

The One Way Forward

Wil Clayton

Long Shadows on a Wide Plain series

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Thank you,

Wil Clayton

Chapter 1

“After we rest, can I ride?” asked Calum looking up at the mound of hair and flesh that was his escort.

“Did you bring a horse with you?” asked Roland, flatly, as he always did.

“No.”

“Then you walk.”

Silence descended on the pair, again.

The draught horse that Roland used as his mount lumbered down the dirt track. Calum, small in its shadow, walked with a hurried pace trying to keep at its side, his legs had started to stiffen from hours of travel. He wondered, not for the first time, whether his body would carry him through the day.

“Will it be soon?” asked Calum.

“What?”

“The rest.”

There was a moment of silence.

“We can take a short break at the trees,” said Roland, “but we cannot stay long.”

Calum looked up the dirt road, far in the distance on a lump of dirt which the inhabitants of the plains would call a hill sat three lone trees that had somehow been spared from the farmer’s relentless hunger for land.

“That’s not on the road.”

“We leave the road ahead and then cut across these fields. There’s a stream beyond that we follow to The Grey Wash,” explained Roland and then added, “no more questions.”

Calum had not known Roland for long but knew that it was the end of the matter. Calum looked for something to occupy his young mind and divert his attention from the dull burning in his muscles.

The lands of the western plains were vast and empty. A patchwork made of the soft oranges of grain crops and the dark greens of the pastures. The wheat that grew on either side of the road swayed in the soft breeze that swept across land. The colours were dotted by the occasional splotch of dark brown where a farmer had thrown up a house, shack or stables.

Calum looked behind, the crossroads where he had met Roland in the half light of dawn had vanished and all that he could see now was a long, straight dirt road that they had travelled all morning.

Calum cursed himself for not having taken a horse from the stables. He had been so focused on getting out of the wayhouse without being noticed that the thought had not occurred to him. It was for the best, he decided, a trip to the stables at that time of morning would have raised the suspicion of the watchmen who had patrolled the yard.

Also, how would he have taken the beast through the tight shrub behind the wayhouse that he used to mask his escape. The beams of the guards men lanterns had almost caught Calum as he had pushed through the brush trying to escape taking a horse as well would have been the end of his adventure right there.

Roland simply did not realise how difficult Calum's escape had been. Calum knew he could explain it to Roland at the trees while they rested, once Roland understood he would certainly let Calum ride the horse for the afternoon.

The thought brought a smile to Calum's face and the burning in his thighs became bearable.

The pair travelled further down the road until Roland's horse cut to the left, heading down a small pathway made by the men who worked the fields. The path was decorated with clumps of weeds that broke through the soil, it had been a few months since the fields had been sown and there had been little traffic to stomp the weeds back. The ground became increasing loose under foot and Calum struggled even more to keep up with the rider as his boots lost their footing in the loose ground.

Roland was first to reach the trees, Calum joined him a short while after. When he arrived Roland had already dismounted and was leaning against a tree, draped in his bearskin cloak as he stared out across the fields.

"You have a few minutes to catch your breath and eat," said Roland.

The sun was reaching its zenith as Calum rummaged through his bag for the piece of bread that he had taken from the wayhouse kitchen.

"I was thinking about the horse while we were crossing the field," said Calum before taking a mouthful.

Roland turned his gaze to the boy.

“It was very difficult to get out of the wayhouse without being noticed but I managed to do it,” munched Calum, “getting a horse though would have been impossible with the watchmen posted around the stables. There was absolutely no way for me to take a horse.”

Calum stopped and studied Roland, waiting for a response, but none came.

“So, I was hoping that you would understand my circumstances and seeing how tired my legs are you would allow me to ride on your horse for the afternoon?” Calum smiled warmly.

Roland turned back to the look at the plains.

“Eat your bread and rest your legs.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Eat your bread and rest your legs.”

The emptiness of the statement was what infuriated Calum the most, the audacity that he would simply ignore a simple question.

“It was a simple question,” said Calum hiding the anger that was building in him.

Roland continued to ignore him.

“Do you think you can simply ignore a simple request? You could offer a simple answer to a simple question?”

Roland continued to study the gentle slope of the plains in the distance.

Calum hated being ignored. No one dared to ignore him in the castle, his father would not stand for such arrogance but his father was not here to fight his battle. On top of a hill, in the middle of nowhere, stood a brute with the strength of seven and a boy of fifteen with sore legs.

Calum’s anger gave way quickly to a feeling of dread.

“This was a mistake, wasn’t it?” he said to himself.

“Perhaps,” replied Roland.

“Take me back to my father, then.”

“Very well and then you will give me what I am owed.”

“What?”

“The land you promised as payment is still due. I have risked much to help you and I demand payment.”

“It was a half day ride,” yelled Calum.

“My time is valuable.”

The situation laid itself out in front of Calum. The humiliation as he approached his father, forced to admit to all his plan to escape The First Kingdom and abandon his station, but not only that, he had also given away his only land holding to a wanderer from another land. But what else was there to do? Move forward with a man who seemed to be delighting in his misery?

“It’s time we go,” interrupted Roland, “which way are we headed?”

Calum stood, quietly, his mind racing as Roland found his horse.

Fur whipped through the air as Roland swung his huge legs up and over the mount, his cloak catching on the horse’s hindquarters. Roland took longer than needed to straighten the cloak and then wrapped himself in it, fully, as though in defiance of the strong heat of the summer sun that washed over the land.

“Well?”

The voice cut through Calum confused thoughts.

“This isn’t fair, you’re making this hard for me so you can get your land sooner.”

Roland sighed as the boy’s eyes became wet.

“Come, I’ll take you back to your father.”

“No,” yelled Calum as he wiped at the tears that had started to gather, “I am paying for you to take me to the White Spire, so you are going to take me there.”

“Then we had best get moving,” replied Roland without a moment of hesitation and kicked his mount forward and the beast started to lumber down the hill.

Calum shook himself, stunned by but proud of the surge of defiance that had taken him from somewhere inside, then he realised he was alone on the hill. He scrambled to gather his discarded bag and ran after the horse that had already descended down the other side of the hill.

Thoughts were racing with doubt, anger, sadness and panic. They were too quick to grab at and as soon as one came it was pushed aside by another. Though one thing was true within the whirlpool of anxiety. The only path left for him now was the one in front.

Ahead of the pair, a corridor of trees marched across the plain, it was the river Roland had promised. The deep green of the leaves looked dense and cool against the orange of the fields.

The two continued on and soon the horse had passed through the tree line and splashed into the water beyond.

The stream, only a few yards wide, ran swift and shallow across the smooth, grey stone of the river bed. The world beneath the trees were dark and grey covered almost fully by the branches and leaves above.

Roland swung off the horse and lowered himself into the stream.

“If they send hounds after you this will hold them back,” said Roland as he started down the stream.

Calum stepped into the water, cautiously, and felt the tug of the soft current against his boot. He steadied himself against the flow and followed after Roland.

The rocks were solid underneath, though slightly slick. His boots clung firm to them with their rough finish and for the first time Calum felt prepared for the journey and cheered to himself in triumph. He had taken his finest boots from his closet before leaving his home of Kabrace, the boots a gift from his mother when he had started his military training a few years earlier.

The river was a marvel to Calum. The water ran clear like the water from the deep wells in the castle. It was much more beautiful than the flows of the King's Way which ran through Kabrace that was always thick with the brown muck of the Northern Lands.

Calum took a breath of the cool, moist air and realised the maddening thoughts that had exhausted him just moments earlier had vanished, subdued by the rushing sounds of the water that cooled his feet and playfully tugged at his feet.

"Where are we headed now?" asked Calum.

"There is a wayhouse we can reach by dusk, off the river, though it will add a league to our journey," said Roland, "or we can hold to the river and put another league between us and your men though we will need to camp by the river. Which would suit?"

"I have camped in the wilds with the finest rangers, they trained me extensively in hunting and woodsmanship," said Calum defiantly feeling as though Roland was trying to insult him.

"Then we will hold to the river, how long do you need to hunt?"

"How is the game in this area?" asked Calum his voice had regained the authority he usual spoke with to the servants at home.

"Easy and slow. The farmers have claimed the rest of the land as theirs, so there are plenty of small animals trapped along the river. You will likely trip over a rabbit during your hunt."

"Then an hour will be enough."

"Good."

The journey continued downstream until Roland announced it was time to make camp.

Calum dug through his bag for some rope and then disappear into the shrub. He returned not long after, triumphant, holding a dead hare. Its neck had been snapped clean and quick by his own hands. By that time, Roland had built a small fire while Calum was away and now Roland sat away from it watching the river, still wrapped in his cloak.

"Do you want some?" laughed Calum still high from the victory of the hunt, "there's enough for both of us,"

"No, you eat it. You'll need it."

Calum fished around for the knife in his bag before producing a sheathed blade.

“I wasn’t good at skinning,” started Calum, “my brother Damon could make a few cuts here and there and then rip the skin off with a single motion.”

Calum started to hack at the animal as the sun went down, the fire creating a halo of light around them. Eventually, Calum produced a butchered carcass with tacks of fur still clinging to the places that were too hard to get at. With another flick of the blade, the animal was gutted, the organs spilt out across to the ground. Calum used his water bladder to wash the gore from the meat, then skewered the hare on a stick and placed it over the fire.

The tattered remains of the animal’s hide sent a thick, choking smoke into the air which caused Calum to cough while the meat began to brown.

“Feels good to hunt your own meal,” Roland’s voice cut through the night from beyond the light of fire.

Calum was startled, this was the first time Roland had started a conversation.

“It does,” said Calum with face a light with a wide smile.

Calum listened to the sounds of the stream for a while.

“It’s been a strange day,” he sighed.

“If your lucky, there are stranger ones to come.”

“Did you think I would make it to the end of the day?” asked Calum and immediately wondered why he had not asked that very question to himself before leaving his bed that morning.

“As a prince I know you’ve come accustomed to every man and woman thinking on you,” said Roland looking into the darkness, “but beyond the walls of The First Keep very few man care about the fate of Prince Calum and when we reach the forest, even less.”

“That’s what I want,” said Calum, “my father cannot reach me in the Spire.”

“I wouldn’t fear your father’s reach. His enemies are the ones I would watch for,”

“My father has no enemies, we live in peaceful time. The Saquaari keep our enemies at bay.”

Roland shuffled in the darkness.

“They teach royals strangely these days,” sighed Roland, “lessons on how to hunt game in the woods and evade the guards in the shadows but then whispers fantasies of peace in their ears. Most surprising is you believe it.”

“No war has come to The First Kingdom since the pact. Peace is ours now and my people will not be giving it up easily.”

“What is your father’s name among the nobles that chatter in the halls?”

Calum paused for a moment.

“King Wren the Old.”

“And how do you think a man of just thirty five years is given such a name?”

Calum sat quietly.

“A title, a joke and a warning all in one. The nobles of the First Kingdom have always been as fickle with their kings as they have been with their dogs, a pact will not change that,” said Roland shaking his head, **“your father may have had a chance at a real peace handed to him by your Grandfather but he threw it away out of either arrogance or ignorance, only he knows that. All I know is the peace your Grandfather died for will not last and the fault lies firmly at the feet of King Wren.”**

Calum sat in the firelight, his face neutral, his mind working. The things Roland said had a treacherous truth to them that Calum had considered himself from time to time, but he always dismissed such thoughts because he knew better than that.

His father held the authority of the western realms. His mother sat beside him with the authority of the east. And his brother Damon sat before them as the first Low King with both lands of the Kaborn at his back.

It was only the commoners who talked of Damon’s low blood but the men of power saw and respected only the Blood the Ka and that royal blood was just as strong in Damon’s veins as any other who had worn the stone crown before.

Damon would take that crown when Father went to his grave many years from now. These were the real truths that Calum knew and truths a wanderer like Roland could never know.

“The kingdom is stronger than you can know and it is united behind my father,” said Calum, firmly as he returned to the the world of the camp fire.

“As you say,” replied Roland.

Calum ate the remains of his prey and then felt the fatigue take him. He pushed dirt over the fire, the night air was enough to keep him warm and Roland did not seem to be making us of the flames. Calum then took up his thin travelling cloak, wrapped himself in it, found a comfortable spot between the buttress roots of a tree and let the exhaustion of the day take him.

Chapter 2

The dream came again.

Calum stood in front of the silver mirror. The world was empty and black around it but somehow his face was lit in the darkness. His thin, red-brown hair groomed neatly, the thin wisps of the hair made thick stains by fresh oil that caused it to glisten and stick to his head,

his bronze skin cleaned and scrubbed with a hint of red that came after a scolding bath. The sweet perfume, imported from the Heartland, huge in the air, so dense it overpowered his senses.

Calum wore a white shirt of ridiculous pomp, frills and ruffs exploded from wherever it could find a gap in the blue vest that bound his body. Frills from the neck, the shoulders, the belly seemed to grow and reach out into the darkness.

Over the top of his left shoulder hung a robe of mismatched colours, purple, green, yellow, pink and so many others, stitched together with golden threads that sparkled in an unseen light.

The face in the mirror stared back at him, a mockery of his own. The left eye sat slightly lower than it should, the right eye slightly higher. His narrow nose stretched longer than it was and slightly crooked at the end, his large dark lips sagged just slightly on the left.

The vision, no longer shocked his sleeping mind or caused his distant, physical body to thrash as it once did. This was a dream he had come to know and a dream was all it was.

Knocks came at the heavy wooden door as the empty world became a room. The mirror reflected the room and nothing more, his perverse reflection gone. He turned. Slowly. Time was always slow here.

The door opened upon the court of The First Throne, a small stone pillar which only came to a grown man's knee, sat in the centre of the room atop the circular rise. Before it stood a squat man, muscles bulge from underneath his grey regal dress that seemed to absorb the light around it. The muscles pulsed under the cloth with a heartbeat of their own, threatening to burst the seams and leave the king naked to his court. The stone crown sat upon his head, a simple ring of marble.

The king beckoned Calum forward, as he always did, and Calum obeyed.

The room was crowded with nobles dressed in the same ridiculous clothes as Calum. The fabrics of the woman's dresses spilt down and consumed the small children that struggled to escape from beneath. The nobles were frozen in mid motion, some chattered, merrily, other whispered, treacherously, all with painted faces, their poses and makeup exuded life but their eyes were dead and unseeing.

Calum walked towards the king who stood in front of the throne. This was the part he had always hated and still did. When the dreams had first come, Calum had felt nothing but a disgust that pulled at the pit of his stomach as he stepped into the room but since his twelfth year a new emotion had come the sense of excitement and anticipation that effected him as deeply as the disgust.

Calum's hand moved to the cold, stone handle of the blade he had tucked into his belt, under his patchwork robe. He had put it there, he did not know when, he did not know why, but it had been his hand that put it there.

He did not rush, there was no need to rush, the nobles were blind and the king was unaware. The tension of the moment built within in him, slowly, his breath quickened, his heart raced.

Now, he was next to the man with the stone crown and in flurry of passion Calum drew his blade and stabbed. The warm blood ran down the hilt of the blade, his hands were bathed and his trousers became spoilt as the thick liquid splattered against the fabric, the blood slowly seeped through to the skin and caused the silk to stick warm and wet against his leg.

The eyes in front of Calum were wide and white with shock, tears stained the cheeks. Calum stared into the eyes as he twisted the knife, enjoying the grown of pain that came, not from the man but from somewhere within his own head. The blood continued down the side of the rise and on to the polished floor of the throne room.

Blinking, Calum woke from his sleep and took a few breaths to steady himself. The dream was gone and the dawn was breaking from between the tree trunks making the world golden.

Calum looked down, the front his pants stained from the dream as they always were. He stuck his head up from behind the root that he had cradled him in the night before and looked around. Beyond the black remains of the campfire sat Roland still wrapped in his bearskin cloak still watching the river.

"I am going to wash in the river," said Calum quietly.

Roland nodded in response but did not turn as Calum slinked away not wanting Roland to see him. Calum always felt ashamed when he woke from the dream.

It was his eighth year when the vision came for the first time. He awoke, upright, in his bed screaming at the dark room, so deeply moved he could not settle his mind again. The king's dead eyes watched him from the dark corners of the bed chamber. Calum jumped from his bed to light every candle in the room to chase the spectre from the place but as the years passed, and dream persisted, he grew not to fear the dead king and then, after a few more years, he grew to enjoy the man's end.

That was what shamed Calum the most, what it said about him in his darker moments that was why he had to be away from his home and why he had to find a new life in a distant land.

Calum returned to the camp dressed in his still drying clothes.

"I'm ready to leave," said Calum collecting his belongings.

"Good, we hold to the river for two more days. It will take us directly into Lay'tol."

It was exactly what Calum needed to hear to clear the darkness the dream left in its wake. He enjoyed the river and did not want to see the burning fields and their uneven paths again. The walls of confidence Calum had constructed in his mind while plotting his escape were starting to rebuild themselves after the battering of the doubts they had taken the day before.

Calum looked at his escort with fresh eyes. Roland, though distant, seemed able and willing enough to complete the journey. Calum had enjoyed the gamy taste of his half skinned hare and his legs sung now with the song of achievement rather than desperate struggle.

Soon, he would see the ancient forests of Lay'tol and then the mystical lands of Dunway, beyond. He started to feel like himself again and the strange, cowardly creature he had become yesterday slain by his usual optimism and determination.

The two left the dead campfire behind and the morning passed without a word exchanged, but as the sun rose to the middle of sky Calum, tired of the silence, decided he would engage Roland in conversation.

“Do you have a name for your horse?” asked Calum.

“You do not name a horse,” he replied, “an animal you need to summon, like a dog, has a name but even then it is for the animal not the master.”

“Each of my horses have a name. I have six in total.”

“Horses are easily lost or stolen when you don't have a royal stable to hold them in,” said Roland, “this is the fourth horse I have purchased this summer. I got this one only recently in Kabrace when I met with you.”

“What happened to your last horse?” asked Calum with a morbid curiosity.

“I was taking the off roads of the Northern Burrows, the tracks made by the smugglers and slavers from Gart...”

“Why not use the highways?” interrupted Calum, “my father spent a lot of gold on the m.”

“I do not like to travel the known roads in the Northern Lands,” said Roland simply and then continued his story, “the off roads are just dirt and rocks piled up and then smoothed to let light carts through, they're not braced like your father's roads. So, by the nature of things, one collapsed out from underneath me while I was mounted.

“The horse tried desperately to find its footing but with my weight on top off it there was nothing that could be done and we both tumbled into the pass below. I was thrown a good dozen feet from my mount, when I recovered I found the horse thrashing, broken in the dirt.

“The beast was desperate, kicking into air making it a danger to approach but I could not leave it that way. I made my way through the flurry of hooves, collecting a few to the gut and

ribs as I went but I was able to get to its throat and slice. I held it firm as the blood spilt across the dirt and after a few moments the horse fell silent.

“Now another carries me and who knows for how long. This is the way of things outside the walls of your city. Naming it, or any other beast that serves me, would be a waste.”

“I suppose your right,” said Calum thoughtfully, “when your name was sung in the courtyards at home, I do not believe your horse was mentioned once.”

“My name is as worthless as any other,” said Roland dismissively, “a name sung by men who cower behind stone walls and listened to by fools who know nothing of what I have done. The true men who walk the land do not care what my name is nor who I am and that is the way it should be.”

“My people do not cower behind walls,” snapped Calum.

“As you say.”

“My First Council says the name is most important part of a man,” said Calum trying to continue the conversation, “without a name we are nothing but beasts. Once we are named, we are remember, our actions for ill or good are recorded and we are accountable for them. As a prince I had to be very careful with my name.”

“Your councilman makes the mistake of thinking men can be anything more than beasts, with a name or without. Out here you see the truth of it, your actions, your name, you, are irrelevant when all is done.”

“I am not irrelevant,” scoured Calum as the rest of Roland’s words became lost to him.

“You are quick to anger when face with simple truths, like the rest of your people,” rebuked Roland, “this is why I prefer silence from the Kaborn.”

“Then have your damn silence,” shouted Calum having enough of the insults of his companion seemed to be filled with, “lead the way like I am paying you to do.”

Roland did not respond and this made Calum even more furious but Calum had nothing more to do then chew on the inside of his cheek. Even when they had met for the first time in a dark corner of Kabrace, Roland did not have a single kind word for the prince and had taken every opportunity to attack his station and his people.

The sun marched across the sky and by the mid afternoon Calum found his cheek was raw and he had forgotten why. What he did remember was the grizzly fate of Roland’s horse and in his mind pictured the loose flesh where the horse neck had been slit.

Calum took his hand and placed it on the short coat of the horse that walked at his side and let the rough feel of the coat take him back to the royal stables, he was home again amongst friends, for a short while.

The day ended and the two set up camp. Calum hunted a rabbit, made his dinner and slept a dreamless sleep. The next day repeated itself as the one before, silence with short interludes of gruff disagreement, until the afternoon came.

“We turn off here,” said Roland.

“Why?” puzzled Calum.

“I have business with a friend before we head further downstream.”

Roland turned his horse and pushed through the undergrowth and Calum followed, eager to meet a person that Roland would call a friend.

The light of the afternoon sun was dazzling as they emerged from behind the trees, the flat fields a vibrant gold stretching out to both horizons. Across the field, a roof poked above the crop.

The field soon gave way to a small, wooden farmhouse, old but cared for. Clothes, shirt, plain brown dresses and thick trousers had been strung up between the only two trees in sight.

“Stay here,” said Roland, “watch the horse, I will return.”

Calum nodded and took the reins. He watched as the large frame of Roland strode towards the house and vanished inside.

The sun continued to move closer to horizon. The sky started to turn a deep purple when Roland reappeared with a bag in hand.

“We will stay here tonight,” said Roland as he approached, “there is a place for you and the horse in stable.”

“The stable?” said Calum, “why can’t stay in the house?”

“You stay in stable tonight and I will come and get you in the morning,” said Roland firmly and pushed the bag on to Calum, “here is some food from our host, she wishes you a pleasant a stay.”

Calum opened the bag and saw a large piece of cake, a couple of sugar rolls. A grin crept across his face at the sight of treats and the annoyance at being denied a soft bed vanished from his mind.

“And this,” said Roland throwing him a leather bladder, “your rangers have taught you well, I’m sure you will be fine in the stables for a night.”

Calum shook his head and led Roland’s horse into the stables. Inside it was warm and dry as specks of dust danced in the light that flooded into the space from the high windows. The familiar smell of horse hung in the air as a few beasts stirred in the stalls at the back.

Calum took the large horse and dressed it down. It was calming to lose himself in the ritual of caring for the horse. As he removed Roland’s saddle from its back Calum almost fell

backwards under the size and awkward shape of it the saddle, like most things concerning Roland, it was not the type for a normal man.

After the job was done, Calum sat cross legged on the ground and open up the bladder Roland had thrown at him. He took a swig and just as he had hoped it was a sharp, red wine.

Calum put the cap back on it, placed it to the side, explored the bag and found some dried meat along side the breads and cake. He tucked himself into a corner and ate the treats, taking several mouthfuls from the bladder and let the warmth of wine fill his body and lighten his spirit.

Calum fell asleep in warm, safe darkness of the stable. The wine bladder, half-empty, laying on his chest, his stomach and mind content.

The cries of a woman woke him from a dream. Calum pulled himself up and the bladder slid to the ground. Calum found his head was light and confused from the wine, slowly the world pieced itself together in the low light of stable. When the world was complete again, all there was left was moonlight and the sounds of the woman still coming from beyond the stable doors.

Calum pushed himself from the dirt floor and went to the doors.

A single window of the farmhouse was open, the light poured out on to the patches of grass. He listened closely to the sounds of the woman and he knew what the sounds were, they were not the sounds of a woman in distress.

Calum smiled to no one and went back to the wineskin he had left lying in the corner. He took another swig, his head spinning slightly and listened to sounds that emanated from the farmhouse. Roland was a man like any other after all, was the thought that came Calum's mind and he laughed.

There were so many tales of Roland the Ferocious, Calum didn't think the one with him would start in such a common way.

When Calum had hired Roland he had imagined a daring escape across the lands of The First Kingdom, as Roland was forced to slay his guards in a desperate battle to protect the precious prince. Calum would have to take up arms against his own men, a demonstration of his rejection of his position and the life he had abandoned in Kabrace.

Calum would have Roland spare one of his former guardsmen and Calum would order the man to return to the king and tell him to forget his beloved son for now, and that Calum would return home after he had tamed the powerful magic of the Dun.

This was how his tale was to start, but unfortunately it had been something very different. Something restrained.

Calum sighed and took another mouthful wine. A sly smile crossed his face and his eyes narrowed, Calum never did like restraint.

The boy returned to the door of the stables and stuck his head out, the yard was lit well enough to see by the large moon overhead. He moved across the ground to the open window and sat himself underneath. The cries of woman now accompanied by the rhythmic, thumping of furniture being used aggressively.

Calum listened and enjoy the sounds taking another swing of the wine, letting the thrill of deviant act wash over him. After only a short while, the sounds of pleasure were no longer enough for Calum. He pulled himself up and poked his head up over the window sill to look into the room.

The farmhouse was alive with the large flames of the fire place, the mountain of naked muscle stood over the table. Calum immediately focused on the woman that gripped the table beneath him. She had a large, curvaceous frame, black, wild hair which swept through the air as Roland pushed her aggressively into the table's surface, chairs that had once sat underneath now were scattered across the floor as the table inched across the wooden floor with every thrust.

The woman's threw her head back and forth in uncontrolled ecstasy. Her breast took Calum's breath away, large and round, they bounced and collided themselves widely as they carried forward the unrelenting force that came from behind her.

Calum had always loved large breasted woman, especially the cook's hand Marsi. She was eighteen when he had approached her, a brave, twelve year old boy and newly anointed Prince of The First Kingdom. Marsi had responded to his aggressive advances with a hard slap and a few curt insults before telling him to a return when his beard was fully grown, then, maybe, she would think about entertaining him.

Marsi had never let Calum forget that day, mocking him relentlessly when no one else was around and that made him love her even more. Calum made do with noble girls from court that threw themselves at him at their mother's instruction and the handmaids that hoped one day he would give them a life better than the ones they were given by fate. But Marsi was the only one Calum had ever loved and he would still have her, one day, when his beard was full.

Calum fell to the ground under the window, colliding with the powdery dirt. A melancholy took him, brought on by the thoughts of his friends at home. The sounds of the fierce love in the farmhouse became distant and hollow. He wanted to see his friends again, all of them. He wanted them to be with him as he saw the forests and walked its paths, side by

side with the great Roland. Tears came to his eyes and Calum took another mouthful from the bladder, the wine would help.

There was a loud crash and the sound of splintering wood came from within the house, the world came back into focus, Calum jumped and stuck his head up.

Laughter exploded from his mouth as he saw the legs of the table had come apart. The woman now lay on the floor on top of pile of wood, puzzled and stunned. Her laughter joined his as she looked through the window to see the boy's red face catching her in such a ridiculous position.

Roland was not laughing. He stormed over to window.

"Get in the stables and stay there," he shouted the force of the words pushed Calum back.

Calum skipped across the darkness of yard, still laughing. He would not let Roland's temper ruin his fun. The light of the farmhouse vanished from the yard as the shutters were pulled shut and the laughter of woman inside became muffled.

Finding the nearest pile of hay in the stables Calum collapsed face down feeling the rough straw stick into him. The laughter did not stop as he rolled over and took another mouthful of wine. He laid back and stared at wooden roof high above him, it was spinning and his legs tingled.

Then he was asleep.

A hard kick to his back woke Calum. Startled, he jump and yelped. Roland was standing over him, his horse saddled and ready. Calum held his head, it felt heavy with a dull pain that dug into it.

"Time to go," said Roland and took his horse from the stable.

Calum quickly found his bag and grabbed what was left of the sweet bread and meat. He had forgotten to cap the wineskin and what little remained of the contents had now spilt across the floor making a thick muck in dirt.

The stable door swung open and morning light spilt over him, his head screamed trying to force him back into the half light but he had no choice but to push on. In the distance, Roland was leading his horse into the field away from the farmhouse.

"Thank you for your visit, my Prince," came the loud voice of woman from the farmhouse, "I do hope you enjoyed your visit to our home."

Calum looked behind and in doorway stood the strong, square frame of the farming woman, a white skirt wrapped around her hips, she was naked from the waist up. Her bronze skin glowing the morning light.

He smiled at her and waved back to her.

“I did indeed, fair woman,” he called back across the dirt, “may your harvest be as bountiful as you are.”

The woman laughed and shook her breast at him and closed the door. Calum smiled to himself and ran to catch Roland who had already vanished beyond the trees.

Calum caught him marching up stream, his horse swaggering next to him.

“I understand...” started Calum.

“You do?” snapped Roland cutting him off.

“A man has needs,” Calum continued with a smile, enjoying himself.

Roland grunted but Calum was not sure what it meant.

“If you need to meet with a woman you can just tell me,” laughed Calum, “you don’t have to lie about having business with an old friend or some other story.”

“I have no reason to lie to you or anyone else. Last night was not what you think it was.”

Calum thought for a moment.

“I think I know what it was,” laughed Calum.

“No, you don’t,” snapped Roland, “Salith, is old friend of mine, her father let me stay on his farm whenever I travel into the Heartland. She has continued to let me stay even though her father died many years ago. She and her husband have had trouble bearing children and last time I passed through I offered to help, if they wished.

“They decided to continue as they were but they have had no success. A friend was in need and I was willing to help, nothing more.”

“The soldiers would talk about nobles that would make similar requests of the them when they couldn’t perform for their wives. They paid large amounts for the services and the silence.”

“They do,” said Roland, “and silence is best for all involved, so I will hear no more of it.”

“If you demand it,” laughed Calum with a shrug, “but must you break the table when you do it?”

Chapter 3

The world became darker as the fields beyond the tree line fell away and were replaced by dense forest. The soft grass and vines that grew along riverside turned to hard tangles of branches and thorns. Enticing berries of red and yellow dotted thick shrubs, Roland warned Calum not to touch them.

The river started to deepen and the stream rose to Calum’s knee, the cold water drowning his boots.

“There’s a woodsman’s path up ahead,” reassured Roland as Calum almost lost his footing against the force of the stream.

Calum simply grunted in response preferring to focus his attention on staying upright.

The small path appeared on the bank, a narrow tunnel of green. Calum struggled out of the water and up the mud of the bank as Roland followed behind with his horse.

The tunnel was small made of thick, sharp branches which shot inwards from either side. Calum was thankful for his small stature as he moved into brush. Behind, Calum could hear the snapping of branches as Roland’s much larger frame struggled to find its way through the space, the horse gave a noise of discomfort as it was pulled along the path.

“Keep moving forward,” ordered Roland, “you see something move, stop and tell me.”

“I will,” replied Calum his voice wavering slightly as he looked down the strangled path.

Above, the canopy tangled together to make a thick net which kept most of the daylight out. To the left Calum heard the fast rushing of waters.

“Is that The Grey Wash?”

“Yes, keep going,” barked Roland in frustration.

“Then these are the forests of Arn,” cried Calum with joy as he continued down the path.

The borders of The First Kingdom were behind them and his father had not found him.

“Keep your voice low and keep your eyes on the path.”

The tunnel ended abruptly, throwing Calum out onto an expertly built highway paved with simple stone. Calum was taken back for moment, it was first piece of civilised construction Calum had seen since he had left the wayhouse.

“Where are we?” asked Calum disoriented.

“Diana’s Road,” explained Roland emerging from the brush, his cloak and hair littered his broken pieces of sticks and leaves.

The horse emerged similarly dishevelled throwing its head around, annoyed

“That way leads back to Kabrace,” said Roland pointing up the clean, empty road that led straight to the horizon flanked on both sides by the forest.

Calum looked the other way at the sturdy stone bridge that spanned the violent torrent of frothing water.

“Then this is the road to Yulas’rel,” said Calum.

Calum remembered the map of the realms which he had studied back at the castle, the network of roads built by the men ruled by Dragons. The roads crossed the lands from the northern mountains of Ulnearth to the southern coasts of The Hold, connecting every major city and capital, from Illaid’s End in Burroway in the west all the way to far eastern shore where Quillo, the capital of Sia watched over the oceans.

“Come, quickly. We do not want to stay too long on the highway,” called Roland as he finished brushing the twigs from his hair.

Roland swung himself up onto his horse and led the way over the bridge as the Grey Wash roared below. The excitement of finally reaching the forest gave Calum the energy to run ahead of the horse.

The pair kept to Diana’s Road a short while until they came to a worn path that met the highway, the dirt road was wide and open to the sky with two tracks dug out by carts travelling in both directions.

“This way,” said Roland.

“We are not going to Yulas’ rel?” asked Calum.

“It is too dangerous for you there,” said Roland, “your father has many friends in that city who will happily return you to Kabrace for a reward. We keep to the woods.”

Calum was disappointed, he had read so much of the maze of walkways and ladders that made up the city in the trees. It was said the Arn had built a castle of nothing but naturally grown oaks, their trunks and branches tamed and twisted together to construct floors and walls to rival the castles built by his own people.

Calum recalled the story of his ancestor, Low King Lansel, who in the Age of Men had attempted to raid the castle in one of the many Kaborn conquests of the forests. The tale said the castle came to life and moved the walls and corridors around them, sealing the invading force within, Lansel and his men were never seen again.

This was one of many stories that had led Calum to enquire about the mysteries of magic and had brought him many rebukes and disparaging comments from the scholars that worked for his father.

The Kaborn of The First Kingdom had no talent in the magical arts, instead they were untouchable in their proficiency with the sword and hammer and used both throughout history to work their will upon the world.

Even the gods with their strange powers, seemed to have turned away from Calum’s people. While the clergy of the Heartland could conjure spirits and return the sickly to health with a few powerful words, the clerics of The First Kingdom simply poured alcohol onto wounds and fix broken limbs with splints and cloth.

Many of his kinsman preferred it that way, magic was dangerous and unpredictable, they claimed, but Calum did not agree.

Calum had asked his mother, only a year ago, to allow him to travel to the White Spire to study the magical arts. He explained to her that he wanted to bring the gift of magic to Kabrace and be remembered as the first Kaborn to wield the powers of magic but in the way

his mother always did she refused him gently. He was needed in Kabrace to sit at his brother's side, help Damon with his duties as Low King and then as King when Father died.

The refusal was what had set him on the course that had him walking the paths of Lay'tol with Roland at his side. Calum was never a person to hear and accept the word no. He never wanted to hear why he could not do something. He knew the world could be a difficult place but he knew there was no trial he could not overcome and he would find the mysteries held by the lands outside The First Kingdom. And when his adventures were done and he had unearthing those mysteries he would return to sit at Damon's side in whatever role his people needed.

So, Calum had dutifully went about his royal tasks as required, attending his lessons, dining and pleasing the daughters of the landed men, making sure the servants kept to their work cleaning and maintaining the castle but when alone he worked, against his mother's wishes, on his escape.

Beggars from the alleys of Kabrace were his eyes and ears. Careful never to hire the same one twice, Calum acquired news of possible escorts passing through the capital but the ones the beggars found were either too loyal or too disloyal.

The news of the great Roland passing through the city was unbelievably fortunate, a man famous for his defiance of the leaders of all the realms as well as his adherence to duty and protection of the weak. Roland would never return him into his father nor would he leave him dead on the side of the road. In Roland's shadow Calum knew he could escape.

And he had escaped, Calum sung to himself as his thoughts returned back to the world around him. He looked down the dirt road ahead, it disappeared quickly as it bent to the left. He enjoyed the thrill that came as he realised he did not know what lay just beyond its bend.

The sun was getting low when Roland called for them to break for camp. They found a small patch of dirt just off the path and Roland kept watch as Calum slept and dreamt of his father's garden with its ponds of ducks and geese inside the keep's high grey walls.

The morning came. Calum awoke and finished some berries he had picked with Roland's guidance the day before when a noise came from the road as a cart full of barrels trundled past. Calum leapt to his feet and chased it down.

A man sat at the front, slender in build with a long, squared-off face, dressed in simple white cotton robe that covered his whole body. He had grey-white hair that hung to his shoulder, his skin was pale and flawless, the man was the first Arn Calum had ever seen.

"Do you have any food for sale?" asked Calum panting as he kept up with the cart.

The man pulled the reigns of his horse and the cart came to halt.

"What is a Kaborn boy doing in the forest by himself?" asked the Arn in a soft voice.

“I am travelling with a friend of mine,” replied Calum quickly.

“Where is your friend?”

Calum looked up the road Roland had not emerged from the clearing.

“He is sleeping,” said Calum, “I am just looking for some dried meat or breads.”

The man looked at him, then up into the tree and past into bushes.

“These are dangerous roads, lad, you and your friend should come with me back to the main road. I can take you to Yulas’rel, if you wish.”

“Thank you, good sir, but we have business on this road.”

The man looked at Calum for moment.

“What business is that, lad?” he asked his eyes narrowing.

Calum was suddenly lost for words.

“If you don’t have anything for sale, I will be on my way,” replied Calum quietly.

The man simply nodded and whipped his horse on.

Calum returned to the camp where Roland was still sitting by the fire.

“If you run off like that you will get yourself killed,” said Roland standing up.

“I thought the man might have some food to trade.”

“These back roads are full of beasts. If you run blindly after things in the trees you will get yourself killed.”

“Aren’t you suppose to keep me safe,” snapped Calum not caring to be lectured to by Roland.

“I told you I will protect you from aggression, but I am not a guards man. If you run off into the woods then you find your own way back.”

“And if I die, who will pay you then?”

“I will find your body and claim what is mine, do not worry about that,” said Roland his voice still plain and level as it always was.

Calum was angry again.

“Who will honour a writ of dead prince?” challenged Calum.

“Most of the noble men in The First Kingdom, I have heard,” rebuked Roland as he took the reins of his horse.

Calum huffed and started to chew on his cheek, he felt the fire in him today. The dreams of home, the forest, the air, everything about the day had given him a new energy and he wanted to expend it.

“Let’s go then, the day is moving without us.”

“It is,” agreed Roland.

Calum strode confidently out on the path and looked on way then the other. The cart was gone, leaving worn tracks in the road stretching both directions the sound of wheels turning drifted on the wind.

“Which way?” asked Roland.

Calum paused for a moment. The cart was going the wrong direction. Unless there was a different road to Yulas’rel. Calum knew they had come up the road from the left, or did they? Both ways looked the same in the morning light.

“This way,” Calum pointed down the road finally his cheek burnt.

“Are you sure?”

Calum’s face went red.

“No, I’m not sure,” he yelled.

“No matter,” smiled Roland to himself, “you were right.”

Calum laughed, loudly and forcefully, and started to make his way down the road, quicker than he normally moved. He felt like running, the air was clean and perfumed with a slight, sweet pollen. He had made it to forest, his father and mother none the wiser, the road he walked was exciting and new, it was a good day.

The day passed and for the first time Calum kept in front of Roland, who swayed quietly on his plodding horse behind.

The night came, the pair camped and for the first time Roland hunted telling Calum not to leave the clearing until he returned. He fetched two rabbits bigger than Calum had ever seen. After finishing only one Calum’s stomach was bursting and the other was left for the wild dogs.

The next day they continued their journey.

The forest was thicker now and did not allow Calum to see far beyond the first line of trees, shrubs and brush filling the space between the trunks. Small dirt tracks occasionally met their’s, some were open and well worn, others only large enough for men to walk single file, others just holes in the vegetation that the forest was slowly reclaiming.

Calum wanted to know what was beyond those trees. Where were all the forest folk he read about in his books?

“Do the Arn have villagers?” asked Calum, “are you leading us around them?”

“There are a few villages but the Arn tend to live solitary lives, there are much fewer of them than there are of your people. So, the ones that desire company usually head to one of the forest cities.”

“I would like see a village,” said Calum and then added, “it will be safe, my father does not have friends this deep into the forest.”

“There is a village on our way that we could reach in a few days,” sighed Roland, “if you insist, we can stay there for a night.”

Calum cheered in response.

The day passed, then the next and the road continued to pass beneath. A few Arn passed them without a word of acknowledgment. Some of them had fiery red hair, others had pitch black hair, one Arn had a large, silvery mane that held itself high above his head, sparkling in the midday sunlight.

As the afternoon sun was getting close to setting Roland signalled towards a side road Calum had barely noticed.

“Hold,” he called and dismounting his horse, “this takes us to Salm’rel, the village you wanted to see.”

Calum smiled and led the way down the path as the sky was turning a swirl of purple and red, the path ended at a large clearing.

Directly in front of Calum sat a garden bed full of pumpkin vines, bean poles and strawberry patches sitting at the back of a home. A young child looked up, he was crouched over one pumpkin as large as his body. The boy studied the stranger for a moment and then turned his attention back to the pumpkin and after a short struggle, the vegetable was in his arms and the boy waddled into the house.

Beyond the small yard stood several, solid wooden houses that followed a well worn path through the clearing.

“Is this Salm’rel?” asked Calum.

“Yes.”

Calum did not know what to make of it, other than the encroaching trees the village was similar to many of the villages he had seen in the hills at home. He had been told the Arn lived high in the tallest trees above the forest with houses held in place by magic but this place was not magical, it was horribly similar to a Kaborn village.

“I did not know the Arn lived like this?” said Calum to nobody.

“How do they live?”

“Like us, I had heard...” Calum’s voice trailed off he was sure Roland was readying another of his insults, “where is the wayhouse?”

“The building with the green roof,” Roland pointed across the clearing to the building that had a large trail of smoke coming from its chimney.

Calum led the way around the small garden and down the village’s main road that cut the clearing in two.

The wayhouse was full of laughter and smoke. A large lump of meat roasted over a fire pit in the centre of the large room. Patrons were gathered around it, collecting cuts of meat onto chunks of bread.

“Grab a piece of bread and get yourself some meat. I’ll find the keeper and get us settled,” said Roland and walk away.

The group of men and women sitting around the wayhouse were mostly Arn. Those that weren’t were larger men and women with round faces and uncut, matted hair, dressed in clothes made of animal skin sown together. Calum knew who the people were, they were the Northern Men who live in the wastes immediately north of the forest.

Calum broke off a chunk of bread from a large pile of loaves on a table. He then found a discarded knife and a free space between the patrons and began cutting at the meat that hung over the fire. The others talked around him about this and that, he felt their eyes on him, he was very aware of how much he stood out in this place.

The meat slice came loose but before he could position his bread it slipped and fell into the fire.

“Do you need some help?” asked a high, sweet voice from behind.

He turned and saw a slender, tall woman with blonde hair and sparkling, silvery-blue eyes smiling at him.

“Yes, if you would,” said Calum, he always knew to accept the help of a beautiful woman.

She took the knife from his hand, deftly cut the meat and while keeping it balanced on the blade placed it on the bread.

“There you are, child,” she said handing him the piece of bread, “where is your father or mother?”

“My travelling companion,” emphasised Calum, “is just setting up our rooms.”

“Would you like to sit with us?” smiled the woman and then motioned to a circle of people by a window, “until they return.”

“Thank you, good woman,” he replied taking her hand in his and kissed it, “my name is Calum of Kabrace, what is yours?”

“I am Dolsel,” she replied with a smile, “you’re quiet well manner for a child.”

“My mother taught me to always be a true gentlemen in presence of great beauty,” he said with a sly grin and she laughed.

“Come and sit,” replied Dolsel and ushered Calum over to the circle of Arn by the window.

Calum pulled a chair up to the circle, the others were heavy in conversation about recent attacks on wagons travelling the roads in area. The conversation died away as Calum sat down and the gaze of group turned to him.

“Greetings, Kaborn,” said one, “what brings you so far into the forests?”

“I am travelling to Dunway,” replied Calum warmly.

Three of the men laughed and then one of them spoke.

“You’ve gone the wrong way, lad, Dunway is south. Who is taking you this way?”

“My friend, he is just settling up our rooms.”

“We’ll have to find your friend a map, you would be best to go back to Yulas’rel and find the road from there.”

“No, its too late for that, you want to find Diana’s Road and then head west to Diana’rel, then the south road will take you there without issue,” stated another knowingly.

“Travelling by land these days is a sure way to get yourself killed, you want to get a boat at Ilan’rel take Gella’s Way to the Silver Marsh, then take the low road east,” snapped another harshly his hair a pure, dull white, “get out of this forest as quickly as you can, Kaborn, it is not safe for someone as young as you.”

“Why are the roads so dangerous?” asked Calum and then quickly added, “beside the usual beasts that stalk them.”

“It’s the damn Saquaari,” snapped the white-haired man.

“You cannot blame them for the actions of men,” said another man dismissively.

“Men used to be men,” continued the white-haired man ignoring the others, “the dragons knew this and so they let the men fight their wars, but now the Saquaari keep us from our ways proclaiming peace has come.”

“They keep us from slaughter,” said a woman, “some would think that is a blessing.”

“Bah, a blessing if your land has open skies for them to watch from,” said the man turning back to Calum his finger pointed and hard, “you cannot keep men from their ways, you cannot keep men from war. It is where the lesser of us release their darker selves without it you have what we have now.”

“What is that?” asked Calum intrigued by the man.

“Demons among us, boy, the lesser men born for battle and blood. Nowadays, people just call them thieves but the word does not describe them fully. A thief wants your coin, the demons, they just want your blood, your goods are just what sustains them.

“The nobles cut back patrols of the northern borders now the Saquaari have come and leave us to deal with the monsters left behind. Born in your homeland, our forests, the

northern wastes and any other place men call home. Free to release their dark selves upon whoever they choose.

“The fact, you got here alive is a blessing from Zeria, herself, it’s strange you were not strung up the moment you entered the forest without an Arn to keep you safe.”

“Stop it,” snapped Dolsel, “you’ll frighten the boy. You’re an old fool, the thieves are no worse than they have ever been.”

The white-haired man shrugged and took a swig from his mug.

“How many are you travelling with?” asked another Arn to Calum, “my family is moving on in a few and we could use some extra hands. I can show you the way south to Yulas’rel through the back roads.”

“Just me and my friend,” replied Calum finishing a mouthful of bread.

“Stop trying to burden the boy with your problems,” snapped a red-haired woman at the Arn.

“We have been travelling for a few days,” said Calum, “we haven’t seen a single raiding party. Maybe the problem isn’t as bad as you think.”

“Unlikely,” snorted the white-haired man, “I think you’ve just slept under a lucky star.”

Calum saw Roland across the room. One of the Arn sitting next to Calum gasped and poked at her friend. The round face men watched Roland from the across the fire, one cleared his throat and spat on to the floor.

“I see you have found some friends,” smiled Roland and then took Dolsel's hand and kissed in gently, “good evening to you all.”

“If I am be so brave,” Dolsel beamed back, “are you Roland the Black?”

“Some call me that, yes,” replied Roland turning to group, “thank you for helping my ward but I am afraid we have both had quite a long day and need our rest. We will take our leave.”

“No, please, have a seat,” said the white-haired man suddenly filled with a joy, he jumping from his seat, “surely you have a few tales for an old man before you depart.”

“Where is the bard?” called Roland to the room and laughed, “they always have a far better memories of my exploits than I do.”

“What brings you through the woods?” asked another as Calum noticed people starting to mass closer to large man in the bearskin cloak.

“The Festival of the Bear and Horse, of course, the Sisters would curse me to the Savage Lands, if I did not attend.”

Dolsel now had her hand draped on Roland’s shoulder.

“I’m sure they would,” she agreed with a smile.

“My good people,” smiled Roland, “I am afraid that I must rest. I thank you all for your kindness. You have a quite beautiful town here. May the gods, watch over you all.”

He was slowly backing himself away from the crowd, letting Dolsel’s hand drop from his shoulder.

“Lad, to the back stairwell, please,” he said in a cheery manner and nodded to a staircase across the room.

Calum picked himself up and puzzled at the kind manner that was coming from Roland.

“Excuse me, please,” he nodded to the Arn and moved to the stairwell past the fire pit when a round face blocked his path.

“Do you answer to the name Roland the Butcher?” asked the Northerner.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because the Hool are weak and worthless men who cannot protect their own,” snarled Roland and spat at the face that had blocked his path.

There was a whirl of blades as yells and screams erupt from the men and women draped in animal skins. Calum was caught in a flood of arms and bodies as the Arn who had massed to see Roland fled from the centre of room.

Calum recovered himself and when he caught sight of Roland again, the man who had challenged him was on the ground gasping for air, his left arm twitching.

Another Northerner jumped onto Roland from behind. With a simple and precise motion Roland was behind the man’s square, wide frame, then the man’s head was helpless in the solid grip of Roland’s hands and with a sickening snap the body went lose and dropped to the floor.

Roland stepped onto the body of the dead man and then lunged at the two standing before Roland, the attackers had their daggers ready in hand. The blades cut the air and sliced deep into Roland outstretched arms. Deep, red wounds opened in his flesh. Blood flowed but Roland did not stop. Wide, clawing fingers seized around the Northerners’ faces and then palms drove their heads back and down into hard, wooden floor. The man and woman screamed as their skulls warped and cracked from the pressure of the mountain bearing down on them.

Two large men and a slight woman moved in from the side dropping their large swords and drawing small throwing blades from their belt as Roland spun to face them. The knives flew through the air and Roland wrap the cloak around himself. The daggers hit the bearskin, a sound rang out as though they had collided with metal armour and the blades dropped harmlessly to the ground.

Before Calum could comprehend what was happening Roland whipped the cloak forward catching one of the men with it and the fur tore his face from his skull. Blood, bone and muscles screamed as the man collapsed to the floor writhing in pain.

The slight the woman dodged under the cloak and stabbed into Roland's gut. The blade found its mark and dug deep into Roland's side. He screamed, deep and low, with pain and swung his fist across his body and struck the woman, her body flew a few feet through the air before falling lifeless to the floor.

Roland yanked the dagger from his side and flung it at the man who was now running at him. The dagger was thrown with such force it cracked through the man's ribs lodging the blade into the attacker's chest causing him to stumble forward and collapse to the ground.

Blood began to stain Roland's white shirt a gruesome red where the woman had cut into his gut. A man and woman to the side were the only Northerners left, they held their swords strong and without fear.

Roland, oblivious to the gash in his side, leapt like a cat on to a waiting mouse. Each became pinned under one of Roland's arm. The man yelled a battle cry as he tried to push Roland off him, but Roland held him firmly.

Roland picked up both of the warriors by their animal skin shirts and slammed them into the ground. The man and woman started to cough and drown in their own blood, Roland picked them up and slammed them again against the floor and the two went quiet.

Roland stood, paused for a moment and surveyed the room. The mountain covered in fur and blood turned and walked over to the man who had challenged him. The Northerner was still holding his arm and trying to pull himself from the ground.

Roland picked the man up with both hands, his forearms had become covered in black, clotted blood.

"What is your name?" yelled Roland

"Rein."

"Are you a Free Man?"

"Yes."

Roland bared his teeth, dug his fangs deep into Rein's nose and pulled back tearing it from Rein's face. Roland dropped the screaming man to the ground and spat the appendage to the ground as blood poured from the cavity in Rein's face.

Roland grabbed a piece of coal from the fire pit in his bare hand, seized Rein's head with the other and drove the burning rock into the man's face, the smell of burning flesh fouled the air.

Rein screamed and kicked as the bleeding slowed. Roland tossed the now cold stone back into the fire pit.

“Return to your clan and show them the people of Hool are still as weak and pathetic as they’ve ever been,” growled Roland and pushed the man to ground.

Roland found Calum in the room of terrified Arn.

“Upstairs,” he barked.

The dream came again that night and the colours of the court were the most vibrant they had ever been as the blood flowed and frothed like the waters of The Grey Wash.

Chapter 4

Roland staggered into the room after Calum and slammed the door shut. He reached up with his blood coated arms, found the bar and pulled it down across the door. He looked at Calum with weary, blackening eyes.

“Stay,” he command and threw his cloak into a heap on floor.

Roland then stumbled to a cot and collapsed into it, a lump flesh and nothing more. His side was coated in the dark, red gore but did not appear to be bleeding anymore.

“Do you need anything?” asked Calum moving to the lit lantern that sat on the table.

There was no response.

Calum snuffed the flame, removed his travelling clothes and found the second cot on other side of the room. He slept as his dreams took him to the frozen world of colour and then he woke.

The morning light streamed through a window that Calum had not noticed the night before. He pulled himself up in the cot and the front of his pants were soiled again. He cursed in frustration and kicked off the long underpants and replaced them with his thick linen trousers that scratched at his skin. He scooped up his clothes and looked at Roland.

The man still slept in the same awkward position that he had collapsed into the night before, the coating on the his arms had dried and flaked, colouring the fabric of the cot a deep red.

Calum lifted the bar from the door and peered into the hallway beyond. The wayhouse was silent except for the sounds of birds nesting in the roof. He walked down the hallway to the stairs that led to the main room.

At the bottom of the stairs Calum found an Arn with dull, golden hair cleaning one of the blood stains off the wall.

“Good morning, lad,” called the man across the room, “how is Roland?”

“Sleeping,” replied Calum, “do you have a place where I can wash my clothes?”

“Through the backdoor. There are some water barrels, pitchers and basins in the cupboard next to it.”

Calum moved towards the door.

“I am sorry about all this,” said Calum turning back feeling like someone should apologise for the chaos.

“Thank you,” smiled the man, “but there is no need, it is part of the business of running a wayhouse. Though, I must say, not all are this... messy.”

“Do you know what it was about?”

“Ask Ystari,” said the Arn with a sigh, “there are so many stories about Roland who knows which ones are true and which aren’t.”

“I have never heard of Roland the Butcher or Roland the Black.”

“Roland the Butcher, I don’t know, but Roland the Black is his name amongst the trees. It was given to him by the nobles of Yulas’rel. He made a lot of enemies in the capital when he helped the Northerners take the Fork back from them. Nasty dealings, apparently, many people lost their lives,” the man shrugged, “or so they say, the nobles have ways of making up nasty rumours about people that best them.”

The man went back to cleaning. Calum found the water he needed and cleaned his clothes. When he was done he took a pitcher of water and a basin back to the room for Roland.

Roland was awake and standing by the window, his cloak now folded neatly on the cot. His body still coated in red and black.

“Are you well?” asked Calum quietly.

“Yes, do not think on me,” replied Roland an emptiness in his voice.

“I brought you some water to wash,” said Calum, putting the pitcher and basin on the small table by the door.

“Thank you.”

Calum paused as questions ran through his mind but thought it was better not to ask any of them now.

“I’ll wait downstairs,” said Calum finally and closed the door behind him.

The owner of the wayhouse gave Calum a small bowl of oats and some rations for the road.

Calum ate the oats slowly, looking out the window at the dense forest that circled the village. He then turned his attention back to large, empty room he sat in. His eyes found the blood stain on the floor where the man who had been disfigured by the cloak had fallen.

The tales of Roland's cloak were as great as the man that wore it and though they had been an exaggerated it was still an impressive item. Calum wondered where Roland would have found such a prize, it was clearly not made from the hide of a bear as it seemed, but if it wasn't, what could it be? Calum's mind started to sift through all the types of fabrics he had learnt about in his lessons, but none came close matching what he had seen the day before. Then, Calum started to wonder if there was more of that material in world and if there was, how could he acquire some for himself?

Eventually, Roland appeared at the stairwell, clean and tidy, except for his shirt that was now cut and stained red. His arms held no trace of a scar or blemish were he had been cut by the blades.

"Do you have any shirts for trade?" ask Roland.

"None in your size. I have a loose nightshirt that may fit you."

"Please."

The Arn vanished and soon reappeared with the nightshirt, frills adorned its collar and long sleeves. Roland took the shirt and vanished back up the stairs, when he reappeared he had donned his cloak. The silk shirt, visible underneath, was now missing its frills, the neck sagged absurdly low showing the hard, white muscle of Roland's chest.

"We will take our leave now," said Roland as he handed the owner some coins.

"You have paid already," the owner replied pushing the coins back.

"For the trouble."

"I include trouble in my price," smiled the owner, "be careful on the roads and remember to come by again."

"As you say," Roland nodded and put the coins back in his pocket.

Roland and Calum worked their way through village to a small path on the opposite side of the clearing. Some of the villagers were in their yards tending their gardens, digging at weeds and picking off pests. Calum recognised a few from the group he had joined the night before. When he saw them he waved, some ignored him while others smiled and waved merrily.

"He was a good man, that," smiled Calum.

"Who?"

"The keeper."

"That man was a bastard," growled Roland.

"What?"

"I murder seven men under his roof and in the morning he greets me smiles and begs my return."

“Would you have rather he cursed you and throw you out of your bed?” laughed Calum.

“He would have if it was Arn blood on the floors but the Northern Men... they are dirt to these people. I am shocked he didn’t hand me all my coin back along with two of his daughters.”

There was deep and strong anger in Roland’s voice.

“You killed seven men, then disfigured another,” puzzled Calum shaking his head, “and in the morning you call the keeper a bastard for thinking low of those same men.”

“My will is mine. My actions are mine. I am to live with the sorrow and joy of each of them and I accept the condemnation of others when my actions are unjust. That swine judged me and he found me a good man.

“A good man does not kill seven that had no means of defending themselves. A good man does not humiliate another who is simply doing his duty.”

An exhausted emotion had risen in Roland.

“Then, why did you kill them?” challenged Calum, “why not just walk past them?”

“We are not like you, Kaborn, we live in a different world with different laws. Rein was commanded by duty to attack me once he knew who I was, that is the man he is, and I will let no man challenge me without consequence, as that is the man who I am. The fight was inevitable,” said Roland quietly but then the anger returned to his voice, “and it is no place of some Arn to look on and see it as a gift handed to him by gods. If the coward did not want Hool in his wayhouse, he should have thrown them out himself not hide in the corner and cheer while others fight and die.”

Roland’s logic was lost on Calum, a man who wilfully kills a group men and then curses those around him that see no crime in his actions.

In the court’s of his father Calum had seen his people spend the days explaining to his father why their obvious misdeeds were justified by the strange nonsense of the common law that had been stitch together since the first stones of Kabrace were laid.

From murder to theft and every sin in between. All of them had their reasons that explained away their guilt or found what was right in their actions, all the time knowing fully they were nothing but dogs trying to dodge the master’s boot. And if his father found them innocent the men would praise him and sing of his just rule. None did as Roland did now, as maybe they should have, and cursed his father and crown on his head for the obvious injustice in his ruling.

“Do not worry yourself about it is something that you can not understand,” Roland’s voice brought Calum back to forest.

Calum had always hated when his father had spoken to him in a such a way because he did understand. It was more his father just did not want to argue anymore. The refusal to discuss the matter further simply made Calum more aggressive usually resulting with Father storming from the room, furious at his son's defiance.

But for this moment Calum stayed himself and saw the world as a stranger, richer and more illogical place then he had thought. Then the moment was gone.

"Why didn't you kill Rein?" continued Calum, "why disfigure him? I was always taught death is a kinder punishment. If you held no malice, why not just slit the man's throat and let it be done?"

"The Northern Men have complex traditions. If I had killed him, his siblings, his parents and any others who had sworn themselves to him would have been called upon to hunt me down and seek my blood for theirs," said Roland, "but while Rein lives his humiliation is his alone and only he may avenge it. He may come after me, if he wishes, but since he lives those bound to him will not follow."

"But they are after you already?"

"The ones who hunted me across the lands are long dead. Now, what remains is only an old grudge, an edict written in stone and enforced by honour. A Free Man of the Hool tribe must challenge me if I am known to them as I am their enemy, now and for all the years I live. That is why I no longer travel the Northern Lands openly, enough men have fallen."

Calum looked up at Roland, the oval face beamed youth and life, his bright orange hair sparkled in the morning sun, no one would believe he was older than twenty five years.

Calum had heard that Roland had lived for thousands of years and helped Illiad in his journey to the end of the earth in the Age of Men, other said he laid with Diana of the Forest and their children were the first of the Western Men, others told the tale in which he and Sulla the Fire Babe conquered the wild tribes of Heartland at the dawn of time and founded Sowland's Watch as the first city of men. But Calum knew they were stupid stories made up by bards to excite their patrons and add a few extra Swords to their purse, but the question still nagged at Calum and he could not ignore it, so he dared to ask.

"How old are you, Roland?"

"Old enough," Roland shot back with a finality that Calum knew meant he had asked to much.

Roland had made it clear when they had met in slums of Kabrace, within the small room above the Riverview tavern, he would not talk of stories or gossip spread by the common folk. Roland was not going to be a curiosity for a young prince to be poked and prodded with a hundred ridiculous questions. He was looking for a job and pay, nothing more and, now,

Calum started to understand why he made this clear, the more time he spent with Roland the more curious he became of the man he found next to him.

The day passed and then the next.

Roland kept on his horse, Calum walked along side. The days of travel had built up his legs to the point where they no longer hurt by the time they broke for camp.

The two talked occasionally about The First Kingdom and Calum's life as a prince but Roland kept his own stories to himself. Sometimes silence would descend again when Calum asked a question his travelling companion was not pleased with, sometimes when Roland dared to insult Calum's people or his privilege upbringing, leaving Calum's cheek raw.

A few Arn moving silently through the twisting maze of roads and paths, uncaring of the pair that walked past.

"How much further?" asked Calum eating the last of some berries that he had found alongside the road, the fire crackled between the two, the moon shone large and silver overhead.

"We are about a day from Gella's Run," said Roland.

Gella's Run cut the Kingdom of Lay'tol in two and Calum realised his journey was only a third complete.

"The land is much bigger out here than it is in the library," he laughed

"It is," said Roland with a smile.

"What do you intend to do after we get the White Spire?" ask Calum without thinking, he await the usual silence that came whenever he asked Roland about his business.

"I will head south to the Lowlands."

"What's down there?" ask Calum.

"Nothing," said Roland with a shrug, "I tire of men. I feel like disappearing off the edge of the world for a while."

Calum looked down at fire and felt the fatigue set in. He lay down on his back and wrapped his travelling cloak around him and fell asleep.

The next day came the pair marched on.

It was about mid afternoon when Roland pulled his horse to halt. The forest that lined the right side of road gave way to a still lake, the water sparkled with a silver silt, the green grass grew thick along the ground reaching all the way to the shoreline.

"Let's stop here for a moment," said Roland and dismounted.

Calum nodded and followed as Roland led the horse to the lakeside. The horse lowered its head and started to lap at the water. Roland removed his cloak, folded it neatly and placed it under a tree.

“The waters near Gella’s Way are some of freshest around. We are making good time, we can afford to stop here for while.”

Calum smiled, thankful for the break, The pair had been moving now for over two weeks, resting only to make camp.

Calum took off his boots and let his bare feet become absorbed into the soft, long grass that formed a carpet at the lake’s edge. He sat down and stared off across the water. Reeds grew out of lake, the flowering vines that had grown amongst them turned the reeds into small towers of summer colours. Birds dived at dragonflies that skipped along the surface of the water before vanishing back into the canopy of the trees that arched overhead.

Roland got up, took the horse from the lakeside and tied it to the tree where he had left his cloak. The horse started to chomp on a small bush.

Roland removed the nightshirt had acquired at Salm’rel and placed it next to his cloak. He then undid the belt that held his pants and they fell to ground, he kicked them off to the side.

Looking over, Calum suddenly noticed that Roland was naked. Calum puzzled at the body was oddly, perfect shape. Tight strands of muscles wrapped around themselves, bonding together to form strong, hard waves that sat frozen under his skin. There was no odd bump out of place or sag of loose flesh as Roland’s white skin held tight to the frame showing no signs of age or wear or life. Calum had always assumed that under the cloak of bear fur was a body just as rough, but he had been wrong instead there was a figure carved of unnaturally pure, white stone.

Roland stood still and looked across the lake. Roland waded into the water a few feet and disappeared as the surface exploded, Roland had found the end of the shore line.

“Do they teach young princes to swim in The First Kingdom?” he called back, his voice cheerful as it carried across the water.

“Yes,” replied Calum.

“Then, you had best take this chance to wash, you need it.”

Calum looked around and saw no harm it. He quickly look off his shirt and pants, feeling very conscious of his smaller, looser body with its slightly round stomach and thin arms.

Calum looked at where Roland had been and saw nothing. Then in distance he saw a slight disturbance in the water, Roland was gliding effortless through the lake as though the gods had suddenly granted him the body of fish. Calum started to feel as though Roland was insulting him again.

Calum lowered himself into the water and started to wash but he did not go beyond the shore's edge. He was able to move through the water, but he had never been good at holding himself in place.

The water felt cool against his tired muscles and the silver sediment started to scrap the dirt from his skin, it was the most refreshed he had felt since leaving the castle. He waded out a bit further and submerged himself entirely before hurrying back to the where the earth was easier to find.

Roland swam over to him and lowered himself on to the bank. He sat there quietly for a small time.

"The waters around these parts are the most beautiful you will see anywhere in the land, many people don't appreciate that."

Calum sat quietly.

"You said, you knew how to swim?" asked Roland.

"I did."

"Then, a race," said Roland pointing at the small tuft of land near the centre of the lake, "the first one who reaches that island gets to ride the horse tomorrow."

"I am glad you found some cheer, finally," laughed Calum, "but I won't be embarrassing myself today."

"Then I tell you this, I will count fairly to sixty, then I will give chase. What do you say?"

Calum looked at the distance island and then at Roland. He would have to make it before sixty, if he hoped to win, he knew Roland would catch him more or less as soon as the man hit the water.

"Eighty."

"Very well. Eighty."

And with that, before Roland could start counting, Calum pushed himself into the water and start swimming with all of his strength.

The water splashed and crashed around Calum's ears, his arms burnt, his legs kicked and flail behind, Calum noticed they were stronger they had been before. The island grew closer, but it needed to get closer, faster.

Calum kicked harder, focusing all his strength on propelling himself through the water. The island was almost there, just a small distance ahead.

It had surely been eighty by now, but Calum did not stop, he buried his head in the water and swam the rest of the way without taking another breath.

Calum burst above the water line, his hand had found the muddy grit of the island, he looked up. There was no one, he had beaten Roland. He turned around to see how far Roland trailed behind.

On the distant bank there was a flurry of limbs, water flew into the air. Roland was grabbing at a figure that danced in the water around him. Calum, confused, started to swim back without another thought.

Calum stopped after a few strokes and pulled his head above the water line. He could see the figures dressed in dark tunics, but could not make out anymore as the water that was being thrown into the air. Roland grabbed at one and punched at another.

Calum kept swimming, only stopping to see what was happening on the shore.

One of the figures was suddenly caught in Roland's large left hand and was pushed, face first, into the lake. It struggled as Roland swatted at the other figure with his right hand, eventually he seized the second and both figures were kicking as they were held below the water.

By the time Calum had reached the shore line, Roland was dragging one of the bodies up onto the shore.

"What happened?" panted Calum as he pulled himself out of the water.

"Thieves," said Roland, "they've been following us since the morning."

Calum stood by slightly dumbfounded.

"I wanted to draw them out before night, I was hoping the temptation to attack while we were unarmed would be enough," he said heading back to the lake and started to pull the other body out, "it was a good thing I did. These men were quiet well trained, they would have gotten you in the night."

Calum walked over to the body and looked at the moist, blue face of Arn that had attacked them.

"Thank you," was all Calum could say as he looked into the large bulging eyes that stared back, empty and hollow.

"We can camp here tonight," said Roland crouching next to one of the bodies and started to rifle through the pockets.

Roland pulled out a few bags of coins and a large curved blade.

"They were doing quite well for themselves," he said weighing the pouch in his hand, "you should make a fire and we can dry off."

Calum nodded. The eyes fascinated, he did not want to look away. He did not want to make a fire. He wanted to stand there and study the blood vessels as they popped and

scratched their way across the whites of the eyes. He wanted to see the red escape the lips and the cheeks hollow.

But he didn't. Calum pulled himself away and went to gather the wood for the fire. The pair had forgotten about their clothes, leaving them abandoned as they sat by the fire watched the sun move across the sky. Roland stripped the thieves of anything valuable and was sorting through the gold on the carpet of grass.

"Here is your share," said Roland as he threw a pouch at Calum.

"Should I curse you for killing these men too?" smiled Calum.

The look Calum received wiped it quickly from his face.

There was the first signs of dusk in sky as the pair laid by the fire. Calum was shocked by how much he wished to be moving again, after so long in constant motion sitting by the lake watching the sun move across the sky seemed an affront to all the leagues already travelled.

Calum looked at Roland, who did not seem to feel the same way. He lay, stretched out on the grass with his eyes closed, letting the warmth of the day flood over him.

A sickening smell invaded the peace of the afternoon.

"Are the corpses rotting already?" asked Calum sniffing at the air and looked at the bodies with disgust.

Roland's eyes flew open.

"No."

Roland picked himself up and also sniffed the air, he moved towards a line of trees and pushed his way through the bushes. Calum followed to the brush but stopped, the branches looked dense and sharp enough to cut his skin.

Roland reappeared a few moments face a look of concern on his face.

"Get your clothes on, now," he ordered.

"What is it?" asked Calum.

Roland moved quickly, like he had in the wayhouse when faced by the Northerners.

Roland was over the one of bodies pulling at the clothes.

"Their horses are behind those bushes, rotting," said Roland.

Calum found his clothes and started pulling them on.

"Their horses are dead?"

"Yes, long dead," cursed Roland, "get on the horse."

Calum grew concerned as a panic crept into Roland's voice.

Calum tried to hitch himself up onto the horse but the stirrups were too low for him to be able to swing up, Roland was behind him and boosting him up. Once balanced on the horse, Calum started to pull on his shirt.

“There were wagon tracks on the... left... three turns back. Three turns on the left, ignore the turns the right. You need to take the horse and get there.” said Roland staring Calum in eye making sure he was listening, “follow the tracks up the road, you must find where they lead. We must find a house or stable, any structure we can fortify before night. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” blurted Calum his mind muddled.

“If the forest is good, there is a farmhouse. If there is, you need to remember it and come back to the first turn and find me. I will be on this road. Do not travel more than a mile. Do not get lost. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“As quickly as you can manage, do not stop.”

Calum kicked the horse and it moved as fast as its stocky legs could go. What was happening? What was driving fear into Roland? And if Roland was afraid, Calum knew he was dead if he did not find a farmhouse by nightfall.

Calum found the trail with the wagon tracks. More than once he lost his balance and almost slipped from Roland’s ridiculously sized saddle. Calum gripped his legs tight to keep balance, they burnt as the horse rolled and swayed wildly beneath him. The wagon tracks went for more than a mile, Calum went further than he was told but found nothing.

Cursing, Calum turned and hurried back the way he came, he looked at the other paths that joined the trail any of these could lead to a farmhouse or a mill or a whole damn village. But the trees crowded the path and refused to share the secret of what lay beyond them.

The sun was still sinking towards the west, Calum called and yelled as he went hoping a friendly Arn would stick his head out and call back to him but there was no sign of life as the woods choked the world around him.

For a moment, Calum became excited as he heard the sound of hooves. He pulled the horse to a standstill and listened to the wind. After a few moment he realised he could hear nothing but the sounds of birds returning to their nests for the night. It had just been his imagination. Calum returned to the turn where Roland had said to wait, his companion nowhere to be seen.

Calum wanted to search in another direction, he felt helpless and he hated feeling helpless, but he fought back the urge to run off madly into the trees and instead waited, nervously, as the sky became orange.

Calum muttered to himself in panic as the horse beneath him stood quiet and still. Then, through the air came the sound of wood creaking against itself and rhythmic clop of horse hooves and then it was gone again. Calum cursed, he had heard only what it wanted it to hear.

The sound came again and this time it persisted. A wagon made its way around the bend, an Arn with bright, blonde hair dressed in a dark blue tunic approached. Calum turned his horse to face the wagon.

“Sir,” shouted Calum as it approached, “do you know a farmhouse? I must find shelter.”

“You are a long way from your homeland, boy,” the Arn replied suspiciously.

“I know,” snapped Calum annoyed, “my friend and I were set upon by thieves and we need a place to stay.”

“You killed them?”

“Yes,” said Calum.

“Then, you are in some trouble. My wagon doesn’t travel as quickly as your horse, but that is no concern. Where is your friend?”

“He is searching the paths for a shelter.”

“Then you must find him and take him to my home, you must be in by dusk,” said the Arn with a concern in his voice, “it’s the first right beyond here and then the second left, follow that road to the bush of yellow flowers, turn into the path it marks. That is my home.

“My daughter and son will greet you. Tell them Taylan sent you. You’d best hurry.”

“Thank you, good sir,” cried Calum in relief.

Calum kicked the horse and turned it, he saw Roland waiting for him at the turn.

“What did you find?”

“An Arn told me how to get to his farmhouse, his children will help us, he says.”

“Children?”

“A son and daughter.”

Roland looked at the sky and cursed even more violently than before.

“Ride,” Roland barked, “I will follow.”

Calum galloped down the rode, looked behind and there he saw the strangest sight. Roland was bent over in a strange way, his arms and legs worked together to propel him down the road as a rabbit did, his cloak snapping at the air behind him, a man was not meant to move like that but Calum did not have time to think on it, he turned his focus to Taylan’s instructions.

Calum found the bush of yellow flowers and turned the horse into the track which led through the tree line and into an open clearing. Two simple structures sat in front of Calum, a stables and a household.

The sky was now a burning red, the sun had not set yet but it would soon. He slowed the horse and rode up to the door of the house behind he saw Roland running across the field,

upright like man should run. Calum, awkwardly, dropped himself from the awkward saddle, almost losing his footing, and knocked at the door.

A slender, bright face of a girl framed in blonde opened it a crack, her eyes were large and yellow.

“Yes, sir,” she asked with no expression on her face.

“Good lady, we were set upon by thieves on the road. Your father, Taylan, said my friend and I could take shelter here for the night.”

Calum could not hide the urgency in his voice.

“Of course,” the girl nodded and opened the door further, “take your horse to the stable. Please be quick.”

The girl turned from the door.

“Jun, build the fire, the dead men are back,” she called into the room.

Calum started to lead the horse to the stables.

“What is happening?” asked Roland as he joined Calum.

“The children are building the fire,” reported Calum, “they said to stable the horse.”

“Sounds as though the locals know of these monsters.”

“Tell me then,” said Calum as they walked across the yard in the ebbing light.

“They are men who have used the power of Milorsa to escape death,” explained Roland, “for one night the god keeps the Midnight Worgs at bay by hiding their souls in their carcasses. One night they have to find their killers and to trick the Worgs into taking their souls to the abyss instead of their own.”

“Magic,” exclaimed Calum with an excitement.

“Calm yourself, Kaborn. This is the crazed powers of the gods, not the clean magic of the Magi, you seek.”

“I know the difference between the gods and the Magi,” snapped Calum.

“Then, you will know we are in great danger until dawn,” said Roland, “we should get ourselves into the house, the light of a fire burns away their power.”

The horse was placed without regard into a pen, the oversized saddled left for it to carry through the night and the two returned to the farmhouse.

Inside they found the Arn girl, who looked to be the same age as Calum, as she was laying salt at the windows and doors. Her younger brother, a boy of eight or so, was poking at the fire and organising different sized pieces of the wood at side of the hearth.

“I see everything is fine hands,” smiled Roland as he enter the space.

Calum wondered why Roland was always nicer to strangers than he was to the man paying for his service.

“It is, sir,” smiled the young girl, “I am Gabri, this my brother, Jun”.

“The dead men have come before,” said Jun with a small voice as he focused on the fire, “but you don’t need to worry, you’ll be safe here.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” asked Roland.

“Who killed the men?” asked Gabri.

“I did,” replied Roland.

“Then you should stay by the fire. Your son can help me secure the back windows.”

“My name is Calum,” said Calum merrily, “and I’d be happy to help.”

Gabri led the way into a bedroom. Calum fixed the window shutters with some wood and nails and Gabri heaped large amounts of salt on the ground.

“You don’t look like one of us,” said Gabri as they worked, “where are you from?”

“I am from The First Kingdom,” said Calum, “I am travelling to the White Spire.”

“I know of The First Kingdom, are you a farmer like us?”

“No,” laughed Calum, “I’m a prince.”

“A prince? From The First Kingdom?” Gabri joined in the laughter, “you don’t need to lie to me, Calum.”

“I am not lying,” he smiled back, “I swear to you, I am the first true born of son of King Wren, the Blood of Ka runs through my veins.”

“I have read about Ka in my book,” she smiled, “You do not seem as... fierce.”

“It’s true, years of ruling The First Kingdom have soften our bodies somewhat but our minds are just fierce as those of our great emperor.”

The horror of the situation was pushed from his mind for a moment. It was pleasant to have company again that was not Roland. Also, the girl also did not seem to fear these dead men that pursued them and that gave Calum a comfort, maybe they were safe now.

“Well, Prince Calum,” said Gabri with a smile, “we should head back to main room, the night will be here in a few moments.”

Gabri brushed the last of the salt from her hands and the two returned to the main room.

Taylan had arrived and was sitting around the table with Roland, two large swords placed before them on the table.

“I will not sit at the back while others defended me,” argued Roland.

“If they get your blood then the fire will no longer repel them and then we’re all dead,” rebuked Taylan.

Roland’s eyes hardened as the Arn held his gaze.

“Fine, have it then,” huffed Roland pushing the sword across the table.

“Lad,” Taylan called to Calum, “do you know how to wield this?”

“He’s a prince, pa,” laughed Gabri as she took up her own sword which she had left by the fireplace, “the Blood of Ka runs in veins, he knows how to use a sword.”

Roland’s eyes snapped to Calum.

“I can use a sword, well enough,” said Calum taking it from Taylan.

“Very well, Jun, Roland, by the fire. Gabri by the backdoor, Calum by the kitchen window,” ordered Taylan who reminded Calum of the rangers that taught him back in Kabrace, “I’ll take the front door.”

Taking his position by the window, Calum felt the adrenaline build in him, his mind raced trying to anticipate what was going to happen as the night approached. Taylan went to the front door and opened it. Darkness had taken the forest outside, the air was still musty and warm from the hot, summer day.

After a short time, the strange sound came. A moist slapping against the wooden wall, next to Calum’s head.

“It is the m,” said Taylan not moving from the door his sword firmly in hand, “be ready.”

The slapping sound moved along the wall to the corner of the room where the kitchen sat. There was silence for a moment and then the sound started to round the corner and towards the door. The sound of squelching steps could be heard coming through the doorway.

Calum almost dropped his sword as he saw it for the first time. The face, slowly, angled its head to peer through open door. A bloated, red mess of a human face that shone in the darkness, looked into the room, the eyes bulged large and silver behind the swollen cheeks of the beast.

It let out a hideous scream that caused the shutters of the window to shake. Calum dropped his sword in fright. Water escaped its mouth cascading down its chin and spilling onto the dirt.

“Pick that up,” barked Taylan.

Calum bent down to pick up sword when the window shutters behind him exploded into splinters. Wet, slimy limbs grabbed his small frame and yanked him towards the hole in the wall. Calum had never screamed so loudly in life, he kicked furiously but the thing had him firmly in its moist grip.

“Stay back,” shouted Taylan as Roland started to move across the room.

Taylan moved swiftly to Calum, scooping up a handful of salt as he went, then dashed the crystals into the arms that held him. The flesh started to bubble and hiss as the salt ate into it, the thing weakened its grip and Calum slipped free.

“Gabri, the cupboard,” shouted Taylan at his daughter who was now at the front door watching the other creature still waiting beyond the frame.

Gabri ran to the cupboard that sat by the window and pushed herself against it.

“Get clear,” she shouted.

Calum and Taylan scrambled across the floor as the the cupboard toppled over, blocking creature’s entrance. Plates and bowls came free, crashing and rolling across the floor.

The creature at the door saw its chance and leapt through the doorway into the room. Its red skin popped and smoked as the firelight fell across it, the thing was still dressed in its wet, black tunic. It leapt back into the dark corner of the kitchen to escape the light and there it sat, squatting in the shadows, waiting, a quiet gurgling coming from of its mouth.

Taylan grabbed Gabri by her arm and threw her next to fire, getting her away from the creature. Calum stood, frozen, next to the toppled cupboard. Taylan circled the beast to place himself between it and his children, his sword pointed directly at the corner in which it sat.

Calum found his senses and looked for his sword, it was stuck beneath the cupboard that had been pushed over without another thought he abandoned it and moved into the firelight.

“Everyone, stay by the fire,” order Taylan.

“Give me the sword,” shouted Roland.

“Stay, where you are?” hissed Taylan, “something is wrong. The soul stalkers are never this strong.”

“They will burn like any other,” yelled Roland and grabbed a piece of wood Jun had placed next to the fire and tore up the rug that sat underfoot with his knife.

“They will,” said Taylan, “but you stay there. Hand me the torch.”

Calum looked at Roland, the frustration was written across the man’s face.

“I am Roland the Black,” he shouted, “I don’t cower while children fight.”

“I don’t care who you are. Don’t be a fool and stay where you are.”

Roland thrust the finished torch into the flames as though it was a sword being plunged into the face of an enemy and then threw it at Taylan. Taylan pushed his sword to Calum.

“Don’t drop this one,” he said quietly and firmly, “both of you cover my side while I approach.”

Taylan started to move towards the dark corner flanked by Calum and Gabri. As the flames of the torch fell across the creature it hissed and cried a small whine. Suddenly, with a swift motion it leapt up and dug its fingers into the rough wood of the roof, water fired from its mouth drowning Taylan and dowsing the torch in his hands.

The other creature was at the door and before Calum knew what was happening, it leapt with its full force onto Roland. It screamed as it brought its gnarled fingers down at Roland’s face.

The beast on the roof started to scuttle across the surface, water slopping from its tunic as it went. Once it was above Taylan, it loosened its grips and dropped its full weight onto the man.

“Pa,” shouted Gabri as she rushed forward and stuck her sword into the creature as best she could.

Calum looked as Roland wrestling the one by the fire, and then at Taylan pinned beneath the other. Who should he be helping? His panicked mind raced without an answer.

Roland hand slipped around the jaw of swollen face. He wanted the throat but the thing would not give him the opportunity, his hand slipped again its slick skin, which smoked and pop from the firelight filling the room off a putrid smell of rot. Its sharp nails swiped at his face again, it just barely missed. Jun was by Roland’s side, salt in his small hands and the boy threw the white powder with all his force into the creatures face, it howled in pain and that was enough. Roland seized a wet limb and was free. He spun on the floor and once Roland had his legs behind him he was able to catch the creature off balance. With a single push, it was in the fire.

The flames of fire came alive with a crimson colour as it consumed the body and the room became tinted by the unnatural light.

Calum, having seen the boy throw the salt, knew what he needed to do.

Calum found a handful of salt scattered near the door and ran at Taylan and Gabri who were both wrestling the beast. Gabri bought her sword up again and sliced at the creature catching its chest. Black blood oozed from the wound, but the creature seemed ignorant of the cut and continued to assault Taylan.

Calum jumped on the back of creature and grabbed at the things chin, he pulled back the head and rubbed the salt into its large silver eyes, feeling the eyeballs slide beneath his fingers.

The creature screamed and bucked. Calum was thrown across the floor, but the creature had exposed it neck to Gabri. A moment later, the sword sliced the air and the creatures head dropped to the left held to its body on by just a few tendons. Gabri stood before it, panting, her sword covered in black gore.

The creature started to spin in panic, a whirl of nail and water, Taylan pushed himself clear but not before a claw caught his shoulder and ripped open his flesh. Roland was there with a log from by the fire and brought it down on the creatures, its body crumpled under the blow.

The beast fell to the ground but there was still life in it and it started to pull its broken body, desperately, towards the door. Roland brought the log down again. Black ooze splattered across the floor. The body still refused to be still, moved by an unending power.

A battered arm swiped through the air tearing a gash in Roland's silk shirt but he was able to jump back just in time for the claws to miss his chest. Taylan jumped on the crumpled wreck and held what was left down, the wound on his shoulder was bleeding freely.

"Get a flame," shouted Taylan.

Roland grabbed the remains of the rug and wrapped it thick around his right fist. He lit the fabric in the fire, the flames leapt around his arm and burnt back his shirt sleeve. Roland pushed Taylan off the creature and punched his flaming fist into the chest of the creature. The cavity exploded and the flames took of the things body. There was a flash of light and Roland jumped back as a dark, red fire took the thrashing body. Black ooze bubbled and erupted from its neck, spewing out onto the floor.

After a few moments the flames were gone as was the creature, leaving behind just a pool of a thick, black liquid.

Taylan cursed into the silence.

The room was a natural orange again and the fire in the hearth crackled to itself. Black blood stained the wood, water pooled into puddles here and there, plates and bowls littered floor.

"Pa, you're hurt," said Gabri as she pulled a chair from the table and pushed her father into it.

"Roland, your hand?" gasped Taylan seeing the charred skin that cracked across the surface of his forearm and hand.

"I will be fine," said Roland, "I just need some cloth."

Taylan looked at Roland puzzled for a moment and then simply nodded.

"They have never been that strong," said Taylan, "I have never seen one willingly leap into the light."

"It is concerning," said Roland.

Gabri had retrieved a jar of alcohol and some cloth from the kitchen and began tending to her fathers wounds. Roland walked over and took a piece of cloth for himself.

"Jun clean up, please," said Taylan wincing as the alcohol cleaned the wound, "and start making dinner."

"Yes, Pa," said Jun quietly and found a broom from the kitchen.

Calum knelt and started to gather broken pieces of plates.

"I need to tell the Brother about this," said Taylan to Roland, "he needs to know they are growing stronger."

"How many of them have come?" asked Roland.

“A handful, now and then. They come out of the forests,” said Taylan, “they’ve got an encampment a few miles from here. We have ignored them, mostly, not worth the trouble we thought, but now... now I think we must act.”

“I would agree, if it were mine,” said Roland.

“I will go tonight, if you would see to my children for me? I will return before morning.”

“Is it safe?” asked Roland.

“Yes and I won’t sleep easy until I talk to the Brother,” said Taylan and then pointed to his shoulder, “he will also be able to help me with this.”

“Then, go, I will watch the children.”

“You’ll eat something first, then go,” ordered Gabri.

Taylan nodded with a smile.

Calum and Jun cleared away the broken plates and mopped up the water and black gore as best they could. Roland put the cupboard upright and inspected the broken window. Gabri made a simple meal while Taylan and Roland vanished to the stables to check on the animals.

When it was all done the group gathered at the small table and had their meal. Roland, too large for the table, stood by with his plate in his now mended right hand.

Calum looked around the room, happy to have food and conversation again. Calum entertained Jun with stories about life as a prince. Taylan shared news of the region with Roland, Roland taking the most interest in the talk of Dunway gaining influence in the forest. Gabri sat quietly and ate her meal.

“The Saquaari will keep the peace,” said Taylan with a shrug, “don’t worry.”

“The Dun don’t need a war to conquer,” said Roland, “they already have Burroway and the Silver Marsh under their sway and now they are turning their sights on Lay’tol.”

“Let them come and take the ears of the nobles and then they will find no one rules this forest except those that live amongst the trees.”

“The Dun don’t rule with armies like the Kaborn or the men of the North, they prefer deep shadows and short blades and their manner is just as effective. Even the Arn cannot fight paranoia and lies, you had best tell your Brother that, he is the one most in danger.”

“Nonsense, the Arn may love their solitude but we are a family tighter than any other,” dismissed Taylan, “agents and assassins pass through our lands as easily as the thousand-men hordes of the Northern Men.”

“We saw some Hool on the way here. Why are they south?”

“I heard from the trees that the Fork is full. Many have been forced to leave their homes looking for new lands to settle, some are trouble, most are simply moving south. Ystari knows where they head after there, I doubt they find room for their camps in Dunway.”

The group finished their meal and Taylan took his leave. Calum and Jun lay on the floor next to the fire, a curtain now used replace the torn up rug. Roland took a chair against the front door and sat. Gabri said good night and went into the bedroom at the back.

As Calum enjoyed the warmth of the fire he thought on the unbelievable evening. He had seen magic at work for the first time and it had been awe inspiring. The power of the beast that had attacked Roland, a man Calum had seen slaughter a group of warriors with ease, was rendered helpless in its grasp. An unstoppable killing machine that was able to survive its head been removed and its body being pulverised. Calum wondered what he would learn from the Magi when he finally reached the White Spire as he lay by the warm fire.

The peace of his dreamless sleep was interrupted by a deep sound that shook his chest. Calum jumped up from the curtain. The farmhouse was quiet. Jun lay motionless next to the fire. Roland was not sitting in the chair and the front door open.

Calum got up and looked out the window.

The large silhouette of Roland stood in the middle of yard bathed in the moonlight. He watched for moment but the dark figure was not moving.

Calum puzzled by what had woken him but he was too tired to care. Calum found his place by the fire and closed his eyes. A quiet cough came from the back room where Gabri slept. Calum pulled himself back up and moved to door, knocking softly.

“Yes,” came Gabri’s voice from behind the door.

Calum opened the door slightly.

“I just wondering if you heard anything a few moments ago?” asked Calum.

“No,” replied Gabri, “maybe you were having a nightmare?”

Calum laughed to himself and opened the door fully. The room was lit by a small lantern that sat next to the bed.

“That is possible,” he said with a smile, “why are you still awake?”

“I am having trouble sleeping after... everything.”

Calum moved into the room and closed the door behind him, he noticed the salt was still in the piles by the windows, the shutters still nailed shut. Gabri sat up dressed in a loose night gown, a large leather bound book open in her hand.

“Those creatures were like nothing I have ever seen,” said Calum

“I thought it had gotten Pa,” said Gabri shaking her head and closing the book.

“They didn’t and they’re gone now,” said Calum as he sat on the bed, “thank the gods you knew how to use that s word.”

Gabri laughed.

“That’s an impressive book,” said Calum his hand found the leather cover.

“It’s a family treasure. It’s full of legends from the old times. I love reading about the Age of Men,” said Gabri excitedly, “your Emperor, Ka, is in here, I suppose you know all of those legends.”

“I do, when you’re a prince you spend many hours in library reading all the histories.”

Calum’s hand slipped down the leather cover and found Gabri’s hand at the bottom.

“Diana the Blessed, Ka the Sower, Illiad the Lost, Rei the Defiant, Sulla the Fire Babe,” continued Calum, “hundreds of books, each begging to be read.”

“Who was your favourite?”

He paused for a moment and thought.

“Helena the Dragon Slayer, she was so strong and powerful,” he smiled and then added, “like you were tonight.”

Gabri kissed him and Calum kissed her back.

“Can you show me the lands of the First Kingdom?” she asked pulling back from the embrace.

Calum nodded and kissed her soft lips again, firmer this time.

“And the great walls of Kabrace?” she asked.

Calum looked deep into her in the eyes.

“We will ride from the eastern lands of Sulla to western lands of Illiad and see all the wonders in between,” he said quietly.

Gabri pushed the gown from her shoulders and exposing her breasts to him. Calum grabbed her within his hands, firmly and confidently as he always did. The firm flesh caused his body to explode with an energy. Calum pushed himself onto Gabri knocking the book from the bed.

Light spilled into the room and Calum looked up. Roland stood in the doorway.

“Boy,” he said with a low gruff voice, “are you telling your stories again?”

There was a silence and Calum released his hands.

“Leave Gabri be and get to bed.”

Calum looked back at Gabri, a shocked look sat on her face, she was frozen for moment. And then Gabri pulled her gown back to cover herself.

There was another moment and then Calum stood up. The bed creaked. Calum crossed the room. And passed under Roland’s arm.

“Excuse him, my lady,” said Roland, “his cock’s bigger then his brain and he ain’t got much down there to start with.”

Calum was chewing on his cheek. Roland closed the door.

Roland turned to Calum who was turning bright red. Roland didn't speak, his arm came down and struck Calum across the face with back of his hand. Calum tumbled to the ground.

"What are you, boy?" hissed Roland trying not wake Jun by the fire, "a man saves your life and when his back is turn you try and take his daughter."

Calum grabbed at his cheek, stunned, hurt and furious.

"I don't know what ya get away with in castle but ya ain't a prince here."

Roland body was large and ready for a fight. Calum did not speak.

"Get by fire and if I see ya move from it before morning this farmhouse'll be the end for you."

Calum lay on the ground as Roland towered over him, he could not attack the thug, not now. A fair fight he could never win against this brute. Maybe he should attack, anyway and see what Roland the Butcher would do to a boy of fifteen. That would be a tale for the bards, the young Prince Calum torn down before his time by the vicious and evil Roland the Butcher.

Calum nodded. Once. Sharp and short. Roland went to the front door and vanished into the darkness.

Calum went to the fire. His cheek throbbed, but he chewed it anyway, enjoying the pain that ran through his body. He looked at Jun lying motionless next to the fire.

Calum wanted to kick the boy into the fire and watch him burn like the beasts that had come before. That would show Roland he was not the only one who could strike at those weaker than himself, but at the same time Calum did not want to wake the boy who slept still and peace in the warmth of the fire's glow.

Calum watched the fire burn and chewed his cheek. Then he realised was how easily he would been to kill Roland tonight. A sly kick while Roland was pinned, the creature would have torn the self righteous peasant apart.

Next time, Roland would look for his help and he won't be there, instead he would smile from the shadows as the great Roland met his end. And the last thoughts of the man who had lived a thousand years would be the regret of treating Calum so badly.

Chapter 5

Calum woke to the sound of wooden plates being placed on the table, the welcoming smell of cooked meat hung in the air. Calum looked around him. Jun was gone and the farmhouse was bright. Taylan was laying out a cooked breakfast on the table.

"Where is everyone?" asked Calum rubbing at his eyes.

“It’s midday,” said Taylan, “we both slept late.”

“Where’s Roland?”

“He’s out with the horse, he wanted to wake you at dawn when I got back but I told him to let you sleep,” said Taylan putting another plate on the table, “here, have some breakfast.”

Calum pulled himself up to the table.

“It looks like you got caught last night,” said Taylan pointing to Calum’s face.

Calum touched his cheek, it was swollen and bruised.

“It seems,” said Calum lowering his eyes to the strips of cooked meat on his plate.

Calum finished the meal, quietly, and thanked Taylan for his kindness. Taylan gracefully accepted and wished him the best on his travels.

Calum left the household and saw Gabri tending to some chickens in a pen. She looked at him quickly and then looked away. He wanted approach her but he did not know what to say, he felt like a fool. He continued across the large clearing past Jun who was chopping fire wood by the stables.

“Have a good journey, Prince Calum,” he chirped and then went back to his chore.

Roland was brushing down the horse near the clearance exit. Calum took a deep breath, not sure what to expected.

“We should go,” said Roland to the horse.

“Yes,” Calum replied.

“It’s yours to ride,” said Roland not looking at him.

“What?”

“I said, the horse was yours to ride,” Roland paused for moment, “yesterday.”

“You can ride. I’ve gotten used to walking.”

Roland led the horse out of the clearing and Calum followed. The two walked the paths the forest, beside them the horse lumbered, riderless. The day passed and as dusk drew closer the fast running waters of Gella’s Way came and went.

The next day came. Calum woke to see Roland staring out into the forest, as he usually did.

The whole day had passed without a single word passing between the two. Calum had noticed Roland’s body had become hunched and heavy under his cloak.

“Where are we headed to now?” asked Calum to break the silence.

“A week to the west is the Grove of Diana,” said Roland not looking at Calum, “I need to be there for the Festival of the Horse and Bear. After that, we have another week of travel.”

Calum was suddenly aware of the fact Roland had not looked at him since he had hit him. The tension had grown large between the two.

“Then we are travelling together for a while longer,” stated Calum.

“If you do not want my company I can get you a boat back at Gella’s Way.”

“You would like that, wouldn’t you?” laughed Calum.

Roland did not respond.

“See here,” stated Calum firmly, “I need to get to Dunway and you want your land, that’s why we are together. Isn’t that the way of it?”

“Indeed.”

“Well, I still need to get where I am going and you still need your land. So, we continue as we are.”

“If you wish,” said Roland quietly.

“Don’t feel bad, Roland,” laughed Calum, “I will have my revenge one day.”

Roland looked at him and shook his head.

“Come, then,” cheered Calum, “the day is wasting.”

Roland no longer hunched as he walked but returned to his usual, strong posture.

Calum was perplexed by how heavily Roland allowed emotion to weigh on him. Calum had almost forgotten the feeling of being struck. The only memory he held onto from that night was that of the firm Arn breast he had grasped in his hand. In that moment, the nipple had pressed hard and tantalisingly against his palm, a smile crept across his face as the memory took him away from the boredom of the forest path.

Next time he would have more and Roland wouldn’t be there to get in the way.

The days passed and the forest gave way to Diana’s Road again. This time they were on the far side of Yulas’rel. The pair followed the road for just a few miles before abandoning the beautiful mosaics of the highway and returning to the muddy back roads that Calum had grown accustomed too.

The forest continued on endlessly.

More days passed, the forest now seemed a darker green to Calum but he could not be sure. He had not realised he would grow so tired of the dense foliage and started to yearn for the open, golden plains of his homeland. To see a distance village and wonder who lived there and what they were doing at that moment or spy a trade caravan on the horizon and watch it crawl, slowly, across the world.

The corridors of trees and brush all seemed the same. Sometimes, he wondered whether Roland was simply leading him down the same four tracks and eventually would reveal the The First Kingdom still lay just beyond the tree line. His father’s men would descend on him and he would have to stage a daring escape to evade capture.

When the fantasy was over he would return to the long walls of green that passed to the side. The horse's rhythmic clops marking the time.

At the end of the fifth day they came across a small wayhouse. All manner of men stood by its door holding mugs of ale and talking loudly. It was more men than Calum had seen since they had left Salm'rel.

A stable sat to the side, numerous beasts of all types were tied to the railings outside.

"We stay here tonight," said Roland.

"Why are there so many people?"

"For the festival," answered Roland and took his horse to a railing and secured it.

The festival was to be held the next night, Calum had learnt. A celebration of The Horse and The Bear, two servants of the gods and guardians of Diana. Calum had heard many things about The Horse and The Bear but did not realise they were worshipped in their own right in the forests. A mercenary hired by his father once told him he had seen The Horse when he was escorting a merchant ship from Marina's Cove to Hawkescliff.

As the ship came around The Hold, The Horse, large as a mountain, was galloping across the waters of the southern sea. Storm clouds, alive with lightning, formed its mane. Its hooves kicked the ocean into the air, forming fierce cyclones that even at such a distance caused the boat to rock. The Horse galloped north towards the Heartland and then, as it hit the horizon, it became nothing but a storm of clouds and lightning.

Roland and Calum entered the wayhouse, it was bursting with men and women, not a single chair was spare, the space between each person was barely enough for even Calum to squeeze through. Every flat surface had a mug or plate resting on it, most discarded and soiled, a few still full of meats and breads.

"Roland," called a man from across the busy hall.

As he waved, widely, a few men turned their heads and then almost as quickly looked away.

"Come, don't get lost in the crowd," said Roland as he pushed his way through the bodies.

Calum followed in his wake, the room became nothing but a forest of legs and torsos. As he shuffled through some looked down at him, others were too engaged in conversation and gave him no attention.

Calum bumped into Roland as he came to a sudden stop. Calum struggled around the large frame to see what was happening in front.

There stood a tall, Kaborn man with dark brown hair that hung to his shoulders cut neatly at the base of the neck, a thick but short beard covered his sharp angular chin, his eyes large and dark, his skin the rich bronze of Calum's people.

"Roland, I don't want to alarm you but I think you may have a prince following you," laughed the man.

"You were never very good at recognising your betters, San," replied Roland, "I'm sure you're confusing him someone else."

"Now I look, more closely I can see I have made a terrible mistake," smiled San, "come I got a room for you. Follow me, if you will."

San led the way through the crowd and into a long corridor at the back, he stopped at a door and entered. The din of the main hall outside softened as the door shut.

"Ah, Roland, you couldn't help yourself, could you?"

"What do you mean?"

"The scourge of the nobles, you still are, sower of chaos. What a masterful stroke, stealing away the Prince Calum. The First Kingdom has probably already descended into civil war."

"Then you had best get back and make your coin."

"Is there fighting at home?" asked Calum worry taking his voice.

"Don't listen to the fool. You said, yourself, your family is united," said Roland, "San, shut up and get us some food."

"I am joking, my prince, Kabrace still stood when I left it few weeks ago," said San with a reassuring smile and vanished out the door.

Roland stood by his cot and took off his cloak. Calum arranged himself in another corner. San reappeared with a plate of roasted meats and vegetables and sat them on a small table in corner.

"Are they talking about me at home?" asked Calum as San sat down the plates.

"No, nor on roads. You have done a very good job of disappearing," San replied.

"Your father will be keeping it quiet as long as he can," said Roland.

"Am I safe here, does anyone else know me?" asked Calum.

"It is hard to say," said San, "people from all over come to the festival, maybe a few will recognise if you, if they are given the chance."

"That is why you will stay in the room until after the festival," said Roland, "when it is done I will come back for you."

"Where are you headed?" asked San.

"Is that your concern?" growled Roland shooting him a hard look.

“Of course not, I was merely making conversation. I can see you are both very tired from your travels,” San stood up, “I will see you tonight. That cot is mine, don’t let anyone else tell you otherwise.”

And with that, San was gone.

“I want to see the festival,” said Calum.

“It is too risky, if someone recognises you all of your efforts will be for nothing,”

“Is that your concern?” challenged Calum, “I wish to see the festival while I am here. And there is enough distance between me and my father that I don’t need to hide from him.”

Roland looked at him for a moment.

“If you wish, but I am not your minder,” said Roland firmly, “you will find your own way to festival and your own way back. I will not have you following me around.”

Calum was excited, he did not know what to expect. He wondered what amazing sights he would see the next night.

The day finished and night came. San rejoined them, he was delighted to hear Calum would be joining in on the celebrations and offered to help Calum find his way to the grove. Roland grunted from the corner but said nothing.

It was afternoon the next day when San declared it was time to leave. Roland, as though to make point, said he would leave later in the evening and the two went on without him.

Calum enjoyed San’s company as they walked a muddy path that wove through the trees.

“Are you from Kabrace?” asked Calum as they walked beneath the tightly knit canopy.

“Yes, my prince, you may recognise me. I served your brother as a mercenary.”

Calum looked at the man but his face was not familiar to him. Many men worked in the courts of The First Keep and San did not seem noteworthy.

“No, I don’t, I’m afraid.”

“I commanded a regiment under Low King Damon when he thinned the Haali tribes. They were a savage bunch but your brother was a well co-ordinated Battlemaster, even at his young age, it was quite a campaign to be part of.”

Damon had been charged with a campaign against the encroaching northern hordes four years ago, only thirteen at the time.

Calum’s uncle had demanded Damon prove his worth before he be named the Low King. Many had been disappointed when he had proved to be such an effective Battlemaster. Damon not only thinned the tribes, he also managed to push the Haali back beyond the Grey Wash.

Some of the nobles had wanted him to falter or, even better, die in the war and then Calum could be easily named Low King and the pact of his grandfathers formed would

continue untarnished. But when his brother returned a hero, the dissenters were forced to swallow their objections and anoint Damon the successor of King Wren.

Calum had never been happier than when he saw his brother return to Kabrace and watch him bath in the love of his people. Calum loved his brother and would never have a crown at the expense of Damon. Also Calum knew, just as his father did, Damon would be a better King than Calum could ever be.

“Do you think there will be war?” asked Calum, “once Father reveals I am missing.”

“There will be war, eventually,” said San, “you may be an excuse but are not the cause. Your mother’s family has been looking to remove Low King Damon since the day your father recognised him. They are just waiting for the right moment.”

“My mother does not want war, she loves Damon like he was her own.”

“Your mother is good woman and wise consort but she has little power in the east since she allowed Damon to take the crown from you. It is sad, but we Kaborn are cursed to war amongst ourselves, are we not?”

That was what the other men say of the Kaborn. The men cursed by the gods to be at constant war.

Ka had used their obsession with war as a strength and under the great ruler the people of The First Kingdom had conquer all the lands north to south, east to west and after Ka had built his throne with the power of countless swords, his crown was taken from him by his brother with a single blade.

It was said the gods were so dismayed by the death of the chosen ruler, they cursed the Kaborn to be at war with itself until the Mother Dragon returned to eat the world.

There was a truth to the story, for never in the times that man had memory of their deeds, had The First Kingdom been at peace for more than a handful of years. That was until Calum’s grandfathers had signed the pact between the eastern and western families marrying Calum’s father, son of the first amongst the men of west, to his mother, daughter of the first amongst the men of the east. Once the pact was done both of his grandfathers wandered north into the mountains of the Crown never to be seen again.

If only Damon had been within the union.

The afternoon turned to twilight as they wound their way along the path until the trees parted and the great Grove of Diana appeared. A huge clearing populated with burning braziers.

On the far side of the grove stood a huge stone stage of three levels, each level the height of two men. Atop it a huge golden statue of The Horse was anchored, kicking its hooves into

the dark of the night sky, its mane flying behind it. The statue arched over the clearing as tall as the tallest tower of the First Keep.

Calum gasped, barely able to comprehend the enormity of the figure. Between its hooves, on top of podium base, much smaller but still the height of two men, was a golden statue of The Bear.

In front of the pedestal was a whole host of tents and stores being worked by the Arn. Jugglers and stilt walkers made their way through the crowds drawing cries of excitement wherever they went. Nearby, a man was eating fire sticks to the cheers of the onlookers who threw coins of copper and silver.

“Well, my prince, I shall leave you to enjoy the festival,” bowed San.

“Where are you going?” asked Calum.

“A mercenary is always on the hunt for gold and there is plenty to be made here,” he said simply, “if you want to leave early you can follow the path back the way we came. Otherwise, I will meet you at dawn by the statue of The Bear.”

Calum nodded and San disappeared into the crowd. He looked around and saw a hut selling fruits he had never seen before.

“Fruits gathered in the deepest part of the forest,” declared an excited Arn, “just five hammers.”

Calum handed the man the copper coins from his pouch and took a round, purple-red fruit. Calum bit into fruit the taste of sugar and sourness swirled in his mouth, it was delicious. After finishing the first, he bought five more and munched on them happily as he wandered the clearing.

A group of performers were doing the comedy of Illiad the Lost, a story based on the man who was said to have led the some of first men west. The performance was coming to its conclusion.

“But Illiad, men cannot breath underwater,” shouted the woman in green gown dressed as Diana the Blessed.

“I have not heard such a thing in all my travels across this land and I am Illiad the Wise,” cried the man in blue dressed as Illiad, “surely, if the gods would not allow me to breathe underwater they would have told me so themselves.”

The man grabbed a young woman from crowd.

“Excuse me, good lady, do you think a man can breathe underwater?”

“Of course, they can,” laughed the embarrassed woman with the traditional response.

“As beautiful as you are smart,” he announced and then slyly added, “the shows almost over meet me in tent afterwards, won’t ya?”

The woman laughed hysterical as the performer playful squeezed her breast and the men in crowd cheered Illiad on.

“Well then, Diana,” said the man releasing the woman who escaped back into the crowd, “it is time for me to continue my journey.”

The performer mimed swimming through the water.

“See,” he exclaimed, “I told you a man could breathe underwater, return to the forest where you know better? For I am Illiad the Wise and these are my brides.”

Two men appeared dressed as mermaids with seashells in their hair and strips fabric holding large melons to their bare, hairy chests, their faces painted with over-the-top make-up. The crowd cheered and laughed as the mermaids pulled men from the audience, kissing them and smearing the make-up across their faces.

The mermaids then called to the audience.

“Now, if you think that Illiad was Wise.”

“Then you’re in for a big surprise,” yelled the audience back as the mermaids pulled up their short dresses exposing themselves to the crowd.

The audience cheered and threw silver and copper at the performers. Calum threw a coin himself, a wide smile on his face and moved on as the actors thanked the audience.

“Stay, if you will,” called the man dressed as Illiad his voice growing softer as Calum walked way, “for the somber the tale of the brothers, Hama and Gella.”

Calum found himself under the hooves of the great Horse statue that towered above. The people around him did not seem to give it much heed, but Calum could not ignore it. His neck ached as his tried to study the craftsmanship of the statue, running into the occasional person who laughed at the wide-eyed boy and told him to be more careful.

The statue was beautiful. Kabrace was known for its masons and sculptors and none could have carved a statue as realistic as this one seemed.

Once Calum was satisfied he had memorised every line, he dropped his attention to the stone stage in front of him. Festival goers walked freely upon it, some using it as a bench from which they could watch the festival below.

The stonework was bare and simple but well crafter. The corners came together at a perfect angle, at least it would have if time had not chipped away at the stone. The slabs that made up the pedestal seemed to be bonded together to make an almost continuous surface, only the slightest change in texture gave any indication it was not a solid piece of stone.

Calum made it to the upper level and in front of him was the statue of The Bear, its face wild and alive. The light from the brazier danced across the gold surface making it appear as though the fur ruffled in night air. The detail of work was amazing, Calum noticed the

creator had even managed to add saliva to the bared fangs, a fitting tribute to the servant of the gods.

A group was gathered at the back of statue in half darkness. Calum looked beyond them, there sat another clearing, but rather than lit by bonfires and braziers it was lit low by scattered torches and lanterns. Tents had been set up in the shadows but they were not open. He felt drawn to the place for some reason.

Calum looked into the dark of the mysterious city. No one moved among them, he wondered what would happen if he descend into it. He looked back upon the mass of cheerful souls celebrating in the light behind and as he did he spied a vendor selling some roasted nuts. A realisation came upon him and laughter hits his lips.

It was the travelling folk's camp. A camp very similar sprung up outside Kabrace when the festivals came to the city. Calum had let his imagination run wild and felt a bit foolish but the same time gleeful at the mystery he had enjoyed for a moment.

Calum turned back to the statue of The Bear and, after appreciating it a while longer, descended the stone tiers and as he did he saw Roland, talking to a group of elderly woman with long, golden hair. They were dressed in robes of silver and blue. Calum kept walking, he knew he was not to disturb Roland tonight, but also, he did not want Roland to disturb him.

A small shop sold venison sausage baked into a sweet cake and Calum bought two for his evening meal along with a mug of ale with pieces of fruit floating in it. He found a place in the clearing, sat on the grass still warm from the day and enjoyed his meal.

A young woman emerged from the crowd, catching Calum's eye as he took a mouthful of ale. She held his gaze and approached. When the woman was next to him, she lowered herself gracefully to the ground beside him.

"Are you alone, poor boy?" she asked sweetly.

"I am here with some friends but I have lost them in crowds," replied Calum with a smile.

"May I sit and talk awhile?" she asked and did not wait for a response, "my name is Cystine, what's yours?"

Her eyes were bright green eyes, her slim body was draped in a flowing, emerald dress.

"I'm Calum."

"You're a long way from The First Kingdom, Calum."

"Everyone keeps saying."

"Do the Kaborn worshipped The Horse and The Bear?" she asked.

"The Kaborn do not worship the gods like others do," said Calum, "but I never miss an opportunity to enjoy the company of beautiful maidens."

“You are certainly a man of The First Kingdom,” laughed Cystine, “but, tell me, you do believe in the power of gods, don’t you?”

“Of course, our fathers just did not think to raise temples in their name,” he replied, “the gods will do as they will, they don’t listen to the voices of mere men.”

“It is very wise of your fathers. The gods can be uncaring, it is true, but the guardians are much kinder.”

“Do you worship The Horse and The Bear?”

“Of course, I am Sister of Diana. It is my duty to keep this place scared need she return from beyond.”

Calum was taken back he had not expected to meet a Sister of Diana wondering the crowds of the festivals.

“Pardon, I didn’t realise I was speaking with one so honoured.”

“Tell me, my dear boy,” she said her voice becoming soft, “what do you seek in forest?”

“What one does at a festival, eat some good food and enjoy some cheer.”

“Do they not have food and cheer in The First Kingdom?” she asked moving closer and looking into his eyes, “why do you come all this way?”

“I am travelling through the lands to see the wonders beyond my home. This grove will be one of the wonders I remember.”

“An adventurous soul, how glorious, just like mine. I knew it when I saw you,” she laughed loudly, her black, curled hair bounced around her shoulders as she moved her head, “come, Calum, let me show you some of the wonders of the grove.”

Cystine pushed herself up off the ground and Calum stuffed the rest of the venison into his mouth and took a final swig of the sweet ale to wash it down. He then hurried after the Sister who was moving elegantly through the crowd which parted for her.

“Have you seen the statues, Calum?”

“Yes, they are very impressive.”

“Diana made them by her own hand to watch over the grove. If she is reborn, it will happen in this very place and The Horse and The Bear will take their golden form to guard her as she grows from a babe to a maiden.”

“Do you think Diana will return?” asked Calum.

“I hope not. Diana is above all other men, in strength and wisdom, and if she must return, it will be because the gods, themselves, shake with fear.”

Cystine came to a stop, in front them was another young woman wearing the same dress talking intently to man dressed in heavy mail.

“Yin,” she called and the young woman looked up, “I am showing my young Kaborn friend the Inner Spring, could you help me?”

“Certainly,” said Yin and turned back to the man, “if you would excuse you me, good sir.”

Yin stood up and walked over. The man in armour did not seem impressed.

“This is Calum, he’s visiting from The First Kingdom,” explained Cystine, “his friends have lost him in the crowd, so I am keeping him company.”

“A wonderful night is it not, Calum?” said Yin, “what is it I am showing you?”

“The Inner Spring, sister.”

“Of course, let me show you the way.”

The three moved through crowd and beyond the light to the dark shadows that surrounded the bright festivities. Calum looked back, the sounds now low in the night air.

“Here,” said Yin and held out her hand.

A small blue orb of light escaped her hand and moved through the trees.

“Is it true, the Kaborn do not have magic?” asked Cystine.

“We have lost the art in our lands,” nodded Calum, “we get by with our swords and machines.”

“But how do you heal the sick?” asked Cystine.

“We don’t, people die young there.”

“How sad,” said Cystine sadly.

“Enough, Cystine,” sighed Yin, “follow the orb, if you will Calum. It will lead the way to the Inner Spring.”

Yin turned to return to festival

“Come with us, Sister,” said Cystine, “you know the way better than I.”

There was a moment between the two.

“If you wish,” said Yin.

The three moved through the trunks of the trees, there was no path here. Calum stepped over roots and squeeze through the gaps he found. The young woman called to him to make sure he had not lost his way. He always replied with laughter and reassurances as the blue light danced here and there, throwing hard shadows through the forest.

Finally, he found the two young woman standing inside a small clearing lit by several of the glowing blue orbs. In the centre a huge, stone pillar just taller than Roland erupted from the ground, water bubbled from the top and then skimmed down the sides collecting in a small pool at the bottom. The pool emptied into a stream that vanished into the woods.

Calum felt it. A powerful pulse that seemed to come from inside him like a heartbeat. As he moved closer to the pillar the beat became stronger and more intense.

“Isn’t it magnificent?” whispered Cystine.

Calum was silent as no words came to him. He moved closer, the stone was pulling him in. His very being pulsed as a cold, hard energy rocked his body.

“What is it?” asked Calum at last staring into the clear water that ran across the stone surface.

“The heart of the forest. The magic that warms the ice of north and blunts the axes of south.”

Cystine was behind him, he felt her hand snake around his torso. She held him tight. She kissed his neck and a power shot through him, her hand drifted down gently laid her hand between his legs. The pulse now shook his body physically, he had never felt anything like it before.

“Do you feel it, Kaborn?”

“Yes.”

“Then the magic is one with you tonight.”

She placed her hands gently on his shoulders and turned him around, her eyes wide and glistened in the blue light.

“I have been waiting for you, Calum. Thank Diana, we have found each other at last.”

Her robes dropped and she stood before him naked.

For the first time when faced with a naked woman, Calum paused.

He did not know why but his mind was spinning. He was nervous. The festival. The forest. The golden statue of the Bear. The purple-red fruits he had tasted bitter and sweet. The pulsing grew louder.

He tore at his clothes and when he was free he pushed Cystine onto the soft grass. The energy pulsed in through his body and rattled his skull. His groin throbbed.

His mind was gone, his body took control and he was in Cystine, his face buried between her firm, warm breasts. Cystine moaned with pleasure as he thrust himself into her again and again. The moment had him and after a few more short thrusts the surge rushed through his body and he fell quiet on top of her.

Panting, he pulled himself off her, rolling to the ground beside her. Cystine lay, stretched out on the ground still moaning to herself. When he noticed Yin standing naked at side the grove.

“I hear Kaborn men are ravenous fiends,” laughed Yin playing with her body, “do you have enough energy for another?”

He did. Calum pushed himself from the ground and against Yin. She was up against a tree and with the force of his body he made her throw her head back into the night air. For a second time, the excitement left his body and Yin stood before him naked and satisfied.

After a few moments, Calum's mind returned and the world made sense again, the beautiful maiden stood nude in front of him. In a moment of greed, he grabbed Yin breasts, small and tight, and licked and sucked at nipple. She laughed, playfully, in response.

There was no one here to stop him from enjoying these woman as much as he wished, he may even take them again. Together, if he chose. But the soreness that emanated from between his legs said otherwise.

Calum continued to fondle breasts when he thought he felt the skin loosen beneath his grip. He pulled his back hand. The once firm, pointed tit he was enjoying began to droop into strange, triangles of wrinkled skin and loose fat. He looked at the face of Yin, wrinkles forming across her face and her beautiful skin started to melt.

Calum yelled in fright and stumbled back.

"Calm yourself, Kaborn," came a voice behind him, he turned and there stood a old woman dressed in Cystine's robes laughing, "just another face for the same."

"Who are you?" asked Calum.

"We are the Sister's of Diana," said Cystine and then added with an old, wicked smile, "and you are not an experienced lover. No matter though."

Calum was now both angry, confused and embarrassed.

"Take me back to the grove," he shouted.

"Cystine, don't be horrible to boy," snapped old Yin who was now dressing, "you have what you wanted, be thankful."

"You're right, do excuse me, lad," she chuckled, "I only get to be with a man once a year, it can make a woman a little... particular."

"Take me back, now," yelled Calum into the dark.

"You had better put your clothes back on first, Calum," smiled old Yin her teeth gnarled and brown beneath her wrinkled lips.

Calum scooped up his clothes and started to pull them on in a huff.

"My lady," exclaimed Cystine behind him and as Calum turned back another young woman had entered grove, Cystine and Yin were now both kneeling.

Calum pulled his shirt over his head and looked upon the woman, slender and beautiful like the others had once been with long, straight brown hair that flowed to her hips.

"Leave us," ordered woman with an authority.

Yin and Cystine pulled their old bodies from the ground and hurried into the trees. Calum stood across the clearing from the young woman, letting the silence sit as he chewed on his cheek.

Calum had decided he had seen enough of the festival and just wanted to be back in wayhouse, readying his bag to leave. He was done with this damn forest and the beasts within.

“I would like to go back now,” he said quietly but angrily.

“Please, excuse my sister’s they are were just over eager,” the woman replied calmly, “the Blood of Ka is a rare treasure amongst the trees. It is a disgrace they were willing to scare a boy to get it.”

“I am not a boy and I don’t feel wish talk too your kind anymore,” growled Calum, “take me back to the grove.”

Calum was red now, he wanted to storm off into forest alone but he knew that would just get himself killed.

“My name is...”

“I don’t care who you are,” he yelled his rage taking him, “I’m done with this stupid forest and I’m done with you, take me back.”

“Please, Prince Calum, I do not wish there to be bad blood between us. I will take you back if you wish, but if you would, I would invite you into my home as my royal guest.”

Calum’s anger surged in his mind, but he was stopped for a moment by the mention of his name and title. He thought. The woman before him seemed remorseful, refusing her now would only prove that she was right in calling him a boy and he would not let her have such a victory. He took a deep breath.

“Very well,” he said still chewing on cheek.

The woman motioned her hand and the trees parted revealing a small path to a wooden hut with roof of woven branches and a simple stone chimney that smoked.

“You need not worry, the forest here is kind tonight,” she smiled, “go straight in any direction for a while and it will take you where you wish to go.”

The woman motioned up the path and they walked together.

“I am Dias, the Keeper of the Grove of Diana,” she said, “I wish you had made yourself known to me. We would have organised an appropriate reception for you Calum, Anointed Prince of The First Kingdom, second born of King Wren, the only king to sit upon The First Throne.”

The sudden affront of Calum’s full title somehow calmed his mind and reminded him of his distant court.

“No need,” said Calum tersely, “I am not travelling with my banners. It’s an accident I am even here.”

The two reached the hut and went inside, it was small area, a small table to eat, bed in the corner and a simple closet and dressing table.

“A Sister’s life a simple one while we watch the grove, I am afraid my reception cannot be illustrious as the ones held by your mother in Kabrace,” she smiled and motioned to a small wooden chair.

“You have heard of our galas?” asked Calum as he found the chair and pulled it up, the anger in him was slowly dying away.

“I have been to a few, myself,” she said with a smile, “I have even seen you from a far though you were a child of five at the time.”

“Are you an illusion as well? Are you as old as...”

Calum’s voice trailed off not sure what to think of the two women who had just fled into the night.

“I am much older,” said Dias softly, “but on the last night of High Summer all of us are blessed with our ideal selves. A gift from The Bear. With that gift, we seek the company of men and if we are lucky, we will bear children who will be raised as the Sister of Diana, if they are girls, or the Red Guard, if they are boys.”

“I wish I had known,” said Calum, “I would have never have gone into the forest with them.”

Though immediately wondered to himself if the words were true.

“Cystine has always been a troublemaker,” said Dias with a sigh, “I did not think she would go as far as she did but her actions are understandable.”

“What?”

“The Blood of Ka is very ancient,” said Dias and reached her hand out and laid it onto his chest.

She was quiet for a moment.

“I can feel it in your veins. It is so cold, so sad, so powerful,” her eyes clenched tight and she winced, “the colours... are unbearable.”

A flash of the frozen court erupted from Calum’s mind. Dias was kissing him. He pulled back and stood up from the chair, shocked.

“I must be getting back,” he stuttered.

“No,” said Dias just as shocked, “please, excuse me, Prince Calum. I forget myself. You must understand the urges on this night are hard to control.”

The woman sat back in her chair a look of sadness on her face.

“You should go, the forest is kind and will take you where you wish to go.”

“Your sister’s said I had magic in me,” said Calum and then paused, “is that true? I was taught the Kaborn could not control magic.”

“Good prince, Cystine would have said anything to entice you. Her words were nothing more than a trap.”

A sullen look crossed Calum face. The humiliation of being tricked no longer concerned him, it was now the growing dread that maybe his journey had been for nothing, he was a fool to chase this dream as the scholars had told him.

“You have been taught true, Prince Calum,” continued Dias, “you have no ability to use magic. But magic is wild beast, hard to tame. A wall of stone and lumber will keep you safer than any made of magic. Your people are clever, industrious and cunning that is something to celebrate.”

Dias turned her head and peered into the fire that burnt in the corner of the room.

“Though you can experience magic,” she said softly, “if you wish.”

“How?”

“I am no court magician or street fair illusionist. I am the Keeper of the Grove of Diana and I demand sufficient payment if I show you some of the power held by us.”

“What do you want?”

“The same you gave my sisters. But this time it is no trick, you know under what terms you give it, knowing fully what I am,” she stood and looked him in eyes.

Calum paused for a moment looking at Dias, her beautiful body draped by a soft, blue dress of silk that fully displayed the graceful curves of her body.

“You will show to me the power and then I will decide if it worth the price,” he said, “I will not be fooled again.”

“Very well.”

Dias went to a tall, cupboard built into the wall and from inside removed a vial of something red and handed it to him.

“This is what makes me who I am tonight. The beauty that was taken by time and trials returned for the world to look upon again until its task is done.”

Dias held out the vial to Calum.

“Drink.”

Calum took the glass vial in his hands. The crystal of the vial cut and stabbed at his hand. He looked into the red liquid for a moment and saw nothing.

He drank.

It tasted of nothing. It felt like nothing. He waited.

Something ran itself across his body, like a thousand snakes slivering over him. Then it came again but this time it seized him as though he was taken into the grip of a giant's hand. His mind seized shut. A vision took him, a vision of himself encased in gold, familiar but flawless. His muscles throbbed with a joyous pain as they sprung to life and started crawl under his skin.

Calum's clothes seemed to tighten, he felt his legs ache and he was sure the room was growing smaller. A beard cut through his skin and across his face, short and thick.

Calum's feet started to push against the inner fur of his boots, curling up as they did. The stitching of his clothes started to cut into him his body. Calum found the mind to quickly remove them as his body transformed.

When the room stopped shrinking and his muscles stopped crawling Calum stood in firelight, tall, strong, naked.

Dias passed him a small silver mirror.

"Look upon yourself," she said, "as you truly are."

Calum lifted the mirror and saw his hair was no long a weak red-brown colour he hated but a rich, dark brown like mud, strong and thick bands falling to his shoulders. His face was no longer loose but tight and angular, his eyes were a pure, white with piercing brown pupils. Calum almost did not recognise himself but as he turned the mirror he saw himself again. The same flat, circular ears and pushed out slightly from under his hair. The same wide, sly smile and glowing teeth. The same sharp chin, now more prominent. His nose the same elegant, long nose of ancient Kaborn.

Calum looked across at the woman now smaller than him.

"This is..." said Calum, his voice deeper and stronger than it had been only moments ago causing his body to flinch at the sound and Calum lost the thought.

Dias crossed the room and wrapped her arms around his narrow, muscular waist. Letting her hand fall on the hard, flat muscle of his buttocks. Calum felt the surge of passion rise as she place her head upon his tight chest.

The desire came and Calum let it fill his body. It did not overwhelm him or cause him to lose his senses, the passion for love became part of his being. The feeling exhilarated him and made him aware every slight motion of the woman who had lovingly, draped herself around him. Calum took the time to enjoy the feeling of the soft silk of dress against his bare skin. It teased, slightly, at the sensitive part of his body.

Calum felt Dias hands wander as she explored his body, allowing him to become of aware of the new flesh that had wrapped itself around him. As she did he found each muscle responded differently, he could feel and control each one independent of the other.

Calum large hands found Dias' gown and pushed the shoulders away, it slipped between the bodies and, gently, fell to the ground. She pushed back from him and sat on the bed, arching her body back to show off her large, proud breasts adorned with bright red nipples. Her waist slender and became wide as her hips curved around to long, slender legs. Dias placed her feet onto the bed and opened her legs, exposed herself completely to him.

"You are truly a man worthy of me," she said holding her hand out to Calum begging for him to join her.

Calum moved to the bed with strong, slow strides. Calum laid himself between her legs and kissed the woman, the most beautiful he had ever seen. His hand followed curves of body gliding over the soft, smooth skin.

"How long til the sun rises?" asked Calum.

"If the gods are kind they will keep the morning from us for as long as it takes the Mother Dragon to return," she replied losing her breath as Calum's hands slipped between her legs.

"It is not enough time to partake in all of your beauty," it was a line he had said many times before in the cold keep of Kabrace, but here in the warmth of a small hut with a woman of unearthly beauty, he meant it for the first time.

Calum lowered himself between her legs and the two bodies became tangled.

The night felt unnaturally long as the two met again and again in ways Calum had never known before but in ways Dias seemed well versed.

The forest was still dark outside the window when the waves of energy in Calum's body paused again as the ecstasy flooded over him, he had lost count of the number of times he and his lover had reached their climax. He went to kiss her, he wanted to be one with her forever but Dias' hand rose to his lips and he stopped.

"You must sleep now, good prince," said Dias, "The Bear has given us what he can and now we must move on to the accursed day."

Dias kissed him one last time and Calum fell on to the bed next to her.

"I don't want it to end," said Calum as the sadness of moment tainted the joy of evening.

"In the day, promise to make a home of wood and stone, my love," said Dias kissing him on the forehead, "it will provide more than this ever can."

The words seemed to steal his newfound energy and his body surrendered to exhaustion.

Morning light streamed across the floor. Calum woke in the bed that had grown larger in the night, his arms were skinny again, his stomach loose. He sat up and saw a screen of grey hair hiding the woman sitting in front the wooden dressing table. With a soothing, rhythm she combed her long, white hair.

The woman hummed to herself a song Calum had heard somewhere before but not sure from where. He sat for a moment and listened to the song, it made him feel like he was home.

“The forest will take you back, Prince Calum,” came an old voice from behind my hair.

Calum pulled himself up, his body ached and his head throbbed.

“I don’t know the way,” he said.

“The forest will take you,” said the voice softly and reassuringly again, “as it is kind.”

The clothes and boots he had abandoned lay on floor in mess. He picked them up, trying to ignore his head and muscles that screamed with exhaustion.

After dressing himself, Calum turned back to woman. He noticed the old, bony hand that held the brush and paused for a moment.

Calum wanted to see Dias once more before he left. He had spent so much of the night fascinated by her beautiful, blue eyes, if he looked beyond the old face he knew he would see her again as she was just a few moments before when they were wrapped in each other.

Calum stepped forward towards the screen of hair, one last look to remember the woman he would always love, but then he stopped. Calum knew better of himself. He would only see an old crone and nothing more because that was who he was in the accursed day.

Calum turned, silently, and left the hut.

The trees and roots blocked his path. The morning sun broke through the leaves and scattered to the ground. He wondered if he was going the right way. Dias had said the forest would take him back, he had to trust her words and keep moving forward.

Finally, he pushed clear of the trees and found himself in front of the wayhouse, Roland’s horse still tied to post outside. There were men gathered around the door nursing mugs and pieces of bread. Some swaggered, still drunk from the night before.

Calum stumbled through the wayhouse and into his room. He saw San, for a moment, he was collecting his gear and packing his bag.

“You found your way back,” cheered San but Calum did not reply.

Seeing the cot, Calum collapsed into it, his whole body melted into its rough fabric.

Calum dreamt of might and power. His body was complete, his eyes were sharp and clear, his mind raced with a thousand clear, precise, thoughts. In his hand he swung a blade of dark onyx as he flew above the land. All feared and loved him. They called him Emperor and they knelt before him, shouting his name in triumph, in front his brother, Damon, bowed to his Emperor, happy and white with old age, the Stone Crown still firmly on his head.

“Emperor,” cheered the crowd in unison, “leader of all men, slayer of the beasts.”

A boot hit him in the arse.

“Get up,” commanded Roland “it’s time to go.”

Calum screamed something inaudible into his cot.

“Tomorrow,” was the only word Calum could find before his body collapsed again.

Chapter 6

The mirror reflected his naked form, familiar but broken. His chest small, his arms skinny, his legs twisted and useless.

Maids without faces brought him his cloths. The plumed shirt of excessive cheer was on him now, he raised his arms and they pulled upon the blue vest that constrained him. They laid the trousers in front, he stepped forward and the maidens pulled the them up, they had done the world a service and hidden his grotesque form from the world.

He looked at himself and felt the handle of the knife, it felt as cold and wicked as it always did. The doors opened, the mirror was empty, he entered the frozen court where the colours danced.

The nobles still sightless, still silent, still unmoved. The king called Calum forward. He could stop, he could stay himself, but he could not. The king beckoned him on and he chose to obey the call he could not refuse.

Calum reached the rise and knew, in that moment, as he looked at the squat, grey man, he must have that form. The form of strength and certainty and power that he had never been or known or desired before. With it he could escape this place, escape the king and his dead court.

The king eyes moved, coming a live for the first time, the eyes became focused and hard on Calum. They were known. Brother, they would have called each other, if they had not gotten lost along the way.

The knife was in his hand and Calum stabbed into the gut. His hand gripping the knife hard and fast. The king seized Calum's hands within his own. The king's grip was cold and strong, he then pushed blade across his own gut. Blood flowed from the wound like a fountain.

The king laughed as the room filled, lapping at the knees of the nobles soaking their robes. The blood rose, drowning the children crushed by the gowns of their guardians.

Calum awoke. The usual pleasure and disgust was absent, his heart did not race and his breath was not quick. He looked at his pants, they were clean and dry.

The dark room was lit by a single lantern, Roland sat across the room looking at the wall.
“What...”

The words caught in Calum's dry, rough throat. His mouth was thick with mucus, his lips were dried and cracked. Calum coughed and snatched the pitcher on the table.

"It's night, you've slept all day," said Roland quietly.

Calum looked into the pitcher, it was clean enough. He gulped down the water as fast as he could.

"Did you enjoy the festival?" asked Roland.

Calum pulled the pitcher away from his face.

"Yes," replied Calum, bluntly.

"I heard from Yin that you disappeared with Dias."

Calum eyes moved to Roland, for the first time Calum was the one who did not want to talk.

"Yes, I met her in the forest," said Calum reluctantly, "she wanted an audience with me as a prince of The First Kingdom"

"And what did speak of?" asked Roland.

"Politics," said Calum wanting to end the conversation, "the only thing nobles ever want to speak of. You wouldn't understand."

Roland tossed Calum a pouch of gold, it hit his chest and fell into the fabric of the cot.

"What's this?"

"Your payment from Yin and Cystine," Roland said, "if I knew you were going to entertain the Sisters I would have reminded you to collect your dues."

Calum picked up the pouch and looked inside there seemed to be twenty or so wings.

"Well, lad, I'm glad you finally got it out of you. The farm girls from here to the White Spire, can now rest easy in their beds," said Roland with a smile, "come, you're going to need some food."

Roland pulled himself up from bed and led the way back into the common room. It was now empty except for a few tradesmen huddled in a corner, all the visitors seemed to have moved on since the celebration. A simple stew bubbled over fire. Calum took a bowl.

"How did you react when the magic wear off?" asked Roland with a strange amusement in his voice.

"You seemed to have found a sense of humour at the festival," grumbled Calum his mind still dull.

Roland laughed.

"It was... confronting," smirked Calum trying to join in the laughter but the energy was not in him.

Calum thought back on the events of the previous night and found the humour as he always did.

“Is your rare joy from entertaining the Sisters, as well?” asked Calum

“That and the company of good friends,” replied Roland with a sigh.

“Do you know much about magic, Roland?”

“A bit,” said Roland and then add quickly, “but nothing I will discuss.”

“This is not about you, Roland,” said Calum annoyed, “I want to know about the Kaborn.”

“Ask then?”

“Do you think I will be able to learn anything at the White Spire?”

“It is a bit late to be asking that question now, lad.”

Calum grunted in anger.

“Have you ever heard of a Kaborn who can wield magic?” said Calum swallowing his tempered.

“There are tales of such things but I have never met one.”

“There are tales of you laying Diana,” said Calum dis heartened.

“And who is to say those aren’t true?” said Roland.

“Are they?”

“Sadly, no,” replied Roland, “magic is a dangerous thing that can turn men into monsters as you saw. That you will learn that at the White Spire, I am sure. Though whether you will be able to find such power within yourself, that is something only you can know.”

“Maybe, I should just take the first caravan back to The First Kingdom?” said Calum to no one.

“That is something you may want to consider. You have had quite the adventure, but maybe it is time to go back to your mother and father.”

Calum yawned. He needed to sleep again.

“What did you and Dias discuss?” asked Roland again.

“Magic, the forest, nothing of real importance,” said Calum dismissively, “I think I should get some more sleep.”

“As you wish, we should get moving tomorrow though, we still have many miles to travel.”

“I’ll be up at dawn.”

The journey continued west for three more days. On the third, the dense forest began to thin and in the middle of the afternoon the trees vanished without notice. Now, in front Calum stretched the green and blue meadows of Dunway.

The sun shone, gentle and welcoming, across the land. Tall bushes decorated with brilliant flowers grew from the open fields while white and grey dots of cattle and sheep wandered here and there. There were no fences or walls, so the animals were free to roam as they pleased. A small path made of crushed grass snaked away from the forest.

“A nice change from the forest,” declared Calum stretching widely.

Roland did not respond.

“How far to the White Spire?” asked Calum.

“We will cut across the fields to Diana’s Way and find passage there. A week or so we should be at the Spire.”

They continued across the grassland as the sun moved through the sky. Before nightfall the two made camp under a ledge of rocks protruding from a small mound of earth as a rain storm fell across the farmland around them.

The next day, at around midday, the path ended at a hamlet. It was nothing more than a few houses clustered together before a wooden platoon floating in the quiet waters of Diana’s Way. A few barges were moored, burdened with large crates and barrels of goods from the north.

Calum found a Dun sleeping quietly by the riverside under a large sheet of fabric held up by posts. Calum asked if the man knew if any of the barges would take travellers. After a short discussion the Dun agreed to take them with him for a fair price once his customers had arrived and completed their trades.

The Dun was much shorter than the men of The First Kingdom, the man’s skin was a pale pink, his eyes were small and narrow, his body squat and wide.

There was no room for the horse on the barge, so Roland found a buyer amongst the small group of houses who was very eager to take the horse from him. Roland said the awkward, oversized saddle was a gift but the buyer had already removed the saddle and thrown it to the side.

When the two returned to the barge, a wagon was collecting barrels and boxes from it. Roland, unable to watch the men struggle with the heavy goods, lent his strength and soon the trade was done.

As the men took a short rest from the labour, a child ran up and began chattering excitedly to the barge owner about a special feast that was being planned for that evening. The boy’s father had just acquired a fine beast from a traveller and everyone was welcome to join. The barge owner, reluctantly, refused.

The barge owner then ushered Calum and Roland onto his vessel and released it from the dock. The young child cheered and waved goodbye from the river bank.

Calum found a place amongst the crates that block harsh light of the setting sun. He looked back at the hamlet as a large pillar of smoke rose from the centre of the cluster. He was glad he had not named the horse.

Calum was amazed by the squat Dun at the back of boat who single handily steered the barge down the river with a single rudder tucked under his shoulder. The sun made the land golden as the small fishing villages and farmhouses floated past.

Night came and Roland lit the lanterns at the front of the vessel. The moon, large and full, turned the world silver. The Dun did not stop, he needed to sail through the night to meet his next customer at dawn.

The barge sailed for another five days down the river, sometimes moving at night, sometimes during they day, depending on the demands of the traders that slowly took away the stock that surrounded Calum.

On the sixth day, the river widened and emptied itself out into the large lake of Diana's Rest. On the distant edge of the lake, shooting straight into the air, was a single, pearl-white spire coming to a single point a thousand feet above the ground. Two black, onyx structures spiralled around the central white spire, gripping to its side, just before the peak the two black structures broke away from the tower creating a summit of three points, two black and one white. Above it, in midair was suspended a single crystal which must have been the size of house in its own right, glistening in the midday sun.

The Dun turned the barge, setting it down at a small dock just before the mouth of river. Calum paid him the man due and thanked him. The Dun nodded and wished Calum well.

Roland found a man with a schooner taking passengers across the lake to the city, setting sail the next day. Roland organised the passage and the two found beds in a wayhouse that sat next to the dock.

Calum looked across the wayhouse at the small crowd in the room, a simple meal sat on the plate in front of him. His bronze skin and brown hair stood out from the pale pink and white skin of those that surrounded him and even though he was only fifteen, he was as tall as the tallest man here. Roland struggled next to him, uncomfortable in the seat far too small for him.

"I'm not going home," said Calum with a certainty, "there will be no place for me there now. Father would have to have told the court I am gone and there would already be new arrangements in place for my younger brothers. Going back, now, would be wrong and a waste."

"Do you think there is a place for you here?" asked Roland.

“If there isn’t I’ll go east to the Silver Marsh or find work in Sowland’s Watch,” shrugged Calum and then added with a smile, “maybe I’ll follow you south.”

Roland smiled back and shook his head.

The next day they boarded the schooner with a handful of others. It skipped fast across the flat water of the lake, propelled by a fast, fresh wind that whipped down from the north.

The White Spire grew large and more impressive as the boat grew closer. The enormous structure dwarfed the city below it even though the city, itself, was quiet large. The dock was a scattering of wooden and stone buildings and piers along the shore line in front of a ring of tall, stone walls.

The schooner settled itself against one of the piers. The smell of dirty chicken cages, rotting vegetables and fresh sewerage caught in Calum’s nose, it smelt like Kabrace. Some men argued loudly, pointing at pieces of papers and shaking fists in the air, some barked orders to boys and girls, as old as Calum, who hurried to organise stock onto moored barges or fill waiting wagons with goods.

Calum and Roland left the boat and made their way to the city. The entrance was a large, open gate with carts and men passing freely beneath.

After passing beneath, themselves, Roland led Calum away from the main throng into the back streets, the masses of bodies moving through the narrow streets made Calum feel welcomed, he had missed being in a large city, the streets full of people and life.

The back streets were just tracks of mud and loose stone, flanked on both sides by hastily constructed houses that look as though they would tumble over, if only there was enough room. A worker hurried past, drenched in the sweat of the humid heat that hung in the air, homeless people lay quietly in shadowed corners, sleeping soundly while they had the safety of the daylight, a child threw waste water from a doorway onto the road ahead of Calum, unaware he existed.

Roland stopped in front a door, that looked liked any other except for a bird in flight painted on it. Roland knocked loudly. After a short while, it opened and there stood a squat man, his face slightly wrinkled.

“Looking for a room for me and the lad. Two nights,” said Roland holding two silver swords in the air.

The Dun nodded and ushered the two through the door.

The hallway was low and tight, Roland had to duck slightly to get through the space, they were led up a tight staircase and into a tiny room with two dirty beds. A window in the back wall looked on to a bare brick wall a foot from it.

“The doors are locked at the second bell, opens again at dawn,” said the Dun and left them to the room.

Roland turn to Calum.

“We are here, then,” said Roland a strange awkwardness in his voice.

“You’re not taking me to the White Spire?” asked Calum.

“You can find it easy enough,” said Roland shaking his head.

“Thank you,” said Calum with a smile not sure what else to say to the man.

“Your thanks isn’t needed,” said Roland quickly, “I’ll have what is mine then.”

“What are you going to do with the land?” asked Calum looking into the bag.

“Return there, one day. I do not know when.”

“Can I visit you when you return?” asked Calum nervously.

“If you wish,” said Roland flatly.

Calum smiled and pushed asides the contents and found the secret pouch at the back still sown shut. He sliced it quickly with his hunting knife and looked in.

The writ was gone.

“It’s not here,” stammered Calum, “I put it in before we left, I am sure.”

All the moments he had left the bag unattended, flashed before him. At any of those moment someone could have taken it and sown the opening closed again, he thought. But who? Only one person would have even known to look.

“It was San,” exclaimed Calum, “he must have taken.”

“San is no thief,” said Roland shaking his head his face was fierce with anger.

“I swear to you...”

“I trust you, Calum,” said Roland through gritted teeth and then added quickly, “do not worry yourself.”

“I don’t have anything else to pay you with.”

“Calm yourself,” said Roland simply his voice returning to its normal level state, “you are still a boy you have a lifetime to pay me back.”

“Anything,” said Calum forcefully, “I will make this right.”

Roland smiled and nodded.

“If I find you again and you are man with means, I’ll have a payment of a thousand wings.”

“Ten thousand wings,” challenged Calum, “land is worth much more than one.”

“One will be enough.”

Silence came across the room.

“It is time for me to leave,” said Roland, “you have the room for two nights. After that you must find your own way.”

The words hit hard Calum, after the weeks he had spent with Roland the realisation that their journey was over brought a heaviness, but he knew any expression would be met with a harsh rebuke that Roland always had at hand.

“I will see you another day then,” said Calum holding out his hand.

“Another day,” said Roland with a smile and shook Calum’s hand and then added, “be careful what you find, Calum.”

The words were strange to Calum but before he could respond there was a knock at the door.

“Roland,” called a voice, “come and embrace an old friend.”

Roland looked at the door and released Calum’s hand. Roland turned, slowly, went to the door and opened it.

In the open doorway stood a thin man wrapped in a black and blue robes, he stood only slightly shorter than Roland. He had deep, black eyes, his pale skin was dull, lifeless, clinging tight to the bones of his slender face.

“Why are you here, Doran?” asked Roland with a low voice.

“You haven’t changed at all,” said the man pushing Roland aside and moving into the room, “and you are the young prince. I am sure I’m honoured to meet you.”

The man simply nodded in Calum’s direction.

“I am leaving,” said Roland.

“Always in a hurry, you must slow down, Roland. Running off here, running off there but then focus was something you always struggled with.”

“Goodbye, Calum,” said Roland ignoring the intruder, “good luck.”

“Elerys, wants to see you,” said Doran quickly.

“I will not.”

“Still a coward after all these years,” laughed Doran, “I had heard from people you had changed your ways.”

“You know nothing of it,” scowled Roland.

“Then prove me wrong, boy.”

“I have nothing to prove to a worthless, old man.”

“She’s in her last days, Roland,” sighed Doran, “will you deny her, again?”

Roland was quiet for a moment.

“Be a good man for once, Roland, and let me take you to her,” said Doran and then turned to the Calum, “are you coming to the Spire, my boy?”

Calum looked at Roland, who was still quiet looking at the door.

“Come, if you will,” said Roland suddenly.

Doran, without hesitation, pushed back Roland and led the way out into the city streets.

The White Spire towered over the city making it seem as though it was always just around the next bend, but it wasn't. The streets came and went and Calum lost his bearings.

“How did you know I was here?” asked Roland.

“I didn't,” replied Doran, “Elerys, sent me. She would have come herself but she finds it hard to leave her room these days. For some reason she is still interested in your nonsense, Roland.”

“You have lost your's, Doran?”

“You had potential once, that is true, but, my dear Roland, you've become a bit too... common for me.”

“I think the word you are looking for is old.”

Doran smirked.

“I was hoping you would have found a less vulgar humour in your travels.”

“I must say the years have been kind to you. Elerys cannot leave her room and yet you are still full of life and energy?” said Roland, “the company of the virgins has worked wonders for you. If only, Elerys had been so wise.”

“I can tell you've missed me,” laughed Doran, “perhaps you should stay longer and show me the errors of my wicked ways.”

Roland shook his head as the city vanished and in front of Calum sat a garden of grass, low benches and shrubs which ran up to the outer wall of the White Spire.

A group of Arn, dressed in all manner of coloured robes stood in the courtyard talking to each other. The walls of tower were smooth and bare, except for the black onyx stone work that twisted around white surface. A huge, set of double doors were the only opening to the tower.

Calum walked between the doors and into the tower's atrium. A huge pressure collapsed on to his chest. The doubt returned as he looked up at the enormous hollow interior of the Spire, high above a simple, grey roof was barely visible .

Several disjointed staircases wrapped themselves around the inside of the wall of the spire following no particular pattern. At different intervals along the staircases were doors of all different shapes and colours. Beneath Calum, the floor was made of highly polished onyx and white marble, laid together in a spiral of large triangles, that reflected the Magi that stood around, talking to each in soft voices.

Doran led the way through the circles of men and women to an orange door in the wall, he opened it and beyond Calum saw a balcony that overlooked the centre well of tower much higher up the tower. Calum stepped through and the muttering voices of the Magi vanished, he was high above looking down on them.

Doran and Roland were already halfway up the stairs that rose to the left when Calum had oriented himself. They walked past several doors until Doran stopped in front of one painted with red and green diamonds and led the way into a room.

A few dozen birdcages were hung from the roof, more were held on elaborate stands. Only a few were empty, most of the cages were occupied by birds of different sizes and plumage. Some chirped, some squawked, others sang elaborate song which filling the room with a joyful, cacophony.

Several brightly dressed servants tended to the caged bird, going about the work of changing the water, placing handfuls of grain at the bottoms of the cages and cleaning away the bottom of the cages into pales.

In the middle of room sat an old woman dressed in a voluminous red and green dress, her hair short and grey, her eyes bright but sunken deep into her skull, her skin spotted and wrinkled.

“Elerys, it’s me,” said Roland as he approached.

“I know, Roland,” she chuckled heartily from her chair, “forgive me, I do not stand as easily as I once did.”

“No need to stand for old friends.”

Roland found a wooden chair and lowered himself to her level.

“You’re a little late, Roland?” she said simply.

“I was coming back...”

“You don’t need to lie anymore, did you think I wouldn’t know?”

“It was...”

“I forgive you, Roland. I found happiness with another, you need not fear my scorn.”

Roland was quiet for a moment.

“That is more than I deserve,” replied Roland and then added, “was he a good husband?”

“Better than you would’ve been,” she laughed, “we had eight children together. All of them are leading happy and full lives now,” she paused for a moment, “as is your son.”

Roland was quiet, the birds chirped and flapped in their cages.

“I know what you think of me,” stuttered Roland.

Elerys raised her old hand to his mouth.

“We raised him with the same love as we gave to all our children” she continued, “he was quiet the handful but I expected nothing else.”

Roland kissed her hand and lowered it from his mouth.

“Where is he now?”

“He found a place in the courts of Galla. He is a councillor to a Lord with his own with grandchildren, now. They come to visit when they have the time, but Galla is so far to come and hear an old woman natter,” she laughed and paused, “I wanted you to know this before I went, I wanted the air between us to be clear, I wanted you to know I was well and I was happy without you. I am so glad Calum brought you back to me.”

Calum puzzled at the mention of his name, he had never seen this woman before.

“Does he know I am his father?”

“I have told him but I don’t think he believes me,” laughed Elerys, “you are so illusive these days, Roland, even I wonder if you were ever real.”

“It’s better that way.”

“The worgs were with you, Roland. As you lay upon the barge I saw them stalking you from the riverbank,” Elerys said softly, “they hate you with all their being and they will not be kind when they have you.”

“Do not worry, my love, I am beyond their reach,” he lent in and kissed her softly on the forehead.

“I am so glad you made it back to me, even after all these years. My birds have heard your plans and they are sound quiet exciting. Still full of purpose, Roland, always more to be done, isn’t there? So, south to the Lowland’s to tame your horse. I wish I could be here to learn of your triumph.”

“Then come with me, Elerys, there are ways to keep the worgs from the tent. Let me show you and we will tame The Horse together. We can have the life now that we could not have before.”

Roland gripped the old hands in his, there was an excitement in Roland’s voice.

“My time in this world is done, my love. I know that and am happy with what I leave behind,” she said reassuringly and pulled her hands free of his, “may you find your happiness as well.”

Roland was quiet and stood from the wooden chair.

“I have always thought of you,” said Roland, “and what we should have been.”

Roland turned and walked from the room. The birds chattered as Calum waited awkwardly next to Doran.

“Thank you, for bringing him to me,” smiled Elerys at Calum.

“I didn’t know...”

Elerys cut him off with a simple chuckle.

“Roland will never say it but he has become fond of you. He is a good man by many measures, be sure to be a good friend to him, won’t you?”

Calum smiled at the old woman.

“Of course,” said Calum simply.

“Please, get me the robin,” she called to a servant boy who quickly fetched a small, silver cage and brought it forward.

“This is the bird I used to watch your escapades, young prince,” she said and a smile and handed him cage, “I have no need for him now. So, a gift for all you have done for me. The White Spire can be a cold place. He will keep you company when you are alone.”

Calum nodded, slightly bemused by the situation.

“Thank you, my lady.”

“I will be leaving then,” announced Doran loudly.

“Thank you for fetching him,” said Elerys.

“My pleasure,” said Doran and added, “I will be needing that information within the week.”

“It will be yours once the birds have it.”

Doran nodded and exited room. Calum stood by himself grasping a silver cage suddenly feeling quiet out of place.

“Good day,” he said and bowed.

“Please, visit me anytime you wish,” said Elerys as he left.

Calum hurried out the door cage in hand. Doran was walking down the stairs, Calum hurried after him.

“Where is...”

“Roland is gone.”

“Then...”

“How much coin do you have?”

“A few...”

“Then your going to want to rent a room in eastern corner of city, its cheaper there, nothing over a few copper a night.”

“But I want to study here,” puffed Calum trying to keep up Doran who seemed to be moving quicker than he needed.

“I know, dear boy, but you’re not going to live in the Spire. I know the Kaborn suffer from slow minds but you must overcome that is you want to be anything here.”

Doran opened the door at the end of the stairway and walked through to the atrium, Calum followed hastily.

“The Spire opens at dawn and closes at dusk. The red doors lead to the library.”

“What about lessons?”

“There are no lessons, just knowledge, you should know that, Kaborn. This is not some noble’s keep with tutors suckling you like wet nurses. The knowledge is here, if you want it. Some Magi may tutor you for a fee, but I would be cautious most here are not worth your time or coin.”

“Can you teach me?”

“No, boy,” he snorted, “I have very exact standards for my apprentices and you do not meet a single one of them.”

“Where do I start? This is so...”

“I am afraid I don’t have the time to hear anymore. I suggested you pick a place to start and go from there, no time to waste, you only have one life after all,” said Doran pausing in front of a door, “it may be overwhelming but then, magic is overwhelming, if it weren’t ever peasant from here to the Sparkling Isle would have spirits tilling their field, wouldn’t they? Now, truly, I must be going.”

Doran disappeared into the doorway and closed it in front of Calum as though to make sure he did not follow.

Calum’s mind was a blur as he crossed the atrium and out into the garden. He wanted to find the large, familiar frame of Roland, he would know what to do, who to talk too, where to stay. Then Calum remembered, he had the small room with the bricked in window for another night, but where was it?

The roads curved and bent as he left the garden and returned to the city, the builders of the White Spire seemed to have despised straight lines. The back allies were as tangled as the ones back in Kabrace, but there was no familiar buildings or statues to navigate by. There were only strange doors decorated with peculiar icons and statuettes Calum did not recognise.

Calum thought he found a square he knew with a red, yellow flower garden but after looking for the tailor’s that he was sure was just a few buildings away, he realised he had never been in this part of the city before.

Calum paused in a front of an open store, a chimney smoked above and the smell of bread wafted in the air. He settled his mind and decide his search was futile, the room was gone and so was Roland with his guidance, the forest with its savage wonder and Kabrace with the family he loved and missed.

But the bakery was here, as was the robin that tweeted happily in the cage and the White Spire, a tower full of secrets.

Calum bought a roll.

“Do you know a place to stay in east side of town? I need a room,” he asked the chubby-faced baker.

“I know a have friend who has a place for a silver a night,” the baker said simply.

“I will pay three copper, no more,” said Calum.

The baker nodded.

“I will take you to him when I close for five hamme rs.”

“Very well,” nodded Calum.

Calum ate the bread as he strolled through the city streets as the day passed he noted the buildings and doors, their icons and colours, finding what made each of them unique. Calum scattered some crumbs into the cage and the robin pecked at them, enthusiastically. This place was strange and confusing, but he would stay and learn until it was as familiar as the city he had once called home.

The End

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