the world, but I will try to find something worthy of her."

"I accept," Pat replied. Ned opened his mouth, but a warning glance from her shut it. Fred stepped back to avoid the displeasure that emanated off them both.

"Then shall we go now?" Percy invited.

"In a moment. I need to speak with Ned and ready myself," Pat promised.

"Then I shall wait for you in the hall." The young man kissed her hand, flashed his smile and allowed them to leave.

When they reached the hallway Ned followed Pat into her room; she expected him to, and turned around with a sigh. "I know this is foolish of me when we're so close to the border, but it is because we're so close that I wish to take this last chance at personal bliss."

"Would it not be wise for me to accompany you?" Ned asked her. "You're not ignorant of Lord Tramadore and my own suspicions toward the father. What makes you believe the son is any better?"

Pat crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. "A son is not his father any more than the father is the son," she countered. "And if you can't show me evidence to implicate the young man then I have nothing but your suspicions to rely on. Besides, if I needed a guard I would rather have this boy here." She nodded to Fred. "He performed admirably last night, which is more than you can say."

Ned looked over her face carefully, and finally nodded. "Very well. Go with him, but do not leave the city."

Pat smiled, grabbed her coat and dashed out of the room. Fred watched her go, but Ned continued to stare straight ahead. The boy heard a sigh and looked back to the old man. Ned chuckled, soft and low, and shook his head. "Only yesterday I would have laughed at the idea that a mere boy would prove more capable than me of protecting her, but-" Ned turned and smiled at Fred, "-you've certainly proved my former self wrong. Yet I get the feeling you would

trade in the responsibility for the home from which I took you."

Fred shrugged. "Probably. I don't understand anything that's happening, and I really don't understand this thing." He pulled out the stick he kept at his waist. His eyes broached over every cracked piece of letter and splintered piece of wood; it told him only part of the picture. "Where did it come from? How can I get this thing to work? What am I supposed to do with it?"

Ned shuffled forward and put his hand on Fred's shoulder; he was glad when the boy didn't shy away. "The wood of that staff came from an ancient tree that grew in the garden of a very old temple managed by the priests of Phaeton. It was whittled with great care and imbued with a most powerful magic, one only the pure of heart can use."

Fred wrinkled his nose. "Pure of heart? Shouldn't a girl be wielding this thing?"

Ned laughed and patted Fred's shoulder. "I've met many women with hearts blacker than coal, and many men whose souls would put the purest winter snow to shame. You would know the world is more complicated than it seems if you choose to go with us on this journey."

The boy put the stick back; he would keep it until he was sure the assassin was gone from his life. "I don't think I'm cut out for everything you two are going to find. I barely got out alive last night with that assassin."

Ned leaned down and caught the boy's eyes in his. "But you did survive. That's proof enough that you have some ability in you."

"Well, maybe that ability will be useful to a blacksmith or a tanner, but not for you two," Fred replied.

Ned sighed, straightened himself and nodded. "Yes, perhaps it may, but the future is a very mysterious thing. It may lead you down paths you don't wish to go, but that destiny demands you travel."

Fred narrowed his eyes and looked into the old man's face; he felt there was something Ned wasn't telling him, but he couldn't be sure. He didn't know the old man that well to tell if he was hiding something or not. "Yeah, well, I guess I'll just enjoy the day and tomorrow see about Lord Tramadore's promise."

CHAPTER 15

Fred kept his promise to enjoy the day, and wandered about the great city. He enjoyed the sights, though less so when he glimpsed Pat walking arm-in-arm with Percival. He wouldn't admit it to himself, but he felt a weight on his chest and he rushed away before they spied him. The young man returned to the castle shortly after that, and bumped into the lord of the city himself in the entrance hall.

Lord Tramadore smiled at the boy. "I didn't get a chance to ask you how you were feeling this morning. Are you well?"

"I'm fine, my lord," Fred replied. He wanted to scuttle back to his room, but the lord blocked his way.

"Would it be asking too much if I spoke with you for a moment in my study?" Lord Tramadore requested. Fred's shoulders slumped, but he nodded his head. The lord led him into the room and firmly closed the door behind them. "I've had my carpenter repair the doors so we shouldn't be disturbed."

Fred sat down in his customary chair and squirmed. "Have I done something wrong?"

Lord Tramadore paused around the other side of the desk and laughed. "No, you haven't. I just wanted to ask how you came to be with such unusual company," he explained as he seated himself. He leaned forward over the desk and his eyes watched the boy. "So how did Ned find you?" Fred recounted the tale, and by the time he was done Tramadore had a smirk on his face. "I see. It would be like Ned to take a boy under such questionable means and thrust him out into the world. Do you regret what's happened to you?"

Fred's hands fidgeted in his lap, and he looked down at them. "I don't know anymore. I've seen more than I ever thought I'd see and I'm free of my parents' debt, but, well, I don't know."

Lord Tramadore sat back in his chair and intertwined his fingers together. "Yes, it would be quite a shock. I imagine the trouble you've seen with them hasn't helped you decide whether this was a good or bad idea."

"No, my lord," Fred replied.

The lord nodded at the boy's waist where he could see the broken stick sticking out. "And what do you make of that stick Ned gave you?"

Fred reached down and pulled it out. "I don't know what to make of it, my lord. It's magical, and Ned said I was the only one who could use it, but I don't know what that means. Is it important that I'm the only one who can use it?"

"That's very important for a castor's staff. They choose their master, and no amount of force will make them work unless they wish to work," Lord Tramadore told him.

"Begging your pardon, my lord, but that still just tells me that I'm the only one who can use it," the boy countered.

Tramadore raised a brow. "Would knowing who owned the staff before you satisfy your question?"

Fred's ears perked up; his heart thumped in his chest. "Only a part of what I wish to know, my lord, but I'd be glad for that."

The lord smiled as he reminisced. "I'm proud to say he was a great friend of mine, and of Ned's, which I believe you know. He was born with a very poor constitution. The smallest exertion tired him easily, but that didn't stop him from traveling. The three of us journeyed

together across much of the world. With Ned and I being so much older than him we treated him as a son, and cared for him how we could before the burden became too much for him, and he retired to his bed in a temple not far from where he was born. He died there just short of his twentieth birthday."

"So he was the one to make this strange staff?" Fred asked him. Tramadore gave a nod. "What was his name?"

Tramadore sighed. "Cedric Osgood."

"Cedric Osgood," Fred repeated. He glanced down at the stick in his open hands. "How did he make it? This staff, I mean."

The lord smiled and shrugged. "I can't say myself. When I first knew him he already had it in his possession, though he was only fifteen at the time."

Fred's eyes widened. "My age," he whispered.

Lord Tramadore raised his eyebrows. "Is it? That's a very interesting coincidence, though I'm sure you two would have gotten along quite well. You remind me a great deal of him."

"So that's why Ned gave it to me? Because I look like this dead friend of yours?" Fred wondered.

"Yes, I believe so, and Ned means for you to do great things with it. Whether that comes to pass or not depends on you, of course, but he certainly gave you the right tool," Tramadore replied.

Fred shook his head. "I guess I've never had to make this sort of decision before. I always had my lord telling me which crops to grow and where, and when I could leave the manor. I just don't know what to do."

Lord Tramadore stood and walked around the desk to Fred. He put his hand on the boy's shoulder, and Fred looked up into the man's kind face. "I'm sure that whatever destiny offers you and whatever choices you make, they will lead you down the path of a good man."

Fred managed a smile and uncurled himself from the chair. "Thank you. I think I really needed that."

Tramadore reached into his vest and pulled out a gold watch on a silver chain. "My pleasure, and it will also be my pleasure to remind you that supper will be served very soon. I'm sure your friends are wondering where you-" They heard a knock at the door; Lord Tramadore turned to the entrance. "Come in."

Pat peeked her head into the room. "My apologies, Lord Tramadore, but I was-" She caught sight of Fred and frowned. "There you are. You had us worrying you'd been assassinated," she scolded as she marched into the study and up to the boy. "Where in the world have you been?"

"Here?" Fred weakly replied.

Pat grabbed his arm and pulled him from his chair. "Well, here is not where you need to be. Supper was called and when we found your room empty Ned had me come down to find Lord Tramadore and see if he could find you. Thank you for keeping him out of trouble."

Lord Tramadore bowed to her. "I'm glad to be of service."

Pat escorted Fred upstairs and to his room, where she left him to attend to his toiletries. The three rejoined out in the hall; Fred wondered where Ned was all day, but the old man rebuffed any and all questions from Pat about his whereabouts. He especially worried them since he had a mischievous smile on his face. The companions wandered downstairs and into

the dining hall. The guests from the previous evening crowded in with them, and took the same seats from the night before. Fred aimed to sit opposite Pat, and so one seat down from where he'd sat, but Ned gently edged him down the table.

"Come on, Fred, move farther down. You can't expect an old man like me to sit in such a chair," Ned scolded.

Fred didn't see anything wrong with that chair, but he obediently moved one seat down. Though all the chairs looked alike, he thought this new one fitted rather differently than the others. He wouldn't complain, though, not with such a feast laid out before him. The other guests seated themselves and all relished the fine food, Fred most of all. An apprentice wasn't likely to be fed feasts every day, so this would be his last good meal for a very long time; maybe for the rest of his life. The food was wonderful, the company friendly, and a messenger raced into the hall fast enough he slipped on the shining floors.

"Lord Tramadore, it's gone!" the man shrieked.

The lord stood from his chair and the table went silent. "What's gone? What is it?"

The messenger got to his feet and his face was as pale as death. "The Uncomfortable Chair! It's been stolen!"

The women were all atwitter and many of the men stood to offer their services in its recovery. Lord Tramadore raised his hand and the room calmed down. "A moment, please, ladies and gentlemen. I'm sure this is some mistake."

The messenger shook his head hard enough to make Fred wonder how his head stayed on his shoulders. "I saw it myself, my lord. The chair has vanished!"

The guests repeated their panic, and Lord Tramadore hurried through them to the messenger, whom he spoke to privately. Pat and Fred looked around in bewilderment, unsure whether to join in the commotion or entertain themselves with the sight of so many adults in fright over a lost chair. Amongst the panic and wonderment, Ned stood and held up his hands. His voice boomed over their frantic voices. "A moment, ladies and gentlemen. The chair is not stolen."

A hush fell over the room, and Tramadore snapped his head toward his old friend. "You know something of this, Ned?"

Ned smiled and nodded. "I do. I know where the chair is hidden, and so do you all. It is in this room, and one of you has sat in it." Many of the women gasped and others glanced over the room, searching for the chair. "I deceived you all through magic, and through magic I will reveal it." He raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

The ruse fell away from the chair and Fred felt the seat beneath and around him transform into its true form. Fred paled and Pat's mouth dropped open; he was the one sitting in the Uncomfortable Chair. Pat's jaw wasn't the only one to drop, and there was a collective gasp from the females. Before the boy could flee the room away from all those staring eyes, one of the older men stepped forward.

"Boy, what is your name?" he asked in a shaking voice.

"F-Fred," he replied.

The old man turned back to his compatriots. "Three cheers for Fred, the Chosen One of the Chair!"

A great cry went up from the other guests and they laid hands on him. He yelped when he was raised on the shoulders of the younger men and paraded above the crowd.

"Ned!" he cried out. The old man leaned against the wall and grinned; Pat stood beside

him and pointed to Fred. The boy couldn't hear any words above the shouts of the crowd, but he saw her stomp her foot and turn to him with a helpless look on her face.

The crowd moved; Fred grasped his captors' hands as they paraded him around the room. Chants filled the air expressing their joy for their new-found leader. "Hooray!" hollered the men. "Yay!" yelled the women. The females fawned over him and the men pushed and shoved to shake his hand. In the back of the crowd Fred noticed Percival standing beside Anthony Brighton; both were showed interest toward him, but neither participated in the jovial atmosphere.

The crowd took Fred around the room a few times and through the archway. it was a low archway, and he knocked his head against the door frame. No one noticed his pain; they were too eager to parade the boy before the whole town. The guests aimed their steps toward the castle entrance and the doors were flung open. Fred's eyes widened and he tried to claw his way out of their hands.

Lord Tramadore stepped in front of the marchers and held up his hands. "A moment, ladies and gentlemen! I don't wish to lose my guests to rapture without an inquiry into this matter."

"Pish-posh, Lord Tramadore," one of the men replied. "Let us show the city their new leader."

"That remains to be seen, and kidnapping is still an offense in my city," Lord Tramadore pointedly countered; he was still in charge of the city. "Now surrender the boy to me and return to your food. If you'd rather harass him or abandon the meal, then you're free to leave." At a signal from Tramadore several of his guards circled the guests. The peoples' enthusiasm died at the points of the guards' weapons.

The crowd lowered Fred to the floor and he rushed over behind Tramadore. The lord glanced over the crowd. "Now will you rejoin me for dinner or leave?"

The people shuffled from leg to leg, and looked to one another. A voice sprang up from amongst their number. "We should tell the whole city!" That inspired movement from them, and they stampeded out of the castle in their bid to be the first to inform their friends and neighbors of the miracle. Tramadore grabbed Fred and dove out of their way. The guests were all gone in a moment save for Percival and Brighton. Pat hurried up to Fred and checked him over; Ned was close behind her.

Tramadore shook his head. "I had no idea I had invited such wild animals," he halfheartedly joked.

"Gossip fever is a very contagious disease," Ned pointed out.

"Yes, and let us hope their fellow citizens aren't so prone to such a burning outburst," Tramadore countered.

CHAPTER 16

The next morning the city was aflame with the news of Fred's conquering of the legendary chair of uncomfortableness. Rumors and gossip ran their course, distorting facts and creating confusion among the people. The only consistency was the knowledge that someone inside the castle had sat in the chair. A pair of familiar men, Lord Sturgeon and Anthony Brighton, sat on one of Sturgeon's balconies and watched the people dancing in the streets. The festival ended yesterday, but the news of the chair extended the merriment.

Lord Brighton poured himself a drink and looked down at the crowds. "You really think this boy's the legendary great man?" he asked his compatriot.

"I don't know, and that doesn't matter. What matters is that they do." Sturgeon nodded at the crowds beneath them. "Even if he isn't, they're going to make him so."

"So you don't believe this nonsense about the boy leading us to a great change?" Brighton wondered.

Sturgeon picked up his drink and swirled it around; there was a small smile on his lips. "You evidently believe the tale isn't true."

Brighton wiggled in his chair and his lips pursed together. "Well, it's not to say it's all a fake. The chair certainly had its curse, but for this boy to be a great leader?" He shook his head. "I just don't see that happening."

"Perhaps you're right, perhaps this boy isn't the great leader foretold in the tale," Sturgeon mused. Out of the corner of his eye he caught movement, and he frowned. "You're late. I expect better from you."

His words were meant for a dark figure in the shadowy corner of the balcony. The person stepped forward and bowed; it was Deadly Sins the assassin. "My apologies. The guards have been tripled since the news."

Sturgeon turned sharply to the man. "I don't care if the guards have increased tenfold, you're to be here when I command you to be here." The assassin merely bowed again. Sturgeon sighed, "Have you at least taken care of the assignment I gave you?"

"Yes, sir. The way is prepared," Sins replied.

Lord Sturgeon noticed his hired help was stiff, more so than usual. "What is it?"

"I would rather take care of them myself, sir. They will be defenseless without their staffs, and easily dealt with."

The lord scoffed at Sins' plea. "Haven't you complicated things enough by going after that boy?" The assassin bowed his head, and Sturgeon sighed. "Your methods are effective, but not invisible. According to my spies Tramadore already suspects you are in my employ, and if he found them dead by your hand he would have me executed."

Lord Brighton, not at all surprised by the presence of the assassin, glanced between the two. "What is this? Another of your enemies taken care of?"

Sturgeon smiled over his glass. "Not yet."

At the same time their conversation occurred, mobs crowded around the front of the closed castle gates. They wished to see their new hero, their new leader, and chanted the boy's name.

"Freud! Freud! Freud!" were their cries.

Fred sat in his bedroom at the edge of the bed and winced at every mispronunciation. At his side was a bag of letters written by the people of the city; they were filled with pleas and demands, dreams and wishes. The citizens presumed him to be a gift giver of a fantastically magical nature when he was just a boy who sat his derriere on a cursed chair. He felt overwhelmed by their blind hope and affection for him, and that cast a gloom over his spirits.

Fred's bedroom door flung open and Ned stood on the threshold. "Good morning, Freud," he cheerfully greeted the boy. Fred cast a dirty look at the old man; this was all his fault. He'd tricked him into moving into that chair. Ned shut the door behind himself and ventured over to the window. "A fine crowd of admirers, wouldn't you say? Very enthusiastic. Lord Tramadore has been kind enough to put more guards around the castle to protect you from your admiring fans."

"I don't care about any of that. I'd rather that they were gone," Fred glumly replied.

"Come, come, that's no way for a new leader to talk," Ned scolded. Fred bent over and clutched his head in his hands. Ned's twinkling eyes lost their sparkle and his face softened. "There, there, lad. Things aren't as bad as that."

"No, they're worse," Fred replied. "Now I have to follow that stupid legend, don't I? The one about being a leader or something. I'm supposed to bring about change, but I don't even know where to start." Ned heard the boy snifle. "I don't want to do any of this. I just want out of here."

Ned took a seat beside him on the bed, and looked the boy over. "None of this tempts you? The opportunity to choose the fate of other men, to lead them on to greatness?" Fred shook his head. "What are you looking for?"

Fred raised his head and his blurry eyes looked straight ahead. "I don't know. I thought I wanted to stay here and be a blacksmith or something like that, but I guess that can't happen now, can it?" Ned shook his head. "Did you mean to do this? To make me miserable like this?"

Ned sighed and listened for a moment to the chanting outside. "The best laid plans are often the ones that go most awry," he admitted.

"How'd you know this was going to work at all? That I was going to be able to sit in the chair?"

"To be honest I wasn't sure it would work, but it would have made a good trick if it hadn't," Ned sheepishly replied. His eyes fell on the stick nestled against Fred's waist, and his mood switched from amused to melancholy. "Change is in the air. My old bones can feel it, and that staff you have there proves it."

Fred pulled it out and examined the weathered leather and sharp edges of the broken parts. "This thing's that important?" he asked the old man.

Ned shrugged. "I've always held it to be, but it has special meaning for me."

"Because of Cedric?" Fred guessed.

Ned jolted back and his lips pursed together. "Then Tramadore told you about him?" Fred nodded. "How much?"

"That he used to own this stick and he was good friends with you two," the boy replied.

Ned's stiff shoulders relaxed, and a sad smile graced his lips. "I see. Yes, because it was Cedric's I attach great meaning to its actions. It's lain dormant for almost fifteen years, and I believe it's awakening now is no coincidence."

Fred paled. "So there's something coming?"

"I believe so," Ned answered.

"And because I sat in some old chair I'm the one who's supposed to deal with it?"

Ned stared straight ahead and pulled at his beard. "Did Tramadore tell you about Cedric's health?"

Fred frowned at the change in subject, but answered the question. "The lord said that he wasn't very strong and died young," Fred told him.

"Yes, that he was, and because of that he spent most of his time studying books. He came upon a private journal written by one of Tramadore's ancestors, the first to receive the chair, if I recall correctly. The lord wrote down the legend that came with the chair, and it was a little different than the one the people retell now."

Fred's eyes widened; hope rose within him at a way out of this mess. "Different? Different how?"

"A great change would come when a person came who was able to sit comfortably on the chair," Ned told him. The old man chuckled. "The story changed with the passing of the legend over the years, much like your name changed in a single night. After so many years people started ascribing the person to the change, and confused them for the same thing." He pulled at his beard and smiled. "Tramadore was much put out that the chair didn't have more importance than being a bellwether for change."

The boy clenched tightly to his stick, and his hands quivered. "You mean I don't have to do the changing? Somebody else gets to do all these things people want me to do?"

"That is how I would understand it, yes," Ned replied. "You're merely the catalyst, the standard-bearer who heralds in the change."

Fred's face lit up with joy and he impulsively threw himself at Ned. Ned oomphed when the boy's arms wrapped around him in a bone-crushing hug. Fred realized what he was doing and quickly released Ned. The old man chuckled. "You're very welcome, my lad."

Fred jumped up and paced the room; his hands were so animated Ned ducked whenever the stick was waved in his direction. "I don't have to do anything! I can just tell Lord Tramadore the older legend and then they'll-" Fred froze and slowly turned to the window. The chants from outside was loud enough to shake the air, and the crowd was only increasing. He looked over to Ned, and his voice came out in a squeak. "How am I supposed to tell them that I'm not the one? What if they don't believe me?"

"Very simple," Ned replied as he stood up. "You don't tell them a thing and leave the diplomacy to Lord Tramadore."

Fred frowned. "How is that going to work?"

"I'm sure Lord Tramadore could show us some escape tunnels through the mountain. We're certainly in need of an escape," Ned quipped.

"We?" Fred repeated.

Ned pulled on his beard and glanced about the room. "Yes, we. I think it's time for a change of scenery. Gloom and responsibility fills these halls, and that wets a man's appetite for adventure." He looked over and winked at Fred. "What say we head out for more fun?"

For all the trouble Ned had caused him, Fred was glad to know he wouldn't be a lone. A smile slipped onto Fred's face, but disappeared just as quickly. He glanced over to the wall that separated his room from Ned's. "What about Pat? She doesn't want me around," he pointed out.

The old man had a twinkle in his eyes that was full of mischief. "I believe I have the perfect reason to persuade her otherwise."

"We are not taking him with us just so he can avoid his adoring fans!" Pat snapped at Ned.

Ned and the boy stood before her in her room; Fred flinched from her anger, and he glared at Ned. "That's your reason? So I can avoid admiring fans?" Fred asked him.

Ned shrugged. "It sounded perfect in my head."

"That's an echo chamber of lies," Pat bit back.

"Then you refuse to allow this boy to come with us?" Ned asked her.

Pat threw up her arms. "Am I surrounded by fools? What good would it do to take him with us? Does he want an early death?"

Ned raised an eyebrow. "As you yourself pointed out, he would be a better guardian than myself. Are you willing to risk your life because you care so much about this boy to let him stand in harm's way?"

Pat blushed and stuttered. "That's not how it is! He's just too young and too inexperienced! His luck will run out and he'll get himself killed and-" The girl shook her head and paced in front of the men. She massaged her forehead with one hand. "Maybe I should just find myself a brand new guardian. Percy-"

"Percy?" Fred snorted.

Pat shot him a glare of death. Fred slammed his mouth shut, but he was irked at her insult toward him. "Yes, Percy Clavier. He's very good with a sword and takes a lady seriously."

"If he took you seriously then he doesn't know what a lady is..." Fred mumbled.

"What was that, boy?" Pat yelled at Fred.

The term boy was the last straw. Fred pulled out the broken stick, marched up to her and shoved it into her shocked face. "This stick's saved you more than that boyfriend of yours, so if you're stupid enough to trust his sword over my staff you deserve that lout."

Pat stared at him with her mouth open and her eyes wide. Fred breathed heavily into her face until she wrinkled her nose and shoved him away. "Your breath reeks," she commented. Fred opened his mouth to object, but she put her fingers gently on his lips. His eyes crossed down at her hand, and back up to her face. She smiled at him. "But you're right. What I said to you was ungrateful, and to you, too, Ned," she called to the old man behind Fred.

Ned shook his head. "Nothing that wasn't true, at least on my account."

"Well, I still apologize for saying such things, especially after how you've both saved me from all those dangers."

Fred's eyes lit up. "So does that mean I can go with you two?"

Pat crossed her arms over her chest and glanced between them. A sly smile slipped onto her lips, and she leaned forward. "Fine, you can go, but on one condition." She nodded down at the stick. "Make that thing come out, right here and right now."

Fred paled, and glanced between her stern face and the stick. "I-I don't really think it works that way," he objected. The boy frowned and looked over to Ned. "Does it come out like that?"

Ned smiled. "Cedric would use it for his walking stick."

"Great..." Fred mumbled; that meant the stick could change forms for even mild tasks. He sighed, stepped back and held the stick out in front of him. "Um, alright, stick-staff thing, I command you to come out!" The staff retained its broken form; Fred felt beads of sweat form

on his forehead. Ned and Pat watched him, one carefully and the other impatiently.

"Come on, we don't have all day," Pat insisted.

"Wait a minute, I'm still trying!" Fred shot back. He looked to Ned. "Any idea how to do this?"

The old man raised his eyebrows. "Do you think I would have carried it for so long as a stick if I could have used it as another staff?"

"Maybe?" Fred weakly replied.

Ned rolled his eyes and plopped himself down on the bed. "Perhaps if you cleared your mind and focused only on the stick then something will happen."

Pat snorted. "He should have the first step taken care of."

Fred shot her an ugly look and trained his eyes on the pieces of stick in his hands. He closed his eyes and imagined the stick shining and stretching into a staff. The wood felt warm in his hands; he concentrated harder. His brow furrowed and his arms shook. Something pushed him from behind.

Fred yelped and his eyes shot open. He hugged the stick to himself just as it transformed into the staff. The tall stick pushed into his jaw and whipped his head back. He clutched at his injured mouth and stumbled back. A pair of soft arms caught him. His head whipped around and he found himself looking into Pat's amused face.

Ned chuckled from the bed. "Well, he certainly has a grasp on the situation when the need calls for it."

"You mean when he's scared it works," Pat countered.

"We shall have to hope he never obtains courage," the old man snarkily replied.

Fred glared at him, and turned to Pat; his expression drooped. "So does this mean I can't go?"

"Well, you did bring out the staff right here and now," she reminded him.

The boy frowned. "Yeah, but not without your help."

Pat shrugged. "A deal is a deal. You can come with us or stay behind with your adoring fans, but you need to hurry. We're already a few days late reaching Galaron."

Ned came up beside her and put a hand on her shoulder. "We both thank you for this honor to protect you."

The girl snorted. "Well, if we take him with us he can't disappoint his adoring fans," she pointed out.

Fred frowned. "How would I disappoint them?"

A wicked, teasing smile graced her face. "Just by being you."

CHAPTER 17

The three companions packed their few belongings, including a healthy bag of food from the kitchen, and went in search of Tramadore. They found him at the front entrance with a contingency of his guards. The doors were not yet barred shut, but a heavy block of wood stood by in case of emergency. He spotted the three and smiled at them, particularly Fred. "It seems you have many adoring fans," he teased the boy.

"Not from choice," Fred muttered.

Ned stepped forward. "I'm afraid the young Chosen One of the Chair wishes to make a hasty retreat from those same fans."

Tramadore raised an eyebrow, and his guards were equally surprised. He waved at the knights. "Pay heed that they don't get through unless expected." The lord turned to his guests. "Please follow me into my study." They obeyed his command, and he had hardly closed the door behind them when he swung around to face them. "What are you up to now, Edwin?"

"Ned, old friend," Ned countered.

Tramadore shook his head. "Not when I see that look in your eyes. That's the same wily expression that's gotten us into trouble many times before."

"In this case I hope to get us out of trouble. We need to leave the city as soon as possible, and with as few problems as possible," Ned explained to him.

"You planned to go through the tunnel?" Tramadore asked them.

"If you will allow it," Ned replied.

Lord Tramadore smirked. "I wonder that you ask my permission. Your staff would get you through the darkness well enough."

"But not without the key to the outside entrance," Ned pointed out. "No magic nor locksmith has ever broken it."

"You have me there," the lord answered. He reached into his vest and pulled out his gold watch. Rather than opening the container as he'd done before, Tramadore unfastened the silver chain and handed it to Ned. "I expect that back next time you come through, and don't forget to lock the door behind you."

"Yes, old mother," Ned teased as he safely tucked the watch chain into his cloak.

Tramadore gestured to Fred. "Before you go there is a matter of this young boy. What excuse should I give for our young prodigy's disappearance?"

Ned pulled at his beard and squinted at the boy. "Well, perhaps you can say he's shy and will perform his workings out of the public eye."

"That's a bad lie, even for you," Tramadore countered.

"And what would you propose we say, hmm?" Ned wondered.

Tramadore shrugged. "That he is out changing the world."

Ned wrinkled his nose. "That sounds suspiciously like the truth."

"Yes, I'm afraid that telling the truth is my one failing, and one you rarely have to worry about," Tramadore quipped.

"Are you two quite done?" Pat interrupted them. She stood impatiently by the door with her arms crossed and her foot tapping the floor.

Ned coughed. "Yes, well, we'll leave it at that then." He shook hands with his old friend, who grinned.

"Be careful, and don't stay away so long. It was fun having you as my guests, even with

all the trouble you caused," Tramadore replied. Ned returned the grin, nodded and dragged Fred with Pat in the lead out of the study. Tramadore watched them go and his lips pursed together. "May the gods keep you safe, old friends," he whispered.

Ned took the lead and guided them into the dining hall and up to the pedestal. He stepped up and tapped the bottom of his staff against the low platform. Fred's eyes widened when the pedestal swung aside to reveal a secret staircase. Pat climbed into the hole, but Fred hesitated; it was very dark down there. "Less ogling, my boy, and more moving," Ned scolded as he pushed the boy in ahead of him.

Following Ned's entrance the pedestal swung back into place and they were swallowed in darkness. Ned tapped his staff against the ground and the top lit up as a clear, consistent blue color. The staircase was wide enough to fit all three of them abreast, so the youngsters followed Ned down on either side of him. Fred clutched his stick and Pat had her hand on the hilt of her sword. The staircase went down for an eternity plus one, but after several long minutes Fred was relieved to feel solid, un-stepped earth beneath his feet.

Before them was a long, winding tunnel that disappeared behind countless corners. The darkness pressed in on them, and Fred stepped closer to Ned. They moved forward, and the only noise was the soft dripping of water from the tips of stalactites and their feet along the hard earth.

Fred couldn't take the silence. "Why is there a locked door at the end but not at the beginning?" he asked his companions.

"A good question, my boy, and one easily answered by the word 'distance,'" Ned replied. Fred blinked. "Distance?"

Ned nodded. "Exactly. An escaping army or citizenry could go the whole way through and unlock the back door. They would then lock the door behind them and force any pursuing army to retreat back the way they came, giving time for the city to regroup and trap their opponents in the tunnel." He held up his staff and showed the thick walls; there were cracks in them. "And in case the enemy army was too powerful to defeat by conventional means the walls could be filled with gunpowder and exploded."

"And the cave would collapse and kill them all," Pat finished.

Fred shuddered. He thought of better things, like the end of the tunnel. "And how is a chain going to help us get through a door?" he wondered.

"Magic, my dear Fred. It has infinite uses, and one thing it's very good at is locking and unlocking things," Ned explained to him.

They pressed on until the tunnel traveled down into a large cavern. At the bottom of the cavern was a bowl impression twelve feet deep and with steep, smooth sides. The companions walked around the hole until Ned paused; his staff's light had flickered. He frowned and moved his staff over the area; the light caught a long shadow in the bowl. It was a smooth wooden post buried in the ground and eight feet tall. "I have no memory of that post," he murmured.

"Is that a bad thing?" Fred asked him.

Ned shook his head. "I'm not-" His staff suddenly flew out of his hands and collided with the wooden post. It stuck against the side a few feet above the ground; fortunately, the light still glowed over them.

Pat pulled out her sword and looked around; there was no sign of anyone else. "What in the world just happened?"

Ned, too, glanced around the area. "It would seem someone knew we would come this

way."

"But how would someone know we would go this way?" she asked the others.

"This is the only secret passage through the city," Ned explained to her. "If someone wanted to make a quick escape to reach a certain point in time for a certain day then this would be the best route."

"So what do we do now?" Fred wondered.

Ned straightened and stepped up to the edge of the bowl. "Now I go get my staff." Before either of them could stop him, Ned jumped off the edge and slid down the steep wall. He landed safely at the bottom, skipped a few steps and plopped himself at the base of the pole. "See? Nothing to it."

"That's a fine idea, Ned, but how will you get out?" Pat called down to him.

"That's very simple. You two will pull me up," he yelled back.

She nodded at his staff. "And how are you going to reach your staff?"

Ned frowned, and looked above his head; the staff sat two feet over where he stood. He turned back to them and sheepishly grinned. "Could either of you lend a strong back to this weak old man?"

Pat hunkered down and looked over the wall. "There's no way you're getting me down there."

Fred straightened and glanced around. "You guys hear something?"

Pat whipped her head around to him. "No, why?"

"I just thought I heard something."

"Like what?" she asked him.

Fred cringed and his eyes flickered around the room. "I don't know, like an ominous rumbling noise."

Pat rolled her eyes; he was so dramatic. "An ominous rumbling noise?" she repeated in disbelief; Fred nodded. "Well, could you give us a little more-" Pat straightened up. She heard something faintly ominous, and it was more than just a rumble; it was a stampede of feet.

"I-it's that," Fred shakily replied.

Ned cupped a hand behind his ears and leaned to the side to listen. His eyes widened, and his voice was frantic. "Get down here!" he shouted to them.

"What? Why?" Pat called back.

The rumbling grew louder and the footsteps stomped into the light of the staff. Fred stumbled back and Pat's jaw dropped open at the sight of a huge dog-like creature. The beast stood five feet high and seven feet long from its large head to its stub of a tail. It was hairless and had leathery blue skin stretched over its lean, broad form. Its tail was a nub, and its thick paws ended in long talons. From its short snout its mouth dripped a long line of drool and its jaws could fit a man's head between them. The thing's beady yellow eyes glared at them from beneath a heavy forehead, and it tilted back its head and howled. The noise echoed off the walls and shook the cavern, sending debris falling down on the three companions.

"W-what the hell is that?" Fred quivered out.

The creature turned those glowing eyes on the youngsters and Fred stiffened. It huffed out warm air from its nostrils, pawed the ground like a bull and charged around the bowl at the pair. An arm wrapped around Fred's waist and pulled him down into the hole just as the creature barreled down on them. Fred screamed and got a mouthful of dirt as he fell face-first down the wall. Pat slid by his side and they hit the bottom in a cloud of dust. Fred coughed and wheezed,

but didn't have much time to relax before Pat grabbed him and dragged his dirt-and-rock-covered carcass over to Ned.

The creature howled in rage and pawed the ground at the edge of the hole. Pat pulled Fred up on his shaking legs and yanked the broken stick out from his waist. "Be scared and use this!" she snapped at him as she shoved it into his trembling hands. The moment the stick touched his fingers it transformed into the staff. Then it shot up and joined Ned's staff on the post above their heads.

The companions whipped their heads up at the two staffs, looked at each other, and Ned let out a nervous laugh. "It seems we have a double problem. This stake attracts magical items."

"You think?" Pat yelled back.

"And if I'm not mistaken, that creature is a cantankus," he added.

Their attention was caught again by the creature, who bellowed and shook the cavern. It put a front paw down on the wall, then another. The creature's eyes widened when the rest of its body unwillingly slid down the decline, and it tumbled head over head until it hit the bottom. The three companions stepped back away from the cloud of dust as the shadow of the beast arose from the ground. It sneezed and dissipated the dust.

"A-are cantankus dangerous?" Fred asked them.

"Only if they're hungry," Ned replied.

Fred paled. "How often do they get hungry?"

Ned took a few more steps back. "Very often." The creature glared at them and growled.

"What do we do?" Pat whispered to Ned.

Ned sheepishly grinned. "Now we run."

He dashed off, leaving the two youngsters bewildered. The creature charged at them and they screamed in unison. The pair ran after their fearless leader and caught up to him. The beast roared and gave chase to all three of them. "Don't you have a better plan?" Pat yelled at the old man.

"Can't...talk, must...run," Ned wheezed out.

The three companions circled the post with the monster close at their heels. If they kept up a hearty sprint they kept even with the beast, but any stumble or lag would spell certain doom. After a few dizzying circles Pat growled, turned and pointed her sword at the creature. "I'm done running!"

Ned slid to a stop, spun around, and grabbed her arm. He yanked them both out of the way of the onrushing beast who moved too fast to immediately stop. The creature slid a few yards beyond them and into the steep wall., knocking itself onto the ground "No stopping!" he scolded her.

"Why not?" Pat argued.

"Because its hide is one of the hardest substances in the world," Ned informed her.

Pat paled. "Oh."

"The thing!" Fred yelled.

The pair whipped their heads around in time to see the creature climb to its feet and raise its head. The yellow eyes glowed in fury and hunger, and it charged the two of them with its teeth gnashing. Fred looked around for something to throw at them and felt the bag on his back. He flopped it on the ground and opened the bag to find the food taken from Tramadore's kitchen. Fred whimpered, but saw a decent sacrifice and picked up a green vegetable. He stood up and threw the greens at the charging creature. His aim proved a little off as the vegetable landed

ahead of the beast.

The creature cried out in fear and skidded to a halt in front of the vegetable. It bent down and sniffed at the food, and jumped back with its teeth pulled back in disgust. Pat glanced over to Fred. "Throw some more!" she called to him.

Fred grabbed all the vegetables he could and tossed them around the creature. It backed up away from all of them and was soon against the wall surrounded by the vegetables. It whimpered and danced around to avoid the greens. Fred reached his hand into the bag and pulled out a leg of lamb. The creature perked up its head and sniffed the air. Its eyes zoomed in on him and its tongue lapped out to lick its lips. Fred dropped the bag, held out the leg of lamb and inched his way over to the cantankus.

Pat looked between the boy and the dog-thing. "What are you doing?" she hissed at Fred.

"Trust me, I know what I'm doing," he whispered back to her.

The creature remained in its self-imposed circle of green evilness, but whimpered and pranced around. Its butt wiggled and the drool flowed like a blobbed waterfall onto the ground. Fred stopped on the edge of the green stuff and tossed the leg into the air. The creature jumped up and caught the meat in its powerful jaws; they snapped shut and the bone crunched into pieces. Fred shivered when he realized that could have been them in those powerful jaws. The beast gobbled down the meat and wagged its butt. It looked to the boy and let out a loud roar of a woof.

Then Fred did something very stupid; he used his foot to brush aside part of the ring of vegetables. The creature bounded out and landed on top of him; it buried its face into his.

"Fred!" Pat screamed, and Ned had to hold her back from coming to his rescue.

They expected to hear Fred's screams of pain and suffering, but all they heard was laughter. The creature's tongue lapped over his entire face. "Stop it!" he giggled as he tried fruitlessly to push its massive head away. "Come on, stop!"

The cantankus stopped its wet torture and sat back on its hunches. Its tongue hung out and its yellow eyes showed all the love and intelligence of a puppy. Ned chuckled. "It seems this is a male cantankus."

Pat frowned. "How can you tell?" She hadn't noticed any definitive gender physiology.

"Because only a man could be subdued through his stomach. A woman would prefer flowers."

Pat elbowed the old man in the stomach, and while he doubled over in pain she hurried over to Fred. The boy climbed to his feet covered in drool and dirt, and wasn't prepared when she flung her arms around him. "I'm so glad you're okay," she whispered to him.

He gave her a sheepish grin. "Yeah, so am I."

Pat pulled him back so they were at arms length; now they were both covered in drool, and she scowled at him. "But don't you ever try to do something that stupid again! What if it didn't like lamb?"

Fred shrugged. "Then I would've tried the beef steak."

Pat rolled her eyes and her arms dropped to her side. "You two are impossible to deal with."

"Children?" Ned spoke up, and they both turned to him. "As pleased as I am to see you in such an affectionate position, we still have problems." Ned stood beside the wooden pole and looked up; their staffs were still firmly attached to the surface and out of reach. The old man

glanced around and his eyes fell on the cantankus. "Fred, if you wouldn't mind leading your new friend this way we may be able to deal with this difficulty. Pat, be so kind as to take a steak from the bag."

While Fred tried to coax the friendly creature to the post, Pat brought Ned the steak. He smeared the blood all over the base of the post, and looked back to see Fred failed at leading the beast. Ned held up the meat. "Perhaps this would help?" he suggested.

The creature's eyes widened, its mouth opened in a grin and it barreled through Fred to the old man. Ned tossed the steak at the post and the creature's hard head collided with the wood. The pole only shuddered, and didn't fall, but the moment the beast smelled the blood the post was doomed. The creature consumed the steak, and aimed its massive jaws at the post. Those sharp, strong teeth crunched down on the post. The wood snapped into pieces, the post tipped over and the staffs dropped down on top of the thing's head.

Ned hurriedly picked them up before the cantankus used them as chew toys. The others and he stepped back and watched the beast lick and bite every morsel of blood from the post. Fred was given back his staff and it changed back into a stick, which he tucked into his belt.

The old man chuckled, and Pat shot him a glare. "What are you chuckling about?" She gestured around them. "Unless that staff of yours can levitate us we're still trapped in this whole."

"I think our new friend here can help with that, too," he replied.

At Ned's insistence, the three companions coaxed the beast to the side of the pit. They then climbed atop its back and used the cantankus as a box to stand on. They were still short a few feet, so Fred was assigned the bottom of the pile while Ned and Pat climbed atop his back as he balanced atop the beast. Pat and Ned climbed over the ridge, and Ned used his staff to pull Fred out. That left their beast friend the sole occupant of the pit. When it felt Fred leave its back, the creature put its front paws on the wall and looked up at them. It whimpered and whined, and its golden eyes pleaded for help.

Even Pat softened at such a pitiful sight. She glanced over to Ned. "Is there any way to get him out?"

Ned pulled at his beard and frowned. "Without a pulley system it would be difficult, and we haven't time to craft such a thing."

"But we can't just leave him down there," she insisted.

Fred scrunched up his face, and in a moment his eyes widened. He dug into his bag for some of the last bits of meat, and held them out over the wall. "Come on, boy, come here."

The creature smelled the meat and barked. It made a pitiful jump up the wall, but slid back down. Pat and Ned saw what Fred meant to do and they stepped back from the edge to give the creature room. The beast whimpered and made another feeble attempt. "Come on. You can do it," Fred encouraged.

The creature whined, dropped its paws off the wall and lumbered away. The youngsters' faces fell; the poor thing had given up. Ned's eyes widened, he grabbed their arms, and turned them around. "We had better give him some space," he told them.

Pat frowned. "Why? Does he need to cry alone?"

Ned looked past the pair. "No, he needs some space to land."

The youngsters swiveled around to see what Ned was looking at. The beast stood at the far end of the hole and faced toward them. It bowed its head low to the ground and wiggled its butt in the air with its face an expression of determination. It pawed the ground, let out a howl

and barreled toward them. The companions scrambled out of the way just as the creature hit the wall running. It jumped at the last moment and its claws dug high into the sides a few feet short of the top. It stuck there for a moment until it lifted one front paw and slammed it down into the wall. The stone cracked beneath his paws and it made itself a paw-hold. It climbed its way up the wall and over the top, then flopped down for a breather.

Ned chuckled. "I think it's a little out of shape," he mused. Fred and Pat hurried over, and the beast lifted its head and wagged its butt. Ned came up behind them and gave the beast a pat on the head. "It seems we have a new companion."

Fred looked to him with hopeful eyes. "Do you think it'll follow us?"

"A cantankus will follow a friend to the ends of the earth. The trick is making it a friend," Ned replied with a wink.

"Let's hope he doesn't slow us down," Pat commented as she glanced at his stubby legs.

Ned shook his head. "These beasts can go many miles without rest. When it's in shape, that is, and not half starved like this one."

"What should we name him?" Fred asked them.

"Fluffy," was Ned's quick reply.

Pat scrunched up her face and her mouth dropped open. "Fluffy?" she repeated.

The cantankus barked, and Ned laughed. "See? He likes it already."

Pat rolled her eyes. "From now on castors are no longer allowed to name things," she decreed.

CHAPTER 18

The companions set about on their journey with their new mascot happily following behind. They reached the end of the tunnel in an hour and found that a golden gate with two doors blocked their path. Its two doors reached up into the ceiling and down into the floor, and there was only a speck of space between them. The hinges were hidden inside the rock on either side; beyond the gate lay the opening to the sunlit world. A large, solid gold lock sat between the two doors, and Ned stepped forward and pulled out the chain. He held up the item near the lock, and Fred flinched back when the chain came to life. It raised itself like a snake and shot into the lock. The moment the tail disappeared they heard a groaning sound from the gate.

Fred stepped back, unsure which way the doors would swing; they didn't swing at all. Instead they brightly glowed and slowly vanished, and the lock along with them. The only thing left in that space was the chain which floated in the air. Ned pushed the youngsters off to either side of the lock and nodded forward. "Hurry. This doesn't last long once the key is taken out."

They hurried forward with Fluffy close behind Fred, and all three turned around to see Ned step in front of the floating chain. He reached out his hand and snatched it from the air. The minute the chain was in his hand the gate popped back into existence. If Ned had been a second slower his hand would have been caught in the recreated lock. Ned pocketed the chain and turned to the others. "There now, nice and locked up."

"That is incredibly dangerous magic," Pat pointed out.

Ned nodded. "Indeed it is. It forces the user to pay attention, or they may lose the ability to count to ten." He walked past the three others and toward the light. "But we haven't time for talk. We have a capital to reach and only a few days to do it."

The companions walked toward the light and out into the bright, warm sun. The opening lay on the side of the mountain, and to their left they could see the side of the wall that surrounded the city. To their right a clear mountain stream ran off the back of the rocks and journeyed forward. Ned smiled at the bubbling creek. "This small thing is a tributary of the Greater Conchero River, which runs beside the plains of Salarnon and beneath the bridge of the same name. That is the boundary of Ralcott, and beyond that is Galarnon."

"How far is it?" Pat asked him.

Ned furrowed his brow. "I would say a few days journey by road, but since we must keep to the creek to avoid being seen it will take a week."

"A week?" Pat repeated in horror. "That hardly gives us time to reach the capital."

Ned pursed his lips and gave a nod. "Indeed, so let us hurry onward and hope we're not delayed any further."

They left the mountain behind them and followed the creek westward, but their exit didn't go unnoticed. A figure clad in black with a handkerchief over his lower face stood on a ledge above the cave and watched them leave.

The days passed by without incident, other than the three humans growing accustomed to their new drooling companion. Their food supply was severely depleted by Fluffy's prodigious appetite, but each day his strength improved and whenever any of the others were tired they would sit atop his back and go a distance.

Ned chuckled, but always abstained from riding. "Not until we have a proper saddle for

him," he insisted.

"Can they be used like a horse?" Fred asked him.

"Of course," Pat spoke up. She patted the cantankus on the head and smiled when he pushed his face into her hand. "Many armies used to have divisions of mounted cantankus' before they were nearly wiped out."

Fred frowned. "Wiped out? Why? What happened?"

"They are notoriously difficult to breed," she replied. "And even their skin can't protect them from every sword blade, especially ones that are magically enhanced. Many fell in battles over the years and the armies could never make those up in younger cantankus, so they were eventually replaced with horses."

"So this guy's really rare?" Fred asked her.

Pat shrugged. "Yes and no. There's a lot in the wild, but the tamed ones are rare now."

Fred grinned and sat tall atop his rare steed. He would care for his new friend and train him to be the perfect cantankus to ride.

Their journey took them down the creek, and the scenery around them changed. The forests fell away and were replaced with open patches of ground. Two days before they would arrive at the bridge the only trees for cover were those along the creek, and even those were short, wiry water trees. With their cover gone and the road close beside them, Ned led them up onto the main path. The closer they came to the bridge the quieter he became until he would hardly answer their questions.

Finally Pat couldn't take it anymore, and sidled up beside him as they walked along the deserted road. "What's bothering you?" she asked him.

Ned glanced up at the sky. "There's something wrong in the air. These old bones can feel it."

Fluffy behind them let out a giant burp, and Pat waved her hand in front of her face. "Maybe it's that smell. That thing needs to be dunked in the creek," she scolded Fred.

The boy shrugged. "He doesn't like water except to drink it. Maybe he can't swim very well with these short legs."

Pat's shoulders drooped. "Great, stuck with a stinky animal for another two days." She noticed Ned didn't even crack a smile at their antics, and her own humor slipped off her face. "You're really that worried, aren't you?" Ned looked ahead and nodded. "Is it him? Lord Canavar?" Fred's ears perked up; he'd heard mention of that name once before.

Ned nodded again, and answered in a low voice. "I believe it is."

"Lord Canavar?" Fred repeated.

"A very dangerous fellow," Ned replied. "He's intent on ruining this wonderful walk with his pets. You witnessed his tricks with the tree creatures." Fred cringed. He would hate to see other 'tricks' by this fellow.

Fred sidled up to Fluffy and scratched behind the cantankus' ears. "Fluffy here will prove useful against Canavar's pets. Won't you, Fluffy?"

Pat rolled her eyes. "Two of a kind. Smelly, drooling, following their stomachs, and dumb as a post."

The group continued on until the road opened up into a large, unbroken field; they had reached the plains of Salaron. Spread out before them was green wild grass ringed on either side by thin trees. The creek they had followed weaved off to their right and toward the horizon to join with the Greater Conchero River. Far off in the distance was a bridge hewn from the local

rocks, and the stone sparkled in the late afternoon sun.

Ned looked around and nodded. "We'll stop here for the night."

Pat's mouth dropped open and she pointed across the plain. "But we're almost there!"

Ned seated himself down on a nearby log. "And that is exactly why we must go slow and take every precaution." He nodded in the direction of the bridge. "The trip across would take several more hours which would get us there at about sunset. I would rather keep these weary old bones away from the cold of the river, and have my eyes capable of seeing any trouble."

Pat frowned, but she didn't argue. They set up camp and sat around a warm fire. Fluffy lay outside the sitting circle and gnawed on a bone he'd picked up somewhere. Fred didn't ask any questions, he didn't want to know. Instead the young man poked at the fire with a stick and the other two were depressingly quiet. Pat sighed and stood up. "I'm going to bed," she announced.

"Goodnight," wished the two men.

Pat was soon snuggled between her two blankets, and that left the men to themselves. Fred had that Lord Canavar fellow on his mind, and when he was sure Pat was asleep he broached the subject. "You said something about a Lord Canavar. What's he trying to do exactly?"

Ned raised an eyebrow at the question. "You're very curious about him."

"And you two are really serious about him," Fred countered.

Ned sighed, leaned forward with both hands on his staff and furrowed his brow. "He is the main obstacle to the success of our mission."

"Mission? What are you doing?" Fred asked him. Ned pursed his lips together and didn't reply. The boy calmed his rising anger and inched closer to the old man. "I know this is going to sound funny after all this time, but I want to know the truth. All of it," Fred quietly demanded. "What you two are running from and why you need to get to the capital."

Ned raised an eyebrow. "The whole truth?" Fred nodded, and the old man sighed. He gazed into the flames for a long moment, long enough that Fred nearly repeated his order when Ned spoke up. "The truth is, my boy, that Pat is not her name, nor is it even Patricia. She is Elsa Lamikan, last of her knightly line and one destined for greatness. That is, if she isn't stopped from beginning her destiny."

Fred wrinkled his face. "Destiny? What is she, some kind of princess?"

"No." The person who spoke wasn't Ned, but Pat. She rolled over and glared at the pair. "I'm not that type." The girl sat up and laid her hands on her bent knees. "I'm a knight, like all my fathers before me. When I was born my mother had my future foretold by a person learned in such arts. It was foretold that, should I reach the capital city of Galaron on my fifteenth birthday then I would be the leader of a great army."

"Great? Not unstoppable or magical or anything?" Fred asked her.

Pat's eyes narrowed and her lips pursed together. "You think this is a joke? Haven't you seen enough to know that if magic exists there are other ways to use it than to destroy monsters?"

Fred flinched at her angered words. "I didn't think it was serious."

Pat jumped to her feet and marched over to him; her fisted hands shook at her sides. "It was serious enough for my parents to hide me away for the last fifteen years for fear evil would use me to conquer the world. I didn't-" She choked up for a moment, and looked down at the

ground. "I didn't even get to see my mother before she passed away, nor my father." The girl composed herself and turned back to Fred; the fire reflected off the tears in her eyes. "So do you think I'm serious now?"

Fred didn't know what to say; he hadn't meant to hurt her. Ned coughed, and the pair glanced over to him. "Let's leave old wounds buried for now and stay focused on our more immediate troubles," he advised them.

Pat's anger cooled; she shot Fred one last angry glare and resumed her seat. "And those would be?" she asked Ned.

Ned picked up a stick and drew two parallel lines, then two more that snaked under those to represent a river. "The plains and bridge of Salaron are still ahead. We'll have no cover for several miles, and though the bridge is wide it's the only one across the river. Our enemies know that and will have set a trap for us there," he explained. He dragged his stick across a few feet of dirt before he reached his lines. "We will have only our powers and wits to help us."

Fred frowned and glanced over to the girl. "If you're so important then shouldn't we have any army to protect you?" he asked Pat.

Ned shook his head. "Too conspicuous. The Priests of Phaeton and I hoped to avoid a battle of armies until after she arrived at the capital."

Fred blinked. "Priests of Phaeton? Who are they?"

"The ones who raised me," Pat replied. "They worship Phaeton, an old god of fire and the sun."

Fred held up his hands. "So let me get this straight. A couple of priests, through a fortune-teller, have told you two to travel halfway across the world to get to the capital by Pat's fifteenth birthday, and this evil guy Lord Canavar is trying to stop you?"

"Not trying, exactly," Ned told Fred. "He wishes to use Elsa."

"Could we just keep it at Pat for now?" Fred pleaded. "I'm having enough trouble keeping up with all these names."

Ned smiled. "Pat then. Canavar wishes to use Pat for his own ends, and to do that he must kidnap her."

Fred furrowed his brow. "And how is trying to kill her kidnapping her?"

"The attempt in the cave may not have been Canavar, but the trees certainly were," Ned explained. "Those beasts did try to pull her away from us, but you stopped them."

"So we're supposed to expect worse ahead?" Fred guessed.

Ned nodded. "If I'm not mistaken very much worse, but what it can be I can't guess."

"Great..." Fred mumbled.

Ned smiled, raised himself to his feet and walked over to the boy. He put his hand on Fred's shoulder and gave him a pat. "I'm sure with protectors such as we Lord Canavar can't defeat us." Ned glanced over to Pat. "And now we should get some real rest for tomorrow."

Pat smiled and nodded. The whole group went to their beds, but Fred didn't fall asleep immediately. His mind filled with horrifying images of monsters. He imagined the broken stick failing him, and him being tossed into the mouth of any number of terrifying creatures. Fred was so deep in thought that he yelped when something pressed up against him. A hand clapped over his mouth and Pat leaned over him. "Quiet or you'll wake Ned," she scolded. The old man lay a few yards off snoring in his sleep.

He pushed away her hand and scowled at her. "Maybe if you weren't trying to scare me," he hissed.

I wasn't, you're just easily scared, and that's why I wanted to talk to you," Pat replied. Fred raised an eyebrow, and she sighed. "You can't keep relying on your fear to use that staff."

Fred shrugged. "It's worked for me pretty well up to now," he pointed out.

"That's just not something somebody's supposed to rely on. What if you actually found some courage and found you couldn't use it? What then?" Pat asked him. The boy turned his face away; he didn't have an answer. "So I'm just telling you that you need to figure out another way of getting that staff out. If Ned can use his staff surely you can figure out how to use yours."

"I heard that," an old voice muttered. The two youngsters' heads whipped around to the other side of the fire, and Ned's amused eyes stared back. "Not bad advice, but perhaps he should learn to use his staff differently when the danger is over."

Pat scowled at Ned's dupe; the same one she'd pulled on them earlier. "I thought you had more faith in his abilities than that?" Pat scolded him.

"Faith is a powerful thing, but this is no time to try out something new," Ned countered. "Now get to sleep, both of you." He rolled over and soon the air filled with his loud, grunting snores.

The girl rolled her eyes. "How is anybody supposed to sleep over that?" she mumbled as she slipped off Fred.

"Pat?" Fred asked her.

Pat paused. "Yes?"

"I'll try to take your advice about controlling my fear."

She smiled. "You'd better. It's good advice."

CHAPTER 19

The day dawned bright and sunny, and the companions set off for the bridge at an early hour. The plains of Salaron stretched out around and before them, and at every breeze the grass waved like a sea of seaweed. Birds flew over them from the bridge to the woods, and small animals scurried about the ground on their way to the trees that were filled with their food. Such tranquility should have eased Fred's mind, but he found himself troubled.

Ned noticed the boy's agitation shortly before they reached the bridge. He came up to Fred and leaned down to him. "You seem troubled. What is it?"

"The animals," Fred replied.

Pat was ahead of them with Fluffy, and she glanced over her shoulder. "What about them? They look like they're just running around to me."

Fred shook his head. "That's just the problem, they're not running around. They're running straight toward the woods. In all my years on the manor I never saw animals act like that unless they were afraid of something."

Ned's lips pursed together and he looked ahead of them. "Then we should be careful at this bridge, for here we are."

They had reached the Salaron Bridge above the Greater Conchero River. The bridge was built from local white rock, carved and smoothed out into flat stones. Those were then laid one on top of the other in four arches rising up from the water, and those arches held up the pathway over which they needed to travel. The walls on either side of the bridge were tall enough to comfortably rest an arm on, and three wagons could have easily fit abreast of one another. The beginning of the bridge started a few feet on land and performed a slight curve over the water and reached the other side. The total length of the structure was fifty yards.

Fred had never seen such a large bridge, and he stepped around the high railing wall and cautiously crouched along the edge where earth met air. He got down on his hands and knees, and glanced over the precipice. The drop was fifty feet, and the dark water showed the depth was well over his head. He pulled back and glanced around the dirt. His eyes fell on a rock, which he grabbed and held over the abyss. He let it slip from his fingers and fall the tall height. It hit the water and made a small splash that rippled over the surface.

Fred frowned; he thought he'd seen something dark move over the darker background of the water. He leaned over and squinted at the spot, but nothing moved. A bad feeling developed in the pit of his stomach, and he looked up at Pat and Ned. The girl stood on the bridge with Ned behind Fred on solid ground. Fluffy stood near him, and the animal's eyes nervously flitted about the area.

"Did anybody see-"

A horrible cry gurgled up from the water. Fred's head snapped back and his eyes widened when the water stretched upward. It pulled higher and higher like a blob of watery taffy, and the gel was so thick there was darkness inside. The water raised fifty feet above the bridge and soaked Pat with its drippings; Fred scuttled backwards on his hands and butt. A dozen small and large tentacles pushed out from the body of water starting at the bottom and all the way to the top. The top of the thing stretched out to one side and flattened at the end, and two dark spots arose from the surface. Those dark spots swiveled from one companion to the other and settled on Ned. They were eyes, and they were angry.

One of the higher tentacles barreled down toward Ned, and he raised his staff. Fire

erupted from the tip and when the water tentacle made contact steam erupted. The creature opened a mouth along the flattened extension and screamed; the noise echoed along the high river walls and Fluffy howled. The tentacle Ned fought swerved away, but three others took its place. They came at him from all directions, and he managed to swing his staff above his head to scorch the ends of two. One dipped low and knocked his legs out from under him. He hit the ground hard and didn't move.

"Ned!" Pat screamed out.

She'd hardly moved a foot toward him when the sprinkles of water on her body glowed. Pat raised her arms to cover her face as Fred watched as the water shot straight out from her and connected to one another with thin lines of water. Thin sheets of ice filled in the geometric spaces between the lines, trapping Pat in a prison of thin ice. She lowered her arms and her eyes widened; she pressed her hands against the sides and slammed her shoulder into the walls, but they didn't even quiver. Pat pulled out her sword and sliced the blade across ice; the blade shattered and fell to her feet, leaving her holding only the handle.

Her prison glowed and lifted off the bridge; Pat gasped and knocked against the wall. The bubble rose quickly, and Fred struggled to his feet and ran to her. He jumped up and the tips of his fingers scraped along the ice walls.

"Fred!" Pat screamed through the glass. She flew out of his reach and up to hover beside the creature's head.

Fred hurried over to Ned, who still lay where he'd dropped with his staff at his side. The boy shook his shoulders, hoping he would wake up and show this was a trick. "Ned! Come on, Ned!" Fred pleaded. Ned didn't respond.

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught Fred's attention and he turned to see the creature shuffle away from the bridge. It headed down the river with Pat floating beside it. Fred narrowed his eyes, pursed his lips together and ripped the broken stick from his belt. He rushed over to the edge of the steep river bank and held out the stick; nothing happened. There was no transformation, no bright light. There was only the broken stick. Fred looked down at the stick and couldn't understand why it wouldn't work; it worked every other time he needed it.

The creature paused and half turned to the boy; the thing's eyes widened. Pat looked on as the creature raised a tentacle toward Fred, and she pounded on the walls. Fred's head snapped up at the noise in time to have his face drenched in the small sprinkles of water. He furiously wiped them off, but they sprang out from his body and created the netting as before. The walls encased him and he fell on his butt when he was pulled off the ground. Fluffy yipped and howled a dozen yards down the road, but he couldn't help; the poor thing couldn't swim, but it did follow them along the river bank.

Fred's prison floated up close to Pat and, once it made sure the pair were beside it, the creature lumbered on down the river.

Pat got Fred's attention and nodded at his stick. "Use that to burn away the ice!" she told him.

Fred looked down at the stick and shook his head. "It won't work. Something's wrong."

The girl's eyes widened when she realized the problem, and she pressed up against her wall closest to him. "Listen to me, Fred, you have to be afraid! The staff isn't responding to you because it doesn't think you need it!"

Fred looked around him for inspiration, but he couldn't manage to be afraid. He felt only angry and frustrated that he hadn't done anything to save Pat or himself. His hands tightly

clenched the stick and his teeth ground together. He wanted to do something, anything, to get them out of there; whatever would work. Nothing happened; they were still prisoner to this water thing that was leading them to some unknown fate. In anger he lifted one part of the broken stick and jabbed it into the wall.

The pointed end broke through the ice panel and created a small hole its diameter where it stuck out the other side a few inches. Cracks spread through the other ice panels that lay all around the broken one. Fred's mouth dropped open and he glanced over to Pat; she had the same expression on her face. A look of determination spread across his face; now he could do something for her. He stood up and yanked the stick out of the hole. Fresh air sucked into the bubble, but only for a moment; with the stick out of the hole the ice patched itself. Fred would need to hit it at the right spot to shatter the whole thing, though he'd have a new problem; he was forty feet up in the air.

The creature sensed something amiss with its captives and stopped to turn to them. Its mouth twisted back in a scowl when it noticed the patch on Fred's prison, and one of the tentacles reached up toward him. Fred glanced over to Pat, who saw in his eyes a look she didn't like.

"Whatever it is you're thinking, don't do it!"

Fred folded the broken stick in half so both points were side by side. Just as the tentacle wrapped itself around his prison Fred raised the stick above his head and brought it crashing down against the floor. The ice shattered beneath his feet and he fell through the floor. The tentacle barely missed grabbing him, and Fred fell the full height into the water.

Any concussion from the impact was knocked aside by the cold mountain-fed river. The water was clear enough Fred could see thirty feet ahead of him, and he was able to glimpse the base of the creature on the river bed. Something shimmered down there, a large stone, but Fred couldn't worry about that just then; he needed air, and he needed it now. All those years of living near a river came to use when he swam to the surface with the stick still tightly grasped in his hand. His head broke through the surface and he took a gasp of sweet, precious air. Fred couldn't rest for long, as the tentacle that missed him barreled down atop him. His eyes widened and he dove back down into the water with the tentacle close behind. It stabbed through the water and wrapped around one of his legs. Fred kicked and thrashed, but the arm wouldn't loosen. Other tentacles slithered out of the creature and rushed for him.

Short on air and running out of options, Fred grabbed the stick in both hands and leaned up toward his capture leg. He stabbed the tentacle and the whole creature shook with the impact. Through the water he heard the vibrations of the creature's cries from above him, and the tentacle released its hold. Fred pushed off away from the tentacle, but the damage was done. His lungs burned and his body ached for air. The other tentacles crowded around him. They whipped and thrashed in anger, and blocked his way to the surface.

Fred glanced upward at the bright surface, and he could just make out the blurry form of Pat in her prison. His only regret was not being able to save her. He clutched tightly onto the stick as he felt his mind slip away, but he stubbornly shook his head. He didn't want things to end this way, not when they'd come so far through so much, and were so close to safety. A glow lit up the dark water, and before he could stop it the glowing stick broke free from his hands. It floated to two feet in front of him, and the two pieces transformed into the single staff. The tentacles hesitated, and some shrank from the light.

Fred reached out and grasped the staff in his hand. The glow spread out around him and

encased his body in a diamond of light. Fred gasped; there was air all around him. The creature above him saw his recovery and let out a roar. The tentacles rushed him and collided with the barrier. The smaller ones were deflected, but the larger ones, those at least a foot thick, clung to the bubble. They wrapped themselves around the diamond and blocked off Fred's view of the world. One last glimpse allowed him to see the glowing rock at the base of the creature, and when he turned in that direction so did the diamond. He paused and turned every so slightly; his protection followed his movement.

Fred pressed his hands against the wall toward the glowing rock, and the diamond broke free from the tentacles. His safe haven pushed through the arms of the creature on its path to the rock. The creature shifted, and more tentacles sprang from its body and raced toward him. Fred didn't know why, but he held out the staff in front of him and light erupted from the stone at the top. It shot through a small, temporary hole in the barrier and left a trail of tentacle parts in its wake. Fred passed through the carnage and turned to see them reattach themselves to the body of the monster.

He reached the bottom of the river bed some twenty feet beneath the surface, but now he had a new problem; he couldn't reach the stone without pushing through the creature's body. His barrier pushed against the monster and sprang back. He held the end of the staff toward the transparent creature and a small, focused blast went through a small opening as it had before. Now, however, the creature was desperate to stop the light beam and pulled most of its tentacles back into its body. They delved down through the thing's body and put themselves in Fred's line of fire. The creature screamed out in pain but hurriedly reconstituted its broken water tentacles to block further attempts by Fred.

Tentacles came up behind Fred's barrier and pounded away at the back. Cracks appeared on the surface and water leaked inside. Others wrapped themselves around him and pulled the protection diamond away from Fred's target. With time running short Fred tried again, but with a larger beam. He created a larger hole in the barrier and water rushed inside. The beam shot out and was again blocked by the tentacles.

A shadow fell over Fred, and he looked up to see the creature's head dive into the water. Those dark eyes bore into his and it gave a roar great enough to vibrate the entire river. Fred swung his staff toward the face, but another object blocked his path; the creature had dragged Pat down into the water with it. Pat looked wildly around her and her eyes fell on the glowing stone at the bottom of the river close by Fred. She pressed her hands against the walls and nodded at the stone. "Do it!" her voice traveled through her prison and the water. The creature heard her and punished her by opening small holes in her prison, and her bubble of air slowly filled with water. She stepped back from the walls and pressed her arms to her chest.

Fred wasn't doing any better. The tentacles never ceased their pounding against his walls and they still pulled him farther from his target. He looked over at the glowing stone. His chances of hitting it with a small strike of light was dwindling, but each hole was causing more water to rush inside the bubble. With the way things were he didn't have any other choice, so he held the staff out in front of him and blocked out all the terrifying distractions. The tentacles pounded against his barrier and the water climbed higher in Pat's prison.

Fred felt his staff quiver and shake, and the stone at the top glowed as bright as the sun. He didn't dare look away or shield his eyes; he needed to focus. The staff burned his hands, and he felt his strength drain from him and into the wood. The barrier around him dulled and weakened; water leaked in from countless cracks and the tentacles sensed his weakening. They

pounded harder on the walls and the face of the beast sank closer to him. That great mouth opened wide to swallow him and extinguish his light.

The boy clenched his teeth and narrowed his eyes. Almost there; he was almost there. Pat watched him and saw the color drain from his face; the effort was killing him. She pounded her fists against the walls to get his attention, but he ignored her. Just as the creature clamped its mouth down on his barrier, Fred eyes widened and he released a devastating energy blast. The diameter of the beam opened a hole in his barrier large enough to collapse the whole thing, and he drifted free in the water.

The creature turned its head away from him, and all three, monster and humans, watched the beam shoot through the countless tentacles and body; nothing slowed it down. The light collided with the stone and the monster let out a gurgling cry of pain and fury. It thrashed and howled as the stone cracked and broke apart. Then the thing hung limp in the water and its body dissipated into the river. Pat was free of her prison and swam over to Fred, who floated very still close by with his staff clutched in one hand. She grabbed him around the waist and they were close enough she kicked off the river bottom.

Pat pulled him along, and her air and strength were nearly depleted when they broke the surface. She gasped and dragged him onto a sandbar; he was very still and his skin was as pale as death. Pat put her hand on his chest and her breath caught in her throat. She couldn't feel anything; he wasn't breathing.

She slowly shook her head and tears sprang to her eyes. "No. You can't die. Fred, I order you not to die!" She grabbed his shoulders and gave him a good shake. "Come on! Wake up! Boy! Come on, you don't like me calling you that, remember? Fred!" She slapped him across the face. Fred's eyes shot open and he stared blankly at the sky. Pat cried out in relief and flung her arms over him. "You're okay! Thank the gods you're okay!" He didn't reply nor return the hug. She sat up and looked at him; he still stared lifelessly at the sky, and his chest still didn't move. A horrible feeling washed over her. "Fred?" she whispered.

Fred's eyes rolled over to her and her heart stopped. Those dark things weren't Fred's eye color. He sat up and Pat fell back away from him. The boy turned his head and stared straight at her without blinking. She trembled beneath that unearthly gaze, and her quiet voice mirrored her fear with its tremble. "Fred?"

Fred blinked. Pat's heart dared to beat a few times. Then he stared straight ahead, his face took on a hideous shade of green and he leaned forward to wretch on himself. Pat cringed back, but now to escape the smell rather than his gaze. After a few moments of ridding his stomach of food and river water, Fred wearily looked up at her and smiled; chunks fell off his chin. "Did we win?" he hoarsely asked her.

Pat's lips trembled, then she smiled, and finally she broke out in a laugh so loud it rang off the walls of the river. Fred looked over both his shoulders to see if she was laughing at something behind him; there was nothing but river and more river. After today he swore he'd never swim in a river again. The mystery of her amusement remained, so he turned back to her with a frown on his face. "What? What's so funny?"

Pat shook her head and tried to get a hold of herself. "I-I'm just so relieved you're okay."

"Why? Was I out that long?" He looked up at the sky and saw the sun was still in the morning position.

"No, I was just that worried." She stood up, put her hands on her hips and looked around. "Now how do we get out of here?"

Fred followed her gaze and could see what she meant; they were on a narrow sandbar below the steep cliffs with no way out but to swim upstream or downstream. They jumped in fright when a roar echoed off the walls, and Fred scrambled to his feet. His weak legs collapsed beneath him, and Pat went for her sword that lay broken at the bottom of the river bed. The roar came again, and a few pebbles tumbled down the wall. The pair looked up and saw Fluffy's face peeking over the edge of the cliff thirty feet above them.

Pat relaxed and rolled her eyes. "Great, he's here, but how can he help get us out?" Fluffy barked and pulled back out of sight. In a moment something long tumbled over the edge; it was a rope. Pat looked disbelievingly at it. "Where did he get that?"

Fred shook his head. "I don't know and I don't care. Let's just get out of here."

CHAPTER 20

Pat strapped the rope around Fred's waist and Fluffy hefted him up, then let the rope down again and she climbed up. She walked over and wrapped her arms around the cantankus' neck. "Thank you so much, you strange thing." Fluffy barked and licked her face, coating her in his drool. Pat wiped off Fluffy's thank you while Fred staggered back the way they'd come. His legs obeyed him with more reliability than before, but Pat came up behind him and slipped her shoulder beneath one of his arms. She smiled at him. "You might need some help for a little while longer. You drank a lot of water, remember?"

Fred shuddered. "Don't remind me."

"Do-do you remember much after that?" she asked him.

The boy furrowed his brow. "After I shot off the staff?" She nodded. "Nope. Don't remember anything until I was puking my guts out with you sitting beside me."

"Oh..." Pat was troubled by Fred's strange behavior; that hadn't been the first time he'd become someone else. She worried it would get worse if he kept using that staff.

They toddled along back to the bridge, laughing off their adventure because they were both alive and well. Fluffy followed and was a comfort to them; he had energy enough to fend off an army. They were two dozen yards away from the bridge when Pat stopped. Her eyes stared straight ahead and Fred followed her gaze; Ned still lay where they'd left him. Fred lifted his arm from her shoulder and stumbled over to him while Pat hung back; she feared the worst. Fred slid up beside the old man and looked him over. Ned's cloak was pushed open and a tip of another rope hung out. That explained where Fluffy picked up their escape item.

Pat came up behind him. "Is he...?"

Fred shook his head. "No, he's breathing." He lifted Ned's head up and felt a huge lump on the back; the landing had been one hell of a knockout. Fred was more rough with his friend than he intended because Ned's eyes shot open.

Ned sat up and shooed away Fred's hands. He scowled and gingerly touched the back of his head. "I see that you were trying to finish the job," he scolded Fred.

Pat surprised them both when she fell to her knees and wrapped Ned in a tight hug. "I'm so glad you're okay," she mumbled through his cloak.

Ned smiled and returned the hug. "So am I," he replied. Pat released him and he glanced over to Fred, who's clothes were torn and wet. "You appear to be in need of a new set of clothes again, my dear Fred. What exactly happened after my short nap?"

Fred grinned and shrugged. "Not much. Just defeated a monster and saved the day."

The old man raised an eyebrow. "All by yourself?" he asked the boy.

The boy's face drooped. "You don't think I could have done it?"

Ned waved his hands in front of himself. "No no, of course I believe it. It's just, well-" he pulled at his beard and his eyes twinkled, "-somewhat unbelievable." Pat rolled her eyes, but there was a smile on her face; she couldn't be mad at him when she was still so relieved he was okay.

Fred frowned. "Well, I did. It wasn't easy, but somehow I got down to the rock and blasted it away with this." He held up his pieces of stick.

Ned raised an eyebrow. "Rock?"

The boy nodded. "Yeah, there was a glowing stone at the bottom of the thing, and I guessed it was pretty important because it didn't want me down there, so I destroyed it. That

killed the creature." Fred didn't like the look on Ned's face. "Why? Is that important?"

Ned looked off into space, and even Pat's glee melted away into worry. "Is it important?" she repeated Fred's question.

Ned shook himself of his stupor. "What? Oh, yes, very important. That's the particular ability for Canavar. He uses the stones to focus his power and create such things. So what are we sitting around here for? There could be more danger afoot." Pat helped him climb to his feet, and Fred fetched his staff and placed it in Ned's hand. Ned took a step forward and stumbled; the pair noticed he winced. "I think perhaps that whack on my head did more damage than I thought."

"Maybe you can ride Fluffy?" Fred suggested. Fluffy heard that and bound forward with an eager bark.

Ned grimaced, but patted the cantankus on the head. "All right, you can have the honor of carrying me, but be gentle."

Fluffy was not gentle. The moment Ned's butt slid onto Fluffy's back the dog bound forward with a roar of a bark. Ned screamed and clung to the beast's back as they sailed over the bridge. The youngsters ran after them, but had a hard time keeping up; not so much from Fluffy's pace as from their laughter taking all their breath away.

The companions reached the other side of the bridge and traveled over the gentle hills that lay beyond the river. Night came on before they reached the capital, and they rested beside a crackling fire. Fred, as the most exhausted, collapsed between his blankets. While he slept Pat took the chance to recant to Ned what had happened to them, including Fred's eerie behavior after she pulled him from the water. "What do you make of it?" she asked him.

Ned leaned forward on his staff and his brow furrowed in thought as he watched the fire. After a moment he closed his eyes and shook his head. "I can't say for sure, but you would do well to watch over him. I would trust no one else with the knowledge of his affliction."

"Watch him? How can I watch him after we reach the capital? Would you not be a better protector of him?" she countered.

Ned shrugged. "I may be, but you two are closer in age and would give much more trust to each other than to an old man like myself."

Pat frowned at him. "You must be joking."

The old man turned up his nose in fake insult. "I never joke about such serious matters," he teased her. His amusement didn't last long, for his face drooped and he looked to her with his weary old eyes. "But in all seriousness he needs you, and I think you may find a use for him. He has saved your life several times. A boy like that would be a great asset to have on hand in these dangerous times." Pat stared into the fire and Ned retired to leave her to her thoughts.

The next day they awoke and hurried on their way. By midmorning they saw the crest of the hill, and their steps quickened until they reached the peak. There was a flat spot at the top, and they took in the view. A large, green valley spread out before them in the shape of a bowl. Mountains capped with snow stood to the north, and smaller mountains lay on either side. In the valley was a large city of stone, larger than Tramadore, and a great road led up to the three gates that fed commerce into the metropolis. They could see carriages and carts wheel through the gates, and countless people wandered in and out. The city was defended by a twenty-foot thick wall of stacked stones, and a small army of guards patrolled the battlements. In the back-center of the town stood a tall castle fortress built on the only hill in the valley. Three towers rose up from the high, defensive walls, stepped so that a giant could walk from one to the next like

stairs.

Ned smiled and nodded at the place. "A very pretty sight. Let us hope we are expected." He trooped down the mountain and Fred aimed to join him, but a hand grabbed his arm. He turned back to find it was Pat.

Her face was pale and her voice shook; she turned away from him. "I want to ask you something," she told him.

Fred frowned. "What is it?"

"Once we reach the capital I'll be under constant guard, and only able to see noblemen and the king. I-" she paused, took a deep breath and turned to look into his eyes. "I want you to be one of those guards, along with Ned."

Fred blinked; he wasn't sure he'd heard her right. "You want me to guard you?"

Pat smiled and tilted her head to one side. "Why not? You've been doing a pretty good job of it so far. If it hadn't been for you that monster would have carried me away."

The boy shrugged. "I-I guess, but to keep protecting you like it's an official thing? Won't the king have some good guards you can use?"

Pat put her finger on his lips, and shook her head. "They will be strangers to me, and how can I trust strangers over those who I already know will risk their lives to protect me?"

Fred pulled away from her finger, squinted his eyes and rubbed his chin as he leaned in toward her. "I don't know. Will there be free food?"

The girl rolled her eyes and slapped him on the shoulder. "Is that all you boys think about?" she scolded.

Fred rubbed his bruised shoulder, and sheepishly smiled. "It's a high priority for us. I can't protect you on an empty stomach."

Pat shook her head, sighed and turned him around to face the downward trail. Ned waited for them a dozen yards down, and there was a smile on his face. "Come on," she told him as she pushed him down the trail. "Let's go see what trouble you can get us into at this place."

GLOSSARY

Cantankus: a hairless dog-beast that was used as steed-of-war by humans. They proved difficult to breed, so humans replaced them with horses. Dwarves still use the cantankus for their mounted divisions. Like dogs, they are extremely loyal and will die for their master, but abuse will lead them to abandon their owner. Riders communicate with their cantankus via a set of collars around their neck and their cantankus' neck that allows them to feel each others' commands and become as one in the mind.

Castor: people who are capable of harnessing the natural magic in the world for their own uses. Current castors use staffs to focus their powers, but ancient castors used stones to connect with the natural world.

Cedric Osgood: deceased protege of Ned and previous owner of Fred's castor staff.

Damskov: lord of a manor located east of Tramadore and former master of Fred.

Ezekiel Tramadore: hereditary ruler of the city of Tramadore and the region of Ralcott. He is one of Ned's oldest friends.

Fluffy: an abandoned cantankus who is befriended by Fred. He becomes the boy's loyal steed.

Fred: a former serf and current castor who was dragged from his former life through Ned's meddling. He now learns the art of castoring from Ned and uses an enchanted staff to perform his magic. He owns a cantankus by the name of Fluffy, and has a close affection for Pat.

Galaron: an ancient city ruled over by the royal family of the same name. It lies in a valley with hills to the north, east, and west. To the northeast lies the Valley of the King where a great battle occurred between Galaron and its enemies. It resides in the region of Sterning, and the city is located in the south of that area. The city of Tramadore to the east is its closest neighbor and ally.

Ned: an old castor with a long history of traveling the world. He was once known as Edwin. At one time he traveled with a young man by the name of Cedric Osgood.

Patricia (Pat): a young girl. She is a knight of the Priests of Phaeton, and was prophesied to take control of the army of Galaron and marry a dead man.

Ralcott: a region in the south central of the continent with its capital located at Tramadore. The region is long and narrow, and is abutted by the Sterning region to the northwest. It is inhabited by humans.

Salaron: the name of both the plains and bridge that divide the regions of Ralcott and Sterning, the former to the southeast and the latter to the north. The bridge crosses over the Greater Conchero River. The Lesser Conchero River is a small creek that runs from the city of Tramadore westward to join the Greater Conchero just above Salaron Bridge.

Sterning: a region ruled over by the royal family of the city of Galaron. The region is located in the western part of the continent and is northwest of the city of Tramadore. The region abuts the Tramadore region to its southeast, and the Dirth region to its north. It is inhabited by humans.

Tramadore (city): a large city in the western central of the Ralcott region ruled by the family of the same name. The family refer to themselves as lords rather than kings, and rule by popular majority. The castle and defensive walls were hewn from a stone mountain by the ancestors of the inhabitants. The city is famous for its Uncomfortable Chair and the prophecy attached to it.

The Unwilling Adventurer (The Unwilling #1)

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