

Blood and Genesis

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Chapter I

‘Seventeen more gone, Your Grace. The sheriff confirms it. Early evening, he said, packs on their backs. I fear they’re not returning.’

‘Founder save me.’ Duke Mandeville reached for his empty goblet, as though it might steady his shaking hand. ‘They’re leaving in droves. This is an exodus, Darby. My forebears would turn in their graves to see their duchy abandoned like this.’

‘Your Grace, if I may.’ As his advisor of many years, Old Darby had great respect and a fondness for the Duke, but recognised a certain weakness in him that had not been in his father. ‘The elves are tired. They have had enough of life here in Mandeville, in the conditions they are forced to live in, in the lack of medical care and adequate housing provided for them. Times are changing, Your Grace. Tales are leaking in from other cities, of elves that earn their own land, who rise to positions of some power. And we must change in accordance. We must at least promise that change can come in future.’

The desertions had started months ago. It was only a trickle at first, one or two each week, but that trickle had soon become a shower, and now a downpour, whole families leaving daily, even those with small children and aging parents.

‘I cannot promise what I cannot deliver,’ Mandeville said, setting his goblet back on the oaken table with a slam that reverberated through the heavy wood. ‘For change, we need resources, and we cannot accrue those resources when the elves responsible for them have gone.’ He sat back against the soft woollen throw draped across the settle, tried to relax himself. ‘Who have we lost this time?’

Darby consulted the parchment provided him by the sheriff, and took a moment to run his eyes over the information. It was a moment longer than he needed, though; he had already checked, double-checked, triple-checked the names, but he feared being the bearer of such bad news.

‘Your Grace.’ There must have been something in his tone, because the Duke shuddered slightly at the words. ‘It appears that the bulk of the deserters were miners. With the few we have left now... I’m afraid coal is going to be difficult to come by.’

‘Miners, again? More of them flee than any other.’

‘Yes, Your Grace. I suspect it is due to their health. The coal dust affects their breathing, and it isn’t uncommon for accidents to occur in such conditions.’ Darby rolled the parchment back up as though he could hide the reality of the situation away. ‘I fear this will only continue if we make no changes.’

The Duke didn’t reply immediately. He sat perfectly still, brow furrowed in deep and sober thought, face ashen with worry and mounting sleepless nights. Darby thought of calling a servant to come and light the fire, in an effort to add some warmth and comfort to the room. But as was custom in Mandeville and beyond, the serving staff was entirely made up of elves, and Darby thought it may be unwise to have them close when such discussions were taking place.

Eventually the Duke sighed, and came from his reverie with a shake of his head. ‘I do understand, Darby, I really do,’ he said. ‘But I cannot make promises that can’t be kept. Even if I were to assure them that I will do my best to improve things, it would be an interim measure at best. There is nothing in place to ensure it. Eventually, the exodus would go on.’ He ran a hand across his brow, a visible sign of the weight of his troubles. ‘Leave me for a while. I need to think about this alone.’

‘Of course, Your Grace.’ Darby bowed and made to leave the room. But just before he reached the threshold, he turned again to address the Duke. ‘I nearly forgot,’ he said, with a strange wry smile. ‘Lord Ormand is here. He wishes to speak with you, if possible.’

‘Old Ulric?’ The Duke rose a little in his seat, questioning. ‘I thought he was ill. At death’s door, so I heard.’

‘His son, Your Grace. Alaric. I can... tell him the timing is inconvenient?’

‘Alaric?’ Something in the Duke’s look darkened as he recalled the name, and he suddenly understood the meaning of Darby’s strange smile. ‘I see. Yes, send him in.’

Ulric had been a fine earl in his time, took care of his city as he had taken care of his unruly children; firmly, but never cruelly, not one to shy away from just punishment, but with a love and pride that kept his kin loyal, and his people content. By now though, the ravages of age had taken their toll. Just like the edge of his blade and the glint in his eye, his mind had dulled, become clouded. He lived on yet, but the city was preparing itself for mourning. They knew he had little time left.

His son, Alaric Ormand, was cut from a different cloth. The eldest son, he lacked the warmth and humour of his father and siblings. In its stead was a black bitterness, a deep resentment for the love his father commanded that never would be his. The Duke had heard tales of his callousness, his blatant disregard for the lives of the elves who baked his bread and tempered his sword. It was an irrational, unexplainable hatred, and the Duke knew that such men should be feared. Especially when such hatred was twinned with a sharp intelligence, and a formidable court acumen.

‘Lord Ormand,’ he said, as the man was shown through to him, rising from his seat and offering a short bow in greeting. ‘It has been far too long.’

‘Your Grace.’ Ormand smiled in return, but it was a smile devoid of goodness, and the Duke felt the hairs prickle on the back of his neck. ‘Always a pleasure to return here. My father sends his regards, such as they are.’

‘My thoughts are with him.’ The Duke gestured for the younger man to take a seat, which he did with all the ease of one relaxing in his own stead, leaning his tall frame back against the settle and fixing his dark eyes on the Duke’s.

‘Thank you,’ he said, inclining his head a little. ‘I wish I could tell you that his condition had improved, but... It has got no worse, at the very least.’

‘That is as well as we can hope for.’

Ormand nodded and leant forwards, as though keen to push the conversation on. The Duke sensed the pleasantries were done with.

‘Word has it,’ Ormand began, running a hand through his hair, black as a raven’s wing save for a single silver streak, ‘that there is trouble here in Mandeville. Elves deserting in legions, so I hear, off on some ridiculous quest for fresh fields and pastures new.’ He laughed, scathing and unpleasant, and the Duke didn’t return it. ‘So I come with a proposition. A *helping hand*, shall we say. If my father were able, I have no doubt that he would wish to assist you and so, in his absence, here am I.’ And there again was that wicked smile, empty of any warmth, of compassion, only predatory, and dangerous.

‘A proposition?’ the Duke replied. ‘Your concern is appreciated, Lord Ormand, make no mistake. But we have measures in place to tackle the issue.’

‘Of course. I don’t presume to tell you how to run your duchy, but do hear me out. My father would so wish it.’

As though your father had any hand in this at all, the Duke thought bitterly, but he knew it was wiser to concede. ‘And hear you out I shall. Do, go on.’

Ormand nodded in thanks, and cleared his throat. ‘Your elves are leaving because of their conditions, because they are not happy with the way they have to live. To combat that you would have to improve those conditions, but that of course requires labour. Labour that they, by fleeing, are removing from Mandeville. So where does that leave you?’

The Duke went to respond but the question was rhetorical, and before he could get a word in Ormand had gone on, simultaneously silencing the Duke with a look, a cold flash

across his eyes that lingered just long enough to make its meaning clear. 'It leaves you trapped, in a vicious circle, unable to remedy the situation. So you must use alternative means. Which is where my aid comes in.'

'And what sort of *aid* would you be offering?' The Duke knew it was better to be politic here, remain cautious, but he found it difficult to conceal his scepticism over the sincerity of this man's offer. Ormand was no good neighbour, that much he knew, and notorious in his disdain for the elves. Stories were whispered down corridors in hushed tones when Ormand passed through them, his name echoed in dark, empty halls. He wore hatred upon him like a cloak, and fear went before him. Whatever aid he offered, the Duke did not want it.

'You need to teach them a lesson,' Ormand said, still smiling, eyes twinkling like a black pool in twilight. 'They need to know that they cannot desert their masters and get away with it. They need to be reminded that they are serfs, nothing more, and that they must know their place.'

The Duke shifted in discomfort. 'And how would you go about teaching them this lesson?'

'I took the liberty of speaking with your sheriff on my way in.' Ormand sat back again, twining a loose string of fabric from the throw around his finger. 'He informed me that your last lot went yesterday, in the evening. On foot, no horses. They shan't have got far.' The smile never left. 'I believe that a wise course of action would be to track them down. Myself and a few of my horsemen. Track them down, bring them back.' With one swift movement of his hand, he plucked the string loose from the fabric. 'And kill them. Kill them publicly, so that those still here know they would do well to stay. That will be their lesson.'

The Duke sat silent. When he found the voice to speak he struggled to keep it even, lest the other man know he had rattled him so. 'Lord Ormand. I am not in the habit of slaughtering elves who have committed no crime. As much as their leaving troubles me, they are serfs, not slaves, and I cannot lawfully have them killed. Nor would I wish to.'

Ormand rolled the loose string between his fingers, before opening them and letting it float gently towards the ground. 'Your Grace. I am thinking of the greater good. Only these few need die, and I assure you, it will be effective. Even if it's only as a temporary measure before you... return the situation to its rightful course.' There was an unmistakable note of sarcasm there, the Duke was sure. Sarcasm, and cynicism, and a careful, subtle mockery.

'I appreciate your offer of aid,' he said, wanting nothing more than to finish this wretched conversation and get the man out of Mandeville and back onto the road. 'But I cannot accept. I will not descend into lawlessness. Founder knows where things would go if we started down that path.' He stood to signal the end of the matter. 'Please send my wishes to your father.'

Ormand watched him for a moment, from his place on the settle, deliberating whether or not it would be prudent to push the matter. Eventually, though, he decided against it. There was a time for force and a time for diplomacy, and here it called for the latter.

'I understand, Your Grace.' He stood, bowed his head towards the Duke. 'I shan't take up any more of your time. Do remember though, that my offer still stands, should you reconsider. My aid is always at your service.'

'I am grateful.'

'Good day, Your Grace.'

'Lord Ormand.'

The Duke felt a certain relief as Ormand swept from the room, his light, even footsteps fading down the hallway until they passed out of earshot. But the relief was short-lived, replaced not moments later by an anxiety, nagging deep between his ribs. That the

man would have the audacity to come here with such a suggestion! The elves might be serfs but they were protected by the laws of the duchy just as the humans were. Not that Ormand and his ilk would have it so if they could help it. But what was his purpose? Surely not just bloodlust, not just some blind hatred for the elves that led him here to seek their deaths? Duke Mandeville couldn't help but feel there was something he was missing, some hidden agenda no doubt black as Ormand's heart.

He sat down again, suddenly drained. Once Ulric was dead, there would be nothing to keep his son in check. And it wouldn't be long now...

Out in the hall, Ormand took a moment to compose himself. He wasn't surprised that Mandeville had rejected his offer, had anticipated it, in fact. The old fool was a soft touch, didn't understand that these goblins had to be kept in line. He didn't have the stomach for ruling his duchy anymore, that much was obvious. And that was just the way Ormand wanted it.

'Dunstan,' he called, waving over his sergeant, a hulking young man hand-picked by Ormand for his fighting strength and inherent aptitude for command.

'My Lord? Do we ride?'

'Change of plan. Mandeville isn't keen on killing the goblins, but he's got no idea anymore, no handle on any of this.'

'We're not to bring the elves back, my Lord?'

'We're not.' He saw Dunstan's shoulders fall a little in disappointment, and couldn't help but smirk at the sergeant's insatiable thirst for violence. 'But worry not, Dunstan. This is for the better. Mandeville has proven himself to be incapable, an easy target who commands no loyalty or fear from his elves. It shan't take much.' He turned and with quick steps descended the stairway to the main door, hearing the sergeant at his heels. 'We head towards Fennering. The deserter elves have likely gone the same way. If Mandeville doesn't want them back, we'll make sure they won't trouble him again.'

Behind him, he heard Dunstan laugh.

Chapter II

It was noon, the sun at its zenith and merciless in its heat, beating down upon the arid trail with golden ferocity. The roadside dwellings had grown fewer as they walked, until now all that was visible was a wide expanse of green, open field, the air above it shimmering in the haze like rippled water.

And yet the small feet that trod the path were light and happy, voices lifted in high spirits. Seventeen elves, their packs half-full with what little they owned, swinging loosely from their shoulders and crooked arms.

Raiwen Dale was one of these, smiling and walking arm-in-arm with her husband, Tevin. The air was so fresh, so clean, so strange on her lungs, used as they were to the choking darkness of the mines. She breathed in, long and deep.

‘Smell that?’ she said. ‘Grass. Living, growing grass. Isn’t that something?’

‘Something special,’ Tevin answered, affectionately gripping his wife’s hand and following her gaze out over the meadows. ‘Haven’t seen such a sight in... Well, a long time. So it feels, anyhow.’

‘So it is.’ Raiwen returned the squeeze of his fingers. ‘First time for the kiddo, I should think.’

They turned together to watch their son, Arrian, as he and his friend kicked a stone along the path between them, a trail of dust rising behind it as it rolled. At twenty years of age, it had only been two years since Arrian had moved from working outside the mine to working down below; not long enough for the dust to have settled in his lungs, but long enough for the coal-black scarring to be evident over his arms and hands. His head too, shaved as all their ilk were, bore the occasional dark fleck, darker than his hair which he hadn’t grown in years. Raiwen had almost forgotten what colour it was, until she remembered him as a babe, with a shock of oak-brown locks that reminded her of her own, when she’d worn it long.

‘The scars will fade,’ Tevin said, as though reading her mind. ‘Maybe not fully, but they will fade some. A few years in Woodston and you’ll never know he was in the mines.’

‘I hope so.’

Most of those travelling were miners too, males and females alike. Many were headed for the neighbouring city of Fennering, where the Duke and Duchess were reported to be a just and gracious pair, and understanding of the needs of the people, both nobles and serfs alike. It was said that some elves had even risen to the position of landowners, lived in a house with a separate room for sleeping and its own privy. Raiwen and Tevin Dale, though, were on course for Woodston, a small town settled comfortably on Fennering’s outskirts, close enough for easy contact with the city, but not so far that they fell too close to the borders of the wild Outerlands. It was here that their elder children had made their home, their son educating the youngsters in reading and writing, and their daughter taken on as apprentice to the town midwife. With her predecessor now advancing in years, she was preparing to fully assume the role herself, a position of great respect and responsibility. Their relative isolation, clinging to the cusp of civilisation, meant that they rarely came into contact with human nobles, and thus were left to their own devices, to prosper as they could. Now that half the elven population of Mandeville had fled, and Arrian was old enough to take care of himself, it struck Raiwen and Tevin as the opportune moment to start again, to put down roots where they could flourish, and blossom into happiness.

Arrian saw his parents looking over, and waved, which they returned with their joined hands.

‘They look happy, don’t they?’ said his friend, Gwyn. ‘Don’t see many smiles like that round serf-turf.’

‘First day in the sun for a decade,’ Arrian replied, shrugging as his parents turned back round to resume their steady march. ‘Feels like ages to me and I’ve not been down there half as long as they have.’

‘I’d hardly call it ages, Ari. Two years, tops.’

‘As if you’d know. Never done a proper day’s work in your life.’

Gwyn gave him a look of affront but Arrian stood by what he said. Gwyn was the son of a cooper, a barrel-maker, and spent his days carving and polishing wood for the nobles’ hogsheads and casks. It was an enviable position; he was tanned where Arrian was pale, stood tall where Arrian was used to crouching, and even able to keep his hair long, less likely as it was to catch or burn or turn black from coal dust. He had something of a miner’s build though; a stockiness, a width to his chest and shoulders that Arrian lacked. When their playful sparring was a test of strength, Gwyn went undefeated, but when it came to speed and dexterity, he was outranked by his friend. Arrian did not hold Gwyn’s fortunate position against him, knew they each had their own job to do, but he’d make sure Gwyn knew how lucky he was. A cooper couldn’t know the darkness of the mines, couldn’t know the heaviness of the rock pressing down from above, from all sides. Couldn’t know the strange wailing noise that echoed through the chambers as they caved, which they did, and often. Like a banshee at the bedside crying down your death.

‘Swap you for a day,’ said Arrian. ‘Then we’ll see what you say.’

‘Won’t have to when we reach Woodston,’ Gwyn said with a wink and a slap on the back. He and his father too were heading to the town, where his father’s cousin had a talented carpenter’s hand. ‘You can do what you like up that way.’

Arrian snorted, and in a moment of irritation he kicked the stone they’d been passing far into the grass. ‘So you say. I’m getting stuck with my brother.’

‘Well he teaches, doesn’t he? Could be worse.’

‘Could it? Could be better.’

‘Lighten up, Ari. You could be with your sister.’ Gwyn laughed at the thought. ‘You, a midwife. Founder’s bones, imagine that. Blood, tears, and babes. Couldn’t imagine anything worse.’ He shook his head in humour. His hair shone beneath the sun’s rays and Arrian felt a pang of jealousy, and ran a hand over his own shorn scalp.

‘True,’ he conceded, but shrugged again as though uncertain. ‘I don’t know. It’ll be better than the mines, I’m sure, but... is that it? I didn’t think it would just be *better than the mines*.’

Gwyn tutted and lightly punched him on the arm. ‘Trust you. Only just got out of Mandeville – only just got out of the *dark* – and you’re whinging already.’

‘I’m not whinging.’

‘Yes you are. You know what you need?’ He left it open for an answer but Arrian didn’t humour him. ‘You need to make an honest woman out of Morna before any Woodston sinners get their eye on her.’

Arrian still wouldn’t play along, wouldn’t rise to his remarks. But he did lift his eyes to look at her, Morna, treading lightly along beside her parents and sister, ragged skirt fluttering round her lower legs in the noonday breeze. As though she could sense him looking, she turned too, her violet eyes watching him from beneath dark lashes, and she smiled, quickly, secretively. Arrian smiled back. She was a curious one, Morna. Quiet, but not shy; she could have a sharp tongue and a quick wit when she wanted to. A strong woman too, had worked beside him in the tunnels, fast and careful, never a complaint, never a mistake, never a cry. Not even in those first few weeks, when so many of them did cry, when their hands bled and their chests burnt and they forgot what the sun looked like. She had felt

her beautiful brown hair shorn from her head and hadn't made a sound. She was brave. Braver than he, and he admired her for it.

'Arrian, you're staring at her.'

He shook his head and looked away. He didn't meet Gwyn's gaze but he could feel him smirking, and scowled in response.

'Why are you so interested in me and Morna?' he said. 'Isn't there anyone interested in you to occupy your time?'

He meant it as half a joke, half an insult, but Gwyn merely laughed and took up kicking another stone. 'Don't say I didn't warn you if the Woodston folk are keen.' And he passed the stone to Arrian to continue the game.

By the time they stopped to rest the sun hung a little lower in the sky, but nearly cloudless as it was, the heat still burnt. Arrian sat with his back against a large oak, his parents too taking shelter from the rays beneath its shady boughs, their pale skin acclimatised to the darkness of the underground.

'Here,' said his father, tearing away a chunk of some stale loaf and handing it across. 'Keep your strength up.'

'Thanks.' Arrian took it and eyed it with suspicion. He hit it against his knee, and winced. 'Pap. You've given me a rock. You could kill a man with this.'

'Cheeky beggar,' said Tevin with a chuckle. 'You'll eat it and you'll like it. Enjoy it while you can; it'll only get more stale.'

'It can't get any more stale, it's fossilised.'

'Just eat your bread, Arrian,' his mother tutted, struggling to tear her own in half. She popped a chunk in her mouth and chewed it thoughtfully. 'I could get used to this. Lunch under the sun, warm grass, family and friends.'

Arrian bit into his own and it almost took out a tooth, but he had to agree. 'And the food's not covered in soot.'

'Very true. No soot.'

There came a soft rustling from the other side of the tree, the sound of someone settling themselves at the base of the oak. Arrian turned to see who it was, and was greeted by a smile and a pair of large, violet eyes.

'Morna,' he said, shifting round to better sit by her side. 'How are you holding up?'

Morna lifted her foot. She had removed her leather shoes and now she wiggled her toes. 'My feet have been better,' she said, lowering it again and pressing it into the grass so that the small green blades rose up between her toes. 'But they'll get me there. What about you?'

'The same. Ma says we'll make it there tomorrow though. I'll live 'til then.'

She laughed a little in response, picking at her own bread and letting tiny crumbs fall and disappear into the ground beside her. 'Have you got a rock for lunch too?'

'Rock, stone, flint. Think a rock might taste better.'

She laughed again and he felt a warmth in his chest that he often felt around her, especially when she laughed, especially when it was at something he'd said. But then something in her look darkened, and her smile faded.

'What is it?' he asked.

She held out her hand to him, palm upwards, to reveal a small black *M* tattooed over the criss-crossing blue veins at the top of her wrist. 'Wherever we go,' she said, lightly brushing the tip of her finger over the ink, 'we're never going to get rid of these, are we?'

Arrian looked at his own wrist, where an identical letter was scratched over the soft skin. The *M* of Mandeville, the mark of the Duke's jurisdiction, permanently etched into

their bodies. As much as they were serfs and not wholly under his control, it always felt like a mark of property, like they were owned.

Arrian reached out and took her gently by the wrist, so that her fingers softly slipped around his own, and the marks were hidden.

‘It won’t matter once we’re there,’ he said. ‘They won’t mean anything, to anyone. Just another scar. And we’ve got enough of those, haven’t we?’

She smiled a little at that, and squeezed his wrist to show she understood. But he could see it in her eyes, that look of *not quite believing*, that lack of conviction. And he didn’t say it but he felt it himself too, and it worried him, if they would look at that mark every day, and feel they were never truly free.

As though she could read his mind, Morna took his other hand and spoke in a voice that was barely above a whisper. ‘At least it’ll remind us that we changed things. They couldn’t make us stay.’

She was a wonder, he thought, and he made up his mind.

‘Morna,’ he said. ‘There was something I wanted to talk to you about.’

She smiled, wide, and he knew he’d made the right decision. But just as he opened his mouth to go on, there was a shout from close by.

‘Something’s coming! Something’s coming down the road!’

They followed the sound of the cry. Davi, another miner getting on in years, stood a short ways from them, hand raised and pointing in the direction they had come from, back towards Mandeville.

‘What is it? Humans?’

‘Animals, I’d say.’

‘They’re moving fast.’

‘Too fast. They’ll be on us in half a minute.’

It came like a cloud, a swift, dark cloud, emerging from the horizon and getting closer with every passing second. Morna stepped up to the roadside for a better view and Arrian followed her, momentarily forgetting what he’d wanted to say. The ground began to shake and thunder as the black shapes approached, and the unmistakable pound of horse hooves grew loud, like war drums beating out an imminent attack. Then a red banner appeared, rising from the cloud, tall and formidable against the blue sky.

Arrian suddenly found his mother at his shoulder. ‘Arrian,’ she said, her voice quick and breathless. ‘Get off the road. Hurry now.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘Get in the ditch, kiddo.’ She pushed him back so that he slipped a couple of inches down the grassy verge, but he caught himself, steadied himself, and by the time he looked back up the figures in the cloud were visible.

Horsemen. Dark, armoured horsemen, their tunics emblazoned with a red crest he didn’t recognise, and swords hanging at their sides, polished hilts flaring in the sun. The horses beneath them, mouths flecked with foam and huge teeth champing at the bit, their dark flanks glistening with a thin sheen of sweat. They rode with frightening speed, and the dust rose at their hooves and the ground seemed to echo each stamp along the road. They carried something with them too, something that couldn’t be seen but hung over them like mist over midnight water. A malevolence, a palpable sense of danger, of peril, merciless and closing fast.

Davi was still stood at the far side of the path, and now he stepped into the centre and addressed the riders.

‘Who are you?’ he cried, raising his voice above the hammering hooves. ‘What’s your business here?’

It was impossible to tell if the riders heard him, because the man at the head responded not with speech, but with action. His right hand released his horse's reins, and went down to his sword. With one swift movement he drew it free, raised it high into the air. Its blade flashed, piercing in its brightness, and then came down hard and fast, slicing cleanly across Davi's unprotected neck. His head tipped back and a red spray arced through the warm air, splattering in neat droplets across the ground. He rocked slowly, back on his heels. Then he crumpled and fell, blood pooling about his head, eyes wide in shock. And then the brightness left them, and they took on the cold, dim hollowness of death.

Then came the screams. A chorus of voices raised in terror, and people were running, the horsemen among them like wolves upon sheep. Arrian didn't move, his feet rooted to the ground in sheer, terrified disbelief, eyes fixed on the red puddle growing beneath Davi's corpse. Another body fell close by, and there was more red, and one less cry.

His mother was beside him still, and now she jolted into action. 'Hide!' she screamed, eyes wide and wild. 'Hide, Arrian, now!' And she pushed him again, forcefully this time, so that he fell back fully into the ditch, and for a moment stars flashed across his vision as his head knocked hard into the ground. He tried to shake them away, blindly pushing himself upright but still aware of the screams, of the hooves, of the screech of iron blades cutting through the air.

His sight began to clear and he clawed his way back up the bank, tearing fistfuls of grass out in panic, desperate to know if his parents lived, if Morna did, if Gwyn did. He raised himself above the verge and devastation met him.

More had died and one was dying, a young woman, blood pouring from her mouth and crawling, crawling vainly to the place where Arrian lay. For a second her eyes met his own, blue and bright and terrified before, like Davi, the light left them and she fell forwards onto the dirt. He couldn't see Morna, or Gwyn. Then he caught sight of his mother and father, racing towards each other, arms outstretched in a desperate attempt to hold the other, their faces stricken with fear and flecked with blood. And then he saw the black hooves of a horse coming at his head, felt a brief and blinding pain as they struck, and then he lost himself in darkness.

CHAPTER III

The journey had been long, but easy. The weather had stayed fine since he'd left Dulmarsh, the road quiet and peaceful. He travelled alone but for the horse beneath him, and the solitude was welcome, gave him a chance to clear his mind in a way near impossible in the city.

'I'll almost be sad when we get there,' he said aloud. 'I wouldn't mind doing this sort of thing more often.' The horse answered with a dismissive snort, and he gave the reins a flick to let her know he was listening. 'I don't care what you say, Angharad. I'm having a nice time. Don't tell me you don't like a walk through the country as much as the next horse.'

He was a young man, fair-haired, his tunic emblazoned with the wide white cross of the order of the Knights Hospitaller. A double-edged sword hung from his belt and a shield loosely from his back, his armour light but strong. He looked about himself with eyes of emerald green, taking in the wide expanse of field, lone trees, the scent of grass under the hot sun. So entranced with his surroundings was he that he almost didn't notice the fallen body on the track ahead, and perhaps he wouldn't have, if Angharad hadn't whinnied her own surprise.

'Whoa, whoa,' he said, laying a gentle hand on her neck as she slowed to a standstill. 'What is it, girl? Someone's hurt?'

He dismounted and approached the figure, wary, recalling how bandits used such tricks to lure the unsuspecting traveller close. 'Hello?' he called. 'Are you alright?'

But the figure didn't answer, didn't stir, and as he drew closer he saw the blood pooled about their head, drying now, like they had lain like this for some time. Though he had seen little death in his short life, he recognised the dullness in the eyes, the silence, the stillness of a body not moved by breath. He knelt beside them, put his hand to his heart in a sign of respect, and leant down to inspect them.

It was a man of some years, poorly clothed in little more than tattered rags, his scalp shorn and his skin blemished by strange black marks. His expression, captured as it was in his dying moments, was surprised, shocked perhaps, like whatever it was that killed him had been swift and unexpected. And killed he had been, clear from the long, deep gash across his neck.

'Founder save you,' the knight murmured, rising to his feet and looking about himself. This was not the only body on the track. He counted four, five, six more, all of them slight, pale things with close-cropped hair and ragged dress. And judging by their pointed ears, each and every one of them were elves.

This perturbed him. He had little experience of elves but knew they rarely strayed outside their city of origin, held to their homes by trades and livelihoods passed down through generations. Likely this band of innocents had been taken by surprise, ambushed, robbed and killed by the bandits who plied their trade along this route. Though their purpose in travelling this way was beyond him.

Suddenly there came a sound to his right, and he span to face it, hand going to his sword lest the bandits still be close. A shape, wreathed in shadow, darted behind the back of a large oak, its light footsteps making the softest silken stirring as it vanished out of sight.

'Come forward!' the knight called, body instinctively poised and ready. 'Show yourself! Was it you who perpetrated this act? Come forward, I said!'

For a moment all was quiet, all still, and then, with slow and careful steps, the form appeared by the tree. Still bathed in shade, it was impossible to make its features out.

'Step into the light. If you mean no harm, then no harm shall come to you.'

It approached. Reached the edge of the tree's shadow and placed one foot into the sunlight, then another, until the light washed over it and its face was revealed.

It was another elf. A very young man, thin-framed and head shaved like the others. His eyes were wide and shining, and he shook like he was frightened. Sensing there was no danger here, the knight released his sword.

'Who are you?' he called, and waited for a response that didn't come. 'You've no need to be afraid. My name is Lorcan – Lorcan Harcourt. I'm a knight, a Hospitaller. I shan't hurt you.'

The elf came forwards again, a shambling, stumbling step, and collapsed onto his knees, the dust of the dirt road rising up around him as he fell. Lorcan went to go towards him but when the elf shied away in fear he slowed, and lowered himself until their levels met. The creature's face was streaked in blood, his head thinly gashed, and Lorcan felt a rising pity and an urge to aid.

'You're injured,' he said, moving slow for fear of scaring the other off. 'I can help. You don't need to fear me.'

Still kneeling, the elf leant forwards, dropped his head and shook it weakly. 'No,' he said, his voice quiet, shaking like leaves in a gale. 'Not you. Not one of them.'

'One of who? Whoever did this to you, I assure you, I'm not with them.'

The elf pushed himself upright a little and fixed Lorcan with a wide-eyed stare, less scared now, more... sad. 'They were knights too. Like you. Don't take me away.'

The poor thing, he looked heartbroken, drained. Likely he was confused, took any old fool in armour for a knight. 'I'm not here to take you away. The bandits round this area –'

'Not bandits. Knights.' The creature's voice rose a little, became harder, and his eyes flamed with a sudden anger. 'Bandits don't ride under a banner. I know what knights look like, I'm not stupid.'

It was true, a banner implied insignia, officiality, much like Lorcan's own order carried. But he could see no reason why such men would cut down a harmless group of unarmed elves so brutally.

'Whoever it was,' Lorcan assured him, 'I was no part of it. What's your name?'

The elf sat back, and his gaze fell to the ground, more out of exhaustion than purpose, it seemed. 'Arrian.' He sniffed. 'My name's Arrian.'

'Were these your people?' Lorcan asked, finally moving close, and settling when the young man didn't pull away. 'The dead?'

Arrian nodded, and his eyes moved towards the closest body, before he quickly turned away.

'What happened?'

'I don't know,' he moaned, putting his head in his hands. 'They came down the road, from back towards Mandeville. They attacked us. Something hit me, I'm not sure what. Maybe a horse, I don't know. I woke up and they were dead and the others were gone.'

'Others?'

'My parents. My friends. I don't know where they are.' He raised his head his eyes were glistening. 'I don't know where I am.'

'Did you come from Mandeville?' A nod in reply. 'Where were you headed?'

The elf shrugged and shook his head. 'Some were going to Fennering. We were going to Woodston. We were meant to be moving there.'

His eyes misted over like he was thinking of what might have been, and Lorcan sought to rouse him from such melancholy thoughts. 'Let me fix your head,' he said, rising to retrieve his pack from Angharad's side. 'I can stop the blood.'

Arrian didn't say anything as he took a bandage and approached, but when he got too close with his hands outstretched, the elf recoiled and backed away.

‘No. I’m fine.’

‘You’re not fine, you’re bleeding.’

‘I’m fine, I swear.’

But he wasn’t fine, knew he wasn’t, and he didn’t seem to have the strength of will to put up a fight. Lorcan crouched beside him and raised a rag to mop the worst of the blood off.

‘It’s ok,’ he said, gently as he could. ‘I’m trained in this. I’ll make it better.’

He wiped away the dried blood and applied the bandage, making the pressure as light as he could manage. The wound was bruising purple, dark and blotched, but it didn’t go deep, a lucky hit if he had indeed been caught by a horse’s hooves. The elf winced as it was applied, but stayed still, and when it was done he touched it with the tips of his pale fingers.

‘There we go,’ Lorcan said, sitting back. ‘Leave it on for a while; it’ll keep out the infection. You’ll mend.’

Arrian seemed faintly perplexed by the action, kept prodding it as though he wasn’t really sure it was there. His eyes met Lorcan’s and it wasn’t the sadness that was dominating now, nor pain, nor anger, but merely a slight surprise.

‘Is it ok?’ Lorcan asked. ‘Not too tight?’

‘No... it’s fine.’

‘What’s wrong?’

Arrian shuffled back a little, drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms round them. ‘Why are you doing this?’ he asked.

‘Doing what?’

‘I don’t know. Helping.’ He raised a shoulder in a half-shrug of misunderstanding. ‘I don’t have anything. I can’t give you anything back.’

‘Arrian...’ Lorcan went to give him a consoling nudge on the arm but withdrew it when he saw him flinch. ‘I don’t want anything. I’m just helping.’ He gestured to the symbol on his tunic in case the elf recognised it and understood his intention. ‘It’s my job.’

Lorcan wasn’t entirely sure how best to proceed. He couldn’t just leave the poor creature here, alone at the roadside, his honour dictated that. But nor could he really think how he could help when they had such little information to go on.

‘Perhaps it would be wise for you to travel with me to Fennering,’ he said. ‘The tracks head onwards, perhaps your parents could have been taken that way.’

‘What if they’re dead? The others are dead, what if they are too?’

And they may well be, Lorcan thought, turning to see the carnage around him. But whether they were or not, the young man would have to keep moving. He might as well do it with some hope.

‘If they’d been killed with the others then their bodies would be here with them,’ he said, with a tone of false authority. ‘How many were you travelling with?’

‘Seventeen. Me, these seven here, and the others.’

‘So that’s nine people missing? I think it’s unlikely they’re dead. Their bodies would be here, and they’re not. So I think it’s safe to assume they’re alive.’

Arrian looked even less convinced than Lorcan felt, but he played along, and nodded. ‘You think they might be at Fennering?’

‘I think that it would be the best place to look. You’d be safer there too. I could make some enquiries, if you want, find out if anyone knows of a group of elves brought through there.’

The elf looked up but didn’t answer right away. There was something in his eyes that Lorcan couldn’t quite place. A certain mistrust, he thought, guarded and wary, understandable of course, in light of the situation. But something else too, a glimmer of hope, a prayer that maybe, somehow, there was something they could do.

‘I don’t know,’ Arrian said eventually, looking away, his nervous fingers plucking at loose threads of fabric on his tunic.

‘I could take you back to Mandeville, but –’

‘No.’ His voice was suddenly firm, decisive. ‘I’m not going back there. There’s nothing left anyway.’ He pushed himself up and, leaning on his knees for support, began a slow, unsteady ascent to his feet. ‘I’ll go with you to Fennering. If it’s ok.’

‘Of course it’s ok.’ Lorcan smiled at him and it was very faintly, and very weakly, returned.

‘What about them?’ the elf said, gesturing to the fallen bodies about them. ‘I don’t just want to leave them here.’

‘No, nor me. Ordinarily I would want to give them a proper burial, but I’m afraid I don’t have the time or the tools to do that. We can lay them on the grass as least, where they’re less likely to be disturbed.’

Arrian nodded and made to move towards one, but Lorcan reached out to stop him going. ‘Maybe I should do it,’ he said. ‘You sit down for a moment. Gather your strength.’

Another nod, and he lowered himself back to ground as Lorcan took up the sombre task of moving the bodies. They were light and frail-feeling in his arms, malnourished and fragile. He laid them side by side along the verge, beneath the shade of the great oak, and he closed their eyes, murmuring a quiet prayer over each one. Arrian sat with his back turned towards them, but Lorcan saw his shoulders shake, heard a sniff and stifled cry.

‘It’s done,’ Lorcan said, returning to the elf. ‘You can take a little more time, if you wish.’

‘No.’ He shook his head and allowed himself to be helped to his feet. ‘I just want to go.’

‘Alright. Come on over here then, I’ll get you on the horse.’

‘On the horse? I can’t.’ His eyes widened. ‘I’ve never ridden a horse before.’

‘You’ll be fine. Come on. I’ll introduce you.’ Lorcan led him over, trying to keep his voice lighter now, trying to keep the elf’s mind more on the journey ahead than his present sorrow. He took the reins to turn the horse towards them. ‘Arrian, this is Angharad. She’s one of my most trusted companions, and one of the cleverest too. Angharad, meet Arrian. He’s going to be travelling with us to Fennering.’

The horse brayed softly as Arrian raised a tentative hand to stroke her on the neck.

‘Does she understand you?’ he said.

‘I think so. She always gives me this look when I’ve done something stupid, so she must have some idea of what’s going on. Now up you go.’

‘No, wait –’

But before the elf could utter any further protest, Lorcan had seized him under the arms and swung him into the saddle. Instinctively, Arrian clutched at the horse’s mane. ‘I don’t like it. I want to get off.’

‘You’ll get used to it. Come on, Ang.’ Lorcan gave her a pat to jolt her into action. ‘Let’s go.’

Chapter IV

The rope was rough between his hands and fraying, small brown fibres coming loose against his sweat-slicked palms. He wound it round his fingers, drawing in the length until he felt a tug and heard a strangled cry behind him.

‘Quiet down,’ Dunstan called, half-turning over his shoulder to fix the elf at the end of the rope with an iron glare. The elf glowered but dropped her eyes, directing her anger at the arid ground beneath her feet.

They had taken nine in all, and left seven dead bodies bleeding into the track, where they would no doubt lie until they were picked apart by crows and their bones kicked into the ditch. Nothing would be done, no burials would take place. Nobody cared about a few goblins.

There had been some resistance, to begin with, but a quick reminder of what had become of their companions put paid to that. Now they trudged, weary and heavy-footed, each bound by rope about their necks and hands. Some of the men had grumbled at their slowness, how it would be faster just to kill them, cut their throats and leave them at the roadside. But Ormand had assured them that the rewards would be worth it; elven slaves could fetch a high price in certain parts of the land, and servants for a lesser profit, particularly the young, whose strong backs and limbs guaranteed years of labour. And Ormand knew well that little ensured a man’s loyalty like the sight of gold pieces in the palm of his hand.

‘My Lord,’ Dunstan said, increasing his pace to ride up beside Ormand. He heard the elf behind him stumbling to keep up. ‘At this speed we shan’t make Fennering this side of nightfall. Where do you intend to rest?’

‘We do not rest, Dunstan. We travel until we reach the city.’ Ormand turned in his saddle to scan the following elves. ‘The sooner we get them sold, the better.’

‘My Lord, the forest is bandit country –’

‘There isn’t a bandit this side of Northall foolish enough to attack us.’ Ormand looked to his sergeant with a wry smile. ‘Are you worried, Dunstan? I thought the prospect of bandit lowlifes might rouse your spirits some.’

‘Not worried for myself, My Lord. Merely concerned that the goblins might see it as an opportunity to escape.’

‘Then keep a weather eye on them.’ He raised his voice and called over his shoulder. ‘You hear that, elves? Any attempt to escape and you’ll be ridden down and slaughtered. Dunstan, keep them at pace.’

‘My Lord.’ Dunstan inclined his head in acquiescence, and turned to rejoin the main party. The elf on his rope rose to a jog to match him, lest the fetter on her neck pull and chafe any more than it already had. She was an unusual looking creature, Dunstan thought, slowing a little so she wouldn’t fall. Shaven-headed, her bare scalp accentuating that strange point to her ears. A young thing, no longer a child but not far off, with strong shoulders and a courage some of the others lacked. She hadn’t cried as they were taken, had fought, but when the situation became hopeless she had refocused her energy into aiding her comrades. Even now Dunstan saw her touch a young man by the shoulder and mutter some low words of quiet comfort, her care and stoicism evident in her round, violet eyes.

Towards the rear of the group, side by side, walked Raiwen and Tevin Dale, their shoulders brushing on occasion, the only contact they’d been able to manage since they were taken. Their talk had been rare and stilted, not only because the soldiers pulled hard on the ropes if they heard anything, but because they feared the truth of what they had to discuss. Their eyes were red with recent tears, not for themselves, but rather for their son. In a

snatched moment of fleeting conversation, they had learnt from Gwyn what had become of him, struck by a horse, fallen out of sight, though whether he was dead or alive no one could tell them.

‘At least he isn’t here,’ Tevin had said in an effort to comfort his wife, but his tone told her he didn’t believe his own words.

‘But I *want* him here, Tevin. I want to know he’s alive, that he isn’t hurt, and on his own. If he was here then we’d at least know he was alright. We’d know he wasn’t dead.’ She didn’t want to but she couldn’t help imagining it, a terrible picture of him lying in the ditch, dying, his head bleeding out until his heart stopped beating. He would be lost, forever, and she would never have the chance to hold him again, to tell him how much he meant to her, just to look into his beautiful blue eyes for a moment longer. ‘We were meant to keep him safe, Tev.’

Her husband had tried to take her hand but the bindings made it hard, so instead he brushed her fingers with his own and said her name.

‘Raiwen,’ he sighed. ‘I’m scared too. I wish there was some way for us to know what’s become of him, if he’s ok, but for the moment there’s nothing we can do. Arrian isn’t a child anymore. We couldn’t keep him safe forever.’

‘But he’s *our* child!’ she cried, too loud, and the horsemen leading them dragged on their ropes so that they stumbled forwards, tied hands out to catch themselves from falling. She lowered her voice, not through choice, but simply because the strength was no longer in her. ‘He’s my little boy.’

As the sun sank slowly into the west, their shoulders and their spirits fell with it, feet sore and empty stomachs groaning. The evening was still warm but it wouldn’t last; even at this time of year when the days were long, the moon brought a chill that would hold until daybreak.

It didn’t matter when the sun rose. This night would go on forever.

Chapter V

Angharad hadn't met many elves before, and had certainly never carried one. This one seemed pleasant enough. He panicked a bit sometimes on rough terrain, and held onto her mane a little too hard, but he was very light and that made a welcome change.

All things considered, Arrian wasn't feeling as bad as he might have done. He tried consciously not to dwell on the absence of his parents, because whenever he did it felt like an anvil was being pushed onto his chest. Out here in the wild though, on the back of a horse, heading towards Fennering with purpose and a friendly human at his side, he felt exhilarated. If it'd been under any other circumstance he might even have said he was happy.

Lorcan was a funny creature. He seemed genuine in his kindness, but altogether out of touch with common thinking, had no concept of the age-old hierarchy that governed the coexistence of humans and elves. He had explained that he had been brought up in relative isolation, on an estate far out into the reaches of rural Eastwick, where he lived with his parents as an only child. They had had elven servants but his mother and father had always maintained a polite and formal relationship with them. Never had he really come into contact with the lesser regarded city elves, the smiths and masons that made up Arrian's own people, as their food and goods had always been transported in from more populated areas. Upon coming of age and joining the order of the Knights Hospitaller, he had trained with them in seclusion as was traditional, and so again had had no meetings with anyone other than his contemporaries. Since then – well, it had really been very little time since his training completed, so his experience of the world was still limited. Arrian hoped it could remain that way, that the views of the world would not warp his own. He had never known a human to be so kind. He didn't even know they could have a sense of humour.

'Have you been to Fennering before?' Lorcan asked, guiding Angharad around a pothole with one hand on the reins.

'Never left Mandeville before today. My brother and sister are up in Woodston though, just beyond it.'

Lorcan nodded. 'I know Woodston. Nice place.' Then he shrugged. 'If things were so bad in Mandeville, why didn't you leave before this?'

'I don't know.' Arrian shrugged back but he did know, really, even if right now it felt like they'd have been better off never having left in the first place. 'It's got worse, recently, a lot worse than it had been. And it's a risk, isn't it?'

'A risk?'

'Yeah. It's hard getting messages from Mandeville to Woodston. We didn't know if there'd be any work for us there, if Woodston could even cope with more of us arriving. A lot have gone before us. And we couldn't just rely on my brother and sister to help us out, that wouldn't be fair.'

'I see.' Lorcan nodded but his expression said he didn't really see at all. 'What are they called? Your brother and sister.'

'My brother's called Amyas, and my sister's Iona.'

Lorcan laughed a little and Arrian shot him a glare. 'What are you laughing at?' he said, and there was sharpness to his tone but Lorcan only chuckled again and threw him an apologetic smile.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I've just never heard names like that before. Look, I'm not making fun. They're nice. Iona's a pretty name.'

Arrian half-thought he should still be insulted, but the good-humoured honesty of the knight made it impossible to stay annoyed. Lorcan didn't say anything else though, and Arrian feared he'd put him off, so he went to engage him in a new conversation.

‘So, you’re a... Hospitaller?’ he tried, gripping a little harder onto Angharad’s mane as they crossed a rocky patch of ground. ‘What does that mean?’

‘Well the Hospitallers are an order of knights,’ Lorcan answered, simultaneously flipping the top of his pack open and rifling about inside. ‘The difference between us and other orders though, is that we ascribe to the Founder’s principle that while war is a necessary evil, we can rectify some of the damage done through instruction of healing.’ He pulled something from the pack and began polishing it on his sleeve. ‘So basically, we’re trained in combat, but also in... nursing, essentially.’

‘You’re like a war-nurse?’

‘Yes, I suppose I am like a... war-nurse. Do you want an apple?’ He held out the polished item.

‘An apple?’ Arrian repeated, staring at it in surprise.

‘Have you never seen an apple before?’

‘Of course I’ve seen an apple before.’ In truth he was just taken aback by the gesture; the whole thing was quite new to him. ‘I’m ok though. Thanks.’

‘Well just wait ‘til you see this,’ Lorcan said, reaching back into his pack, his face suddenly lighting up with excitement. ‘I bought one of these exotic fruits, from across the sea. It’s wonderful, all long and yellow, like nothing you’ve ever seen. I believe it’s called a *bananana*.’

‘A bananana?’

‘I think that’s what he said. Let me just find it...’ He delved deeper, and when he was up to his elbow his face suddenly changed, first to surprise, then to confusion, and then to disgust. ‘Oh, no. Founder’s eyes, I think it’s exploded. Maybe it was softer than I thought.’ And then he drew his hand up and out of the pack, clutching a sorry-looking limp skin of yellow and black, fingers coated in an unsavoury goo the colour of old potato. ‘Urgh. Forget the bananana...’

Arrian snorted with laughter, surprised that he could be so cheered on such a day, as Lorcan attempted to flick the ooze from his hand, and then wiped the remains on his tunic. Arrian shook his head and, still smiling, turned ahead to see a solitary crow swooping across their path.

The track had become winding as the fields had grown sparse and the trees more frequent. Now oaks and birches towered high above their heads, their leafy, massing canopies obscuring the mantling evening sky, the low sun to the west almost lost from view entirely. Lorcan had assured Arrian that they could reach Fennering by evening tomorrow at a steady pace with a few hours rest, but now, surrounded by shadows and twisted branches, he glanced warily about himself and urged Angharad on.

‘We don’t want to be caught in the forest at nightfall,’ he said, one hand still on the reins and the other instinctively moving to the hilt of his sword. ‘There’s more than crows inhabit these trees.’

‘Like what?’ Arrian asked, furtively casting his eyes between the branches. ‘Wolves?’

‘Wolves. And worse.’

‘What do you mean, worse?’

‘I mean...’ Lorcan gave a last look to the rear and then seemed to shrug the anxiety off. ‘Just keep your eyes open. Tell me if you see anything unusual.’

They continued down the road in silence for a time, the quiet only broken by the occasional cry of a bird or the rustling of leaves in the light breeze. Arrian thought of his parents, of his friends, of Morna. Every time they rounded a corner he feared seeing another body on the track, thought of them going to it, turning it over, recognising the face, and he couldn’t help wondering how he would react. It was true what Lorcan said; if their bodies

hadn't been with the others then it followed that they were still alive. The thought settled his mind somewhat, but then if they were alive, what had become of them? Captured by those dark horsemen who rode under a banner – Founder knew what kind of atrocities they would be forced to suffer. He had heard the tales, knew there were those who were not above buying and selling elves as slaves. They could be moved anywhere, even across the water. The thought weighed heavy on his mind, but he sought to banish it. There was nothing he could do until they arrived at Fennering, and at least he knew that with Lorcan here too, his chances of finding them were far better than they were alone.

Perhaps Lorcan sensed his train of thought because, as they moved deeper into the woods, he said softly, 'I will help you look for your family, you know. Once we're in Fennering. I have some work I need to attend to, but... I will help. If you want me to.'

Arrian looked down at him, met his eye, and smiled. 'Thank you,' he said, nodding. 'I'd like that.'

There was a sudden rustling from a little way ahead, and they instinctively turned to locate the source of the noise. For a moment all was still, until a dark figure stepped lightly from the shadows to the path. Immediately Lorcan gripped Angharad's reins to bring her to a halting standstill, and Arrian held her mane as though it might afford him some protection.

'Who goes there?' Lorcan called, shielding his eyes in an effort to adjust them to the gloom, to bring the figure into focus. 'Are you friend? Or foe?'

The person moved to the centre of the track and stayed silent for a short while, watching. It was a man, judging by his height and the width of his shoulders, but his face was enrobed in a black shroud, leaving only his eyes visible. At his side hung a short but wicked-looking blade.

'Friend or foe?' the form repeated, his deep, rasping voice confirming that it was indeed a man. 'That depends. Friends we can be, if you give up your goods quietly, without a fight. If you don't...' He laughed, a harsh, grating sound. 'You do not want us as foes, sir.'

'Us?' Lorcan said, though no sooner had the word left his lips than familiar rustling sounded behind them, and they turned to see two more black-clad faceless figures step out onto the road at the rear, one armed with a sword, the other a dagger, long and cruelly sharp.

'Aye. *Us*,' the front figure said, drawing his blade before him. 'Lay your packs down quietly and no harm will come to you. Your weapons too. What say you?'

'Arrian,' Lorcan said, still facing ahead and speaking so quietly his voice was barely audible above the breeze. 'Pull on Angharad's left rein, turn her round. We charge the two behind. Get rid of the weaker pair and take the big one on together.'

'But I don't have anything, I don't know how to –'

'No time to argue, Arrian, just do as I say. I can't afford to lose the contents of this pack. On three. One.'

'Wait, Lorcan –'

'Two.'

'I don't know what to do –'

'Three!'

And with a shout, Lorcan drew his sword and turned, began racing towards the pair behind them. Without stopping to think, Arrian followed suit, dragging on the left rein so that the horse beneath him turned, knocking his heels against her flanks as she set off at a gallop towards them. He saw the figures brace their stance, prepare their weapons, and heard the man at the front call to his comrades.

'Kill them!'

With his sword above his head Lorcan met the rogue on the left, and there was a metallic cry as their weapons clashed. Arrian moved the horse in the direction of the right

figure, and saw his eyes widen in shock as they rode towards him, before he fell hard onto the dirt and scrambled backwards. Arrian thought for a moment they might trample him, but just before they did, Angharad bucked and whinnied and, unused to such motions, Arrian found himself flung from the saddle, landing on the track opposite the foe.

Lorcan had forced his enemy down to the floor and now he brought the hilt of his sword smashing down upon their head, and the dark-clad form went limp, and collapsed. Not a moment too soon Lorcan turned to meet the leader of the trio, parrying the man's blade with his own, the sharp point knocked from on course to his heart and instead glancing harmlessly into the air.

Arrian scrambled to his feet in unison with the man across from him. The foe had dropped his weapon and now turned to look about for it. Seizing the opportunity, Arrian ran at him, reached him as the man took a loose grip of his blade and turned back. Acting on instinct, Arrian kicked at him, aiming his foot so that it came into hard contact with his crotch. The dagger was dropped and there was a pained grunt, but the man didn't reel away in agony as Arrian had expected, and for an instant he stood, surprised, giving the rogue a chance to retaliate. He seized Arrian by the shoulders and pushed him roughly to the ground, and his eyes were fiery and his grip vicious.

'That won't work on me, *elf*,' they said, and the voice, through gruff, was feminine, and the hands on his shoulders small. There wasn't time to dwell on it though – he hauled himself backwards, clutching handfuls of dirt as he went. The bandit, female or no, was strong and now she was reaching for her weapon again, and Arrian knew he would have to act fast if he were to survive. All he had was a fistful of dust so he threw it, catching her in the eyes and she fell back, yelling, her hands going to her face.

'Lorcan!' he cried, turning to see the knight finishing off his own fight. The enemy was winded but still held his blade ready, and now Lorcan plunged his own through the man's chest. He drove it home, and with a hideous screech it slid between the ribs and out of the back. The man gurgled, bloody drips beginning to seep through the shroud on his face, and as Lorcan prized the blade free he bent double, lifeblood leaking onto the floor at his feet. Without pause, Lorcan turned to answer Arrian's shout, saw the woman rubbing dirt from her vision and charged her, slamming the sword-hilt into the side of her head. Her eyes widened for a moment, red with dirt and anger, and then they dulled, and closed, and she toppled sideways onto the path, unconscious. They heard a final gasp, turned to see the ringleader collapse dead at their feet, a small red puddle growing beneath his chest, and sinking into the ground.

Arrian fell back onto the road, panting hard. Lorcan dropped his sword, drained, but unharmed. The three motionless bodies lay about them, still dark, still obscured, but for now at least, no danger.

'Are they... dead?' Arrian gasped, adrenaline flowing through his veins, still on edge, ready to spring up again if necessary.

'This one is,' Lorcan answered, leaning forwards to catch his breath. 'As for these two... I don't think so.' His shoulders were heaving. 'Maybe... Maybe it would be best to kill them, but... I can't, not when they're defenceless. Leave them.' He raised himself up with his hands on his hips and drew in a deep, long breath of air. 'Are you alright?'

'I think so. Just... ' Arrian shook himself off and tried to gather his thoughts. 'I can't believe that happened.'

Lorcan held out a hand and Arrian took hold of it, was helped to his feet.

'You did well,' the knight panted, inspecting the limp figure of the female. 'Good call, going for the crotch. Shame it was a woman.'

They looked at each other and, still in shock, scarcely able to believe he was alive, Arrian laughed, and Lorcan returned it, a relieved, exhausted laugh made of pure happiness to be alive.

‘Does that happen to you a lot?’ Arrian said, legs shaking beneath him.

‘Not at all,’ Lorcan grinned, and moved to retrieve Angharad from the side of the road where she had taken refuge. ‘Baptism by fire, I’m afraid. Sorry.’

They mastered their breathing and Lorcan helped Arrian back onto the horse, took a hold of the reins and went to lead her on.

‘I know we could do with a rest,’ Lorcan said, voice full of apology. ‘But these might not be the only bandits in the forest.’ He gestured to the narrow, open path before them. ‘If we go fast we can be out of the woodlands soon. Travel through the night. I don’t think we should stop here, not when we could reach Fennering by noon tomorrow. What do you say?’

The adrenaline was still pumping but Arrian knew it would soon wear, and all he’d want to do was sleep. The day had been long, longer than any other, not just physically, but emotionally too. He was tired with travel, fearful for his parents, and the shock of loss and danger took its toll on the body. But he trusted Lorcan, knew that the knight was more accustomed to this than he, and if going all night was their best option than that’s what they would do.

‘Alright,’ he said, nodding and gathering himself together. ‘Let’s go on. Better we get there sooner, isn’t it?’

Lorcan smiled and inclined his head. ‘My thoughts exactly.’ He went to guide Angharad onwards, but just before he did, he paused, went back to the body of the woman, picked up her dagger, and brought it back. ‘Here,’ he said, holding it out. ‘You might need this. I hope you won’t, but you never know.’

Arrian took it and tucked it into his belt, shifting the blade so that it faced away from his body. ‘With you,’ he said, gripping the reins in front of him, ‘I think I might need it a lot more than I’d like.’

And Lorcan laughed, and spurred Angharad on, and they took up their journey to Fennering once more, beneath the setting sun and the shadows of the dark, towering trees.

Coming Soon

Order of Night
Book II of the Exodus Saga