

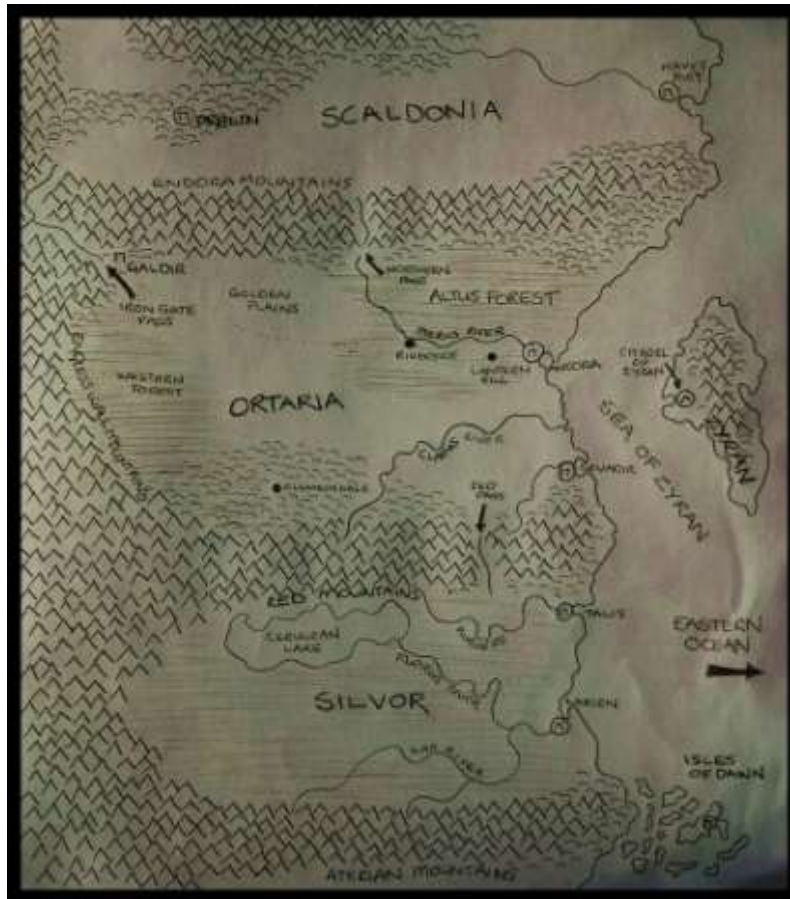
THE SWORD OF LIGHT
BOOK ONE OF THE VEREDOR CHRONICLES
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MAP OF THE EASTERN LANDS



CHAPTER ONE

Deep in the southern hills of the Kingdom of Ortaria, perched precariously on a mountainside, was a lonely and simply built hut. There was nothing particularly unusual about the hut, apart from its rather perilous location. A steep track led down to a little village far below, and anybody passing through the village would have thought it was a very strange place to build a home, if they noticed it at all.

A young man stood by the only window and looked out across the valley. He was tall with wavy brown hair and dark eyes. The small window presented a view

of the entire village. The people of Clemensdale were scurrying about and making preparations for the approaching storm. Dark clouds were rolling across the hills to the east. Thunder rumbled from above and echoed throughout the valley. He reached out and fastened the shutters as lightning lit up the sky above.

The hut was made up of a single room with a central wooden table and two single beds against each wall. An oil lantern filled the little hut with warm light. On top of the table was a small metal box. The young man sat down and gently lifted the lid off the box. Inside was a piece of folded parchment paper. He took it out and unfolded the letter. He then began to read.

Brother Erako,

I send to you this child. His name is Eben. Lady Kaloren has requested that he be hidden from our enemies. She has assigned me the task to protect the child. I must ensure he is placed somewhere where he will not be found. She has also requested for the Ecorian Sword to remain with Eben. I know I can trust you to take care of him. It is truly important that you accept. We are living in a dangerous time. Our numbers are few in these lands. The rumours are true; the hand of evil reaches south. I will only say a few words in this letter of our troubles. We have encountered our old enemies in Ortaria. There is word they have entered Vastoria. We can only hope the Cosmic Gate holds true. We fear the time grows near. One of us will come to take Eben from you soon.

Sincerely,

Carlin.

Eben had read the letter at least a dozen times, and with each reading more questions entered his mind. The metal box had been hidden beneath Erako's bed. The contents of the letter had shocked him deeply.

For most of his life Eben had lived in the southern hills of Ortaria. He had been taught the craft of surviving in the wild rocky land by Erako, the Huntsman of Clemensdale. Erako was already an old man when Eben was entrusted to his care, and he singlehandedly raised Eben from when he was only two years old. Few memories remained of the time before his arrival, only vague recollections and faces of people who he could not clearly remember. Eben had always been told that a stranger left him and had promised to return one day to take him away, but the stranger never returned. The months turned into years without a word or message.

Over sixteen years had passed since he arrived at the small remote village. In the depths of winter a fever had overcome Erako. The old huntsman passed away peacefully in his sleep. Life in the village had not been the same since Erako's death.

Erako always said someone would eventually come to Clemensdale to explain Eben's origins, but after reading the letter he felt a deep desire to search for the answers himself. There was so much he wanted to know: who Carlin and Lady Kaloren were, and where had he come from, but mostly he hoped to find his parents.

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After several hours the storm had passed. Questions continued to circle around in Eben's mind. He knew that he would have to leave his home and begin a

dangerous journey if he was ever going to have a chance at discovering any of the answers. Clemensdale was a humble village and very far from anything evil or treacherous. The people were shy folk and went about their business without much care for the happenings of the wider world. The village was tucked away in the hills and mostly forgotten by outsiders.

Many dreadful stories had been brought to Clemensdale by peddlers, drifters, and nomads. The Kingdom of Ortaria had once been a peaceful and beautiful land. Rumours continued to surface that something menacing was growing in the north and east of the country. The summers had grown cold and the winters long and icy. Crops had mostly failed, rivers were depleted of fish, and few animals remained in the forests. However, even with all these happenings, the village of Clemensdale continued to be largely untroubled. The farmers had little to complain about, the bakers still baked, the shepherds still tended their sheep, and the village folk were as happy as they had ever been.

Eben pondered the stories as he packed his bag. He knew the roads that led north would be dangerous. His thoughts were interrupted by a gentle tapping at the door. He opened the door and looked out to see Vera, the baker's wife, standing just outside. Vera was a very old woman with grey hair and blue eyes that were full of cheer. She looked up at him with a warm smile.

'Hello there my dear boy,' she said as she stepped inside and out of the cold.

'Vera, I wasn't expecting you.'

'I've come to bring you some bread. We baked it this morning especially for you,' she said, setting the basket down on the table. She turned to face him. 'How are you my boy? We've been worried about you living all alone up here on the hill. Is everything all right?' she asked as her eyes glanced across at his half packed bag on the floor.

'I'm fine.'

'It looks to me you are planning to go somewhere,' she said, a look of worry crossing her face.

There was a short silence as Eben thought of how best to tell Vera about his planned journey to Ancora. He knew Vera cared for him like an aunt would for a nephew, and he also knew she would probably be opposed to any suggestion of an adventure beyond the boundaries of Clemensdale.

'I am, Vera. I'm going on a journey.'

She nervously scratched her chin and shook her head. 'Eben, you should reconsider. There are many terrible things out on the roads of Ortaria. Erako would have wanted you to stay safely here in Clemensdale. You have an important place in our village. We care about you; you know we do.'

'I know, Vera, but please understand I have to go to Ancora. If my parents are out there somewhere I still may be able to find them. I know the road will be dangerous, but it's a chance I'm willing to take.'

She took his hand and warmly smiled. 'I realise what it is like to have so many questions and no answers. If you really must go then you also must stay safe. You don't know much about the outside world, none of us here in Clemensdale do. Don't trust anyone. It's not like Clemensdale out there; the people beyond the hills are only interested in what they can take from you. They say it's about take, take, take in the north. Keep your eyes wide open. Always remember your home and your people. Once you find what you seek hurry home to us. We will be waiting for you.'

'Thank you, Vera.'

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Eben had been walking for three days. He set out from Clemensdale taking only his leather cloak, a hand axe, his hunting bow, enough food for several weeks on the road, and the Ecorian Sword that was mentioned in the letter. He had decided to take the back road from Clemensdale to the main highway.

It had rained heavily overnight and dark clouds filled the sky above the hilly terrain. Not a single bird could be heard singing that morning, and a deep gloominess had settled over the land. The road ahead looked rugged and unpleasant. He expected a long day of tough trekking along the rocky and rarely trodden way.

The back road led northeast toward the main highway, which he planned to follow all the way to the port city of Ancora. Stories of bandits and other unspeakable terrors on the northern road had convinced him the back way to the highway would be his best option. The road had already proven to be challenging; it traversed many deep valleys and unstable ridges, and often he found it difficult to know whether he was actually following the road or had strayed off onto a goat track.

The brightness of Clemensdale faded away the further he moved north. It seemed that the trees were struggling against a silent and invisible force. The leaves were withered and their branches drooped. The light of the sun struggled to make it all the way to the ground, and a murky feeling permeated the landscape. His hope pushed him to persevere, and he wasn't going to let the road or the gloominess force him to turn back. He had his sights firmly set on the great capital of Ortaria.

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Eben's dark eyes surveyed his surroundings. He had arrived at the place where the old back road intersected the main highway that led from Ancora to the Iron Gate Pass. The landscape around was dotted with large oak trees rising up over moss covered rocky ground. Directly ahead of him were the ruins of an ancient village. Most of the stone houses were completely derelict, and all the inhabitants had long since moved on. A stream flowed through the village, pouring down out of the hill country to the south. Eben approached with caution. Erako had taught him how to pass by unnoticed. He had been educated in all that was necessary to become a huntsman; walking silently was one skill he was quite adept at.

He passed through the ruins and came to the edge of the stream where an old rock bridge spanned the fast flowing water below. For a moment he had a feeling he was being watched. Without moving his eyes darted to the left and the right.

'You there!' shouted a voice to his right. He quickly turned around as his hand went for his hunting dagger. In the centre of the ruined village was an old and very large oak tree. Hanging upside down by a rope tied around his ankles was a bedraggled young man with an unkempt red beard and long greasy dark hair. He was perhaps a year or two older than Eben. It was instantly clear his hands were tied behind his back. The rope around his ankles was attached to a chain that was wrapped around a branch high above, and his head hung about four feet from the ground. He looked at Eben with bright blue eyes and a wide smile.

Eben slowly walked toward him. 'How can I help you?'

'I think the answer to your question is obvious,' replied the young man, glancing upward toward the chain that was holding him in place. 'I've been waiting for someone like you to come by and free me.'

Eben looked up at the chain and wasn't sure if he should trust the stranger. 'I expect someone tied you up for a reason.'

'Not for a good reason,' replied the man defensively. 'I was travelling with a small group of traders. The sly backstabbing thieves robbed me and then left me here to die. Now really, why don't you just go ahead and free me? Surely that can't be too much trouble for you?'

'How can I trust you? You could be a threat to me.'

The young man released a sigh and shook his head in disbelief. 'True, I could be a threat, but when you think about it, you have a sword, an axe, and a bow, and I have nothing. By anyone's guess you are much more of a danger to me than I am to you. I won't trouble you if you just help me escape. Surely you won't leave me here to die? No one deserves to be treated in such a way. It's really quite simple; just use your axe to cut the rope, and I won't bother you ever again.'

Eben considered the situation and knew what the young man said was true; he simply couldn't leave him and walk on. He took his axe from over his shoulder and walked over to where the rope had been fixed to a lower branch.

'Hey, wait, be careful with that axe,' said the stranger, not knowing for sure what Eben was going to do. A second later Eben cut the rope just below where it was connected to the chain. The man toppled downward and was stunned for a moment. He slowly got to his feet and stumbled around as he gained his balance. Eben helped to untie his hands.

'Thanks. You have done a good deed,' he said as he brushed the dust off his dirty clothes.

'I hope so,' replied Eben as he turned to leave.

'Where are you heading?' asked the stranger as he followed.

'I thought you said you wouldn't bother me again.'

'I'm just trying to be friendly. You hill folk sure are odd. You simply don't trust anyone.'

Eben crossed the rock bridge and walked east out of the ruined village. He was hoping the stranger would take the hint and leave him alone.

'I see; you're heading for Ancora,' said the man, continuing to follow.

'Perhaps,' replied Eben, not wanting to share his plans. Eben was beginning to think he had made a mistake releasing the young man. A few moments went by in silence.

'Are you taking the highway? You won't make it. Walking the highway alone is a sure way to meet a sorry end.'

Eben stopped and looked back. 'So what would you suggest?' The stranger smiled widely.

'I would suggest not going to Ancora in the first place. Ancora is dangerous. If I were you I would return to the hills along the road you came, but if you insist on going forward to Ancora you would probably need someone to show you a different way.'

'I don't need your help if that's what you're suggesting,' said Eben, turning back around.

'But I need your help,' said the man, rushing his words and continuing to follow.

Eben looked back over his shoulder and was beginning to feel a little impatient with the stranger.

'I already helped you.'

'Yes, I agree, you did, but you must realise I'm alone with nothing to eat in a barren land. The truth is that if you leave me here I'll probably die. Yes, you freed me, but really what was the point if you were going to leave me alone with no food. If I don't starve I will be killed by bandits or something much worse,' he said, scanning Eben's face for a reaction.

Eben realised it was going to be difficult to be rid of the stranger. He remembered back to something Erako had said to him many times as a child: 'There is a purpose to everything in life. Every meeting, every action, and every outcome has a meaning. In time everything becomes clear.'

'What's your name?'

'Redding is my name, but I am known as Red.'

'I'm Eben of Clemensdale. You can come with me until we arrive somewhere safe.'

Red nodded and smiled.

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Deep in the dark and gloomy forest, far beneath the canopy of towering oak trees, the two young men trekked slowly eastward. As they walked through the woods they were only seen by an occasional bird or squirrel, and mostly their presence went unnoticed.

Eben moved up beside Red who was crouching down and looking over a slight ridge to a shallow gully beyond. A moment earlier they had heard the sound of crunching and breaking branches ahead. It had sounded like something large was moving through the woods in their direction.

Red peered through the trees. 'It's safe,' he whispered, glancing back at Eben. Eben listened for the sound again. All was silent. 'We can continue,' whispered Red as he slowly began to get up. Eben grabbed his shoulder and dragged him back down.

Suddenly a creature came into view. It was not like any creature that Eben had seen before in all his years of hunting. It was similar to the shape of a man, but it was covered in a hide of thick dark fur. The monster snorted with each breath and walked with a menacing hunchback. Its hands were large with sharp claws, and its head was like that of a wild boar with tusks protruding from beneath a hog's snout. The monster stopped and looked about with fierce bloodshot eyes. The beast snarled and sniffed the air.

'It's a muckron,' whispered Red, his eyes wide with panic.

Eben felt a sense of disbelief, and his heart began to race. He had heard about muckrons, although he had always believed they were mythical creatures. Muckrons were frequently the adversaries of men in many old folk stories. Seeing the reality of the beast before his eyes was a shock. Eben reached for his bow and drew an arrow as quietly as he could manage. The beast leapt in their direction. The muckron was moving as fast as a hunting dog and made its way up the slope toward them.

'Run,' cried Red, leaping up and turning on his heel. Red sped off in the opposite direction. Eben focused his attention on the fast approaching monster and drew back his bowstring. He released the arrow and watched as it flew wide of its mark. The muckron howled furiously, continuing toward Eben and gaining speed. Eben quickly turned and started running, knowing he wouldn't have time to shoot again; his heart was beating like a drum. Red was almost out of sight. Eben looked back over his shoulder and saw the furious beast leap over the ridge and run after him.

He turned and drew his hunting dagger. A moment later the beast was upon him. Eben, holding his breath, stabbed forward with the dagger and felt the impact of the monster. He was knocked off his feet and crashed into the ground. The muckron was above him and had pinned him down. With both hands he reached up, grabbing beneath its foul mouth and used all his might to keep the muckron's fangs from biting into his neck. A menacing howl was followed by a dreadful hiss. Eben cried in pain, using the last of his strength to hold off the monster's yellow fangs.

Suddenly there was a heavy thud. The monster leapt back and turned around. Red stood a few feet away with a large stick. He swung the stick wildly as he stepped away, drawing the muckron's attention from Eben.

'Leave my friend alone!' shouted Red. The beast moved toward Red, howling and snorting as it prepared to pounce once again. Red, wide eyed with horror, gazed up at the monster. He swung the stick again. The muckron stamped its feet like a bull preparing to charge.

Eben struggled to his feet and stumbled across to where his backpack and sword had fallen to the ground. He grabbed the sword and drew it forth. The light of day flashed against the polished blade, and for a moment the gloom of the forest seemed to retreat. The beast turned and glared at Eben. Eben raised the sword, ready to fight, and felt courage flow through his veins. The muckron stumbled backward and was clearly bewildered. It stared at Eben in silence. The monster flung its head back and howled skyward before turning and dashing away through the woods. A moment later the beast was gone. Red sat down on a rock, catching his breath.

'Thank goodness that's over,' gasped Red, who was visibly shaking.

'You saved my life,' said Eben gratefully.

'We are even,' said Red. Eben nodded in agreement.

'We should probably move on from here just in case the muckron decides to return.'

A few minutes later they set out eastward and away from the direction the monster had fled.

CHAPTER TWO

In a grassy glade, deep in the forest, a gentle flickering light from a small campfire lit up the surrounding trees. Eben and Red had found a clearing that was well protected from the weather by a circle of shrubs and trees. It was a nice place to set up camp for the night. Red warmed his hands by the small fire.

'We are about two days walk from Ancora,' said Red as he took a stick and stoked up the fire.

'Can you tell me about Ancora?'

Red cringed at the thought. 'It's a dangerous place. A few years ago Ancora was a thriving seaport and mostly a peaceful and safe town. Slowly over the last two of three years it has changed to become a haven of thieves and cutthroats. King Ignis is mostly to blame. He doesn't care much about the people anymore. All the good men of the town were sent away three years ago to a distant fortress called Galdir in the far west of Ortaria. King Ignis told the people that the men were required to guard the Iron Gate Pass against a possible invasion. About three years ago King Ignis employed groups of vagrants and vagabonds to maintain law and order in Ancora. The problem is these new guardsmen are only interested in lining their

pockets with gold and silver. The townsfolk quickly learned it wasn't safe on the streets. Everyone who had the means to leave moved to the safety of the villages around Ancora, but now the villages are very dangerous with all the groups of bandits and monsters wandering around the wilderness.'

'What about you? Are you from Ancora?'

'Me, no; I'm from Talis in the Kingdom of Silvor,' replied Red, snorting at the suggestion that he may be Ortarian. 'Don't take it the wrong way; I like Ortarian people, and I've spent a long time in your country, but at heart I'm a proud Silvorian. We're a little more relaxed than the average Ortarian and probably less money hungry.'

'I see,' said Eben. 'So what brought you to Ortaria?'

'Work and money,' replied Red, seeing the contradiction in his own words and laughing at it. 'I took a job on a trading ship out of the port of Talis about two years ago. Soon after I found the sea was not the place for me. I sailed as far south as Ateria and as far north as Scaldonia. I've probably seen a lot more of the world than the average man, but I knew when it was time to move on. I then took another job working for a small circus troupe operating around the docks of Ancora. At first I was helping mostly with setting up the stage and guarding the tent. Later I started to help out with the acts, and I learned a lot about circus performing. Unfortunately my stint in the circus didn't last all that long. About six months later a gang of local thugs burned down our circus tent in the middle of the night; that was the end of the circus.'

'So what did you do after the circus burned down?'

'I looked for a job in the town. It quickly became clear that the employment situation was constantly getting worse. Just before I had spent every last coin, I took a job working for an overland trader. I like to call him Olack the Terrible. He's a nasty individual who operates a small group of wagons. He trades with villagers all over Ortaria. Olack didn't like me from the beginning and only employed me because few people are desperate enough to work on the dangerous highways around Ortaria.'

'This Olack must be brave to take the risk?' suggested Eben.

Red laughed and shook his head. 'No, no, he doesn't do the work; he sends other people to do it and then takes the profits.'

'So how did you end up tied to that oak tree?'

'I was the leader of three wagons and eight men working for Olack. We traded our goods on a five week journey all the way out west, almost as far as the Endless Wall Mountains. We were on our way back to Ancora with the profits. The men I was leading decided to rob all the money from the expedition. They chained me to the tree when I tried to stop them. Luckily you came along. I could have died in that place. Hopefully we don't bump into Olack in Ancora. He won't be happy with me.'

'Surely you can explain what happened to Olack.'

'Olack, no, he won't understand. I was the leader, and he'll blame me for the loss. It's probably best to stay away from him and hide out in Ancora.'

'I see,' said Eben.

'What about you? Why do you want to go to Ancora?'

'I was not born in Clemensdale; I was adopted by a huntsman. I never knew my real parents. I thought the best place to look for answers about my past would be Ancora.'

'Why would a hunter adopt a child? That seems strange to me.'

'I guess that's true. It's just the way it happened. I don't really know much of the world outside the hills around Clemensdale. The village is still a safe place and is mostly unaffected by the troubles elsewhere. Although, we have suffered over the last two winters and have had some poor crops.'

'Poor crops are better than none. Most Ortarian farmers brought in next to nothing last year. I think this whole land is cursed,' said Red as his eyes drifted to look at the dark edges of the glade. 'I don't know what's happening, but it seems to be getting worse as time goes on. Once I get some money together I'm going to sail back to Silvor and leave this cursed land behind forever.'

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Eben and Red walked east for two days. The forest eventually gave way to grass covered hills that gradually descended toward the coast. They stood on a hill about two miles from the western gate of Ancora. The entire town was set around the edge of a small bay. The sea stretched out into the distance beyond. Eben was mesmerised by the subtle light of the sun shimmering on the water.

He had never seen the sea before and he marvelled at it for some time; he felt something in his heart grow warm at the sight. High above the town several large vultures circled ominously. Smoke rose from many chimneys, clouding the sky directly above the city. Red started moving down the grassy slope that extended all the way to the main gate. The gate was arched and set in a poorly maintained grey stone wall. Eben followed after Red.

'We will have to be careful,' said Red. 'There are a lot of thugs who try to take advantage of unsuspecting folk coming to town. Keep your eyes open at all times.'

They approached the gate together and several brutish guards looked up as they walked through. For a few moments Eben thought they were going to be stopped, but they passed by the guardsmen without incident. Inside the gate a cobblestone street wound its way eastward and turned north through the town. The road led up a gradually rising slope toward a large palace which was set atop the headland at the northern edge of the bay. The Palace was a magnificent building and dominated the skyline. Three large towers rose from its highest point, and they stood like sentinels watching over the town below.

Many beggars scurried about. They were dressed in rags and the sight of such poverty shocked Eben. Further along a group of mangy dogs rummaged through the rubbish filled streets. A stench like nothing Eben had ever experienced rose from the streets and permeated the whole town. Red led the way quickly away from the gate, and apart from a few grim looks from strange men they were not bothered by anyone.

'A good friend of mine lives down by the docks. She may be able to provide us with some safe rooms for the night,' said Red. 'Do you have much money?'

'A little, how much will it cost?' asked Eben.

'Probably a few copper coins a night.'

'I have some silver coins,' said Eben.

'That's plenty.'

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They arrived at the docks several minutes later. There were about five or six ships harboured in the bay. Many smaller boats were tied to a network of docks that were situated toward the southern side of the bay covering an area about two hundred yards in length. The docks were busy and bustling with fishmongers, sailors, and seafaring folk.

'Three years ago the harbour had a hundred anchored ships in it. Most sea merchants try to avoid Ancora these days,' said Red as they walked along the edge of the docks. Red then suddenly veered to the right and led Eben down a narrow laneway. At the far end was a small door. Above the door was an old painted sign that Eben could scarcely read. He strained his eyes and made out the words: The Sea Dragon.

'I used to drink at this place, but it closed down about a year ago. It's an old tavern that doubles as an inn,' said Red as he knocked on the door. He waited for a few moments. 'The King kept taxing places like this until they went out of business,' he added, continuing to knock loudly.

'Who's there?' asked a woman's voice from the other side.

'It's me, Red.'

There was a long pause. Red shuffled nervously.

'What do you want?' she asked warily.

'Stella, I know you probably don't want to see me, but I'm really in a bit of trouble. I need a room for a few nights. My friend can pay for both of us,' said Red, his voice becoming more urgent.

'You owe me a fortune, Red!' she shouted. 'Stay somewhere else!'

Red rubbed the back of his neck. He nervously looked at the door for a few seconds. 'Come on, Stella, just a few nights. Then I'll never bother you again.' There was only silence. He knocked again a little harder.

'Go away, Red!' she shouted.

'Oh, come on. Please, Stella, I really need your help this time. Remember the good old days when we worked in the circus together. Come on, just a night...or two. Please, Stella. You know I'll pay you everything I owe you when I can.'

There was a silence that lasted about half a minute. The door opened a few inches. Eben could see the face of an attractive young woman with dark hair cut to her shoulders, a fair complexion, and large green eyes. She stared out at the two of them unsympathetically. Her eyes narrowed as she looked Red up and down. She then gave a bemused smile.

'Red! What happened to your clothes, and why are you wearing those ridiculous rags?' she asked as she opened the door wider. Red smiled widely and stepped into the large common room of the tavern.

'Great to see you again, Stella,' he said, hugging her. She gave Eben a slightly suspicious glance as he stepped through the door. She then closed the large oak door and bolted it with a big iron latch.

'Only two nights, Red,' she said firmly.

'Sure, I get the picture. We won't bother you at all. You won't even notice us.'

'Good. You can stay in rooms four and five upstairs,' she said. 'Don't forget to make the beds when you leave and change the sheets,' she added. 'And just one last thing: you're not hiding from anyone here are you?' she asked, giving Red a doubting look.

Red took a step back. 'Hiding from someone? What? Why would I be hiding from anyone? Whatever gave you that idea?' He winked at Eben.

'If I find out you're taking advantage of my hospitality I'll throw you to the streets where you belong,' said Stella in a hardened voice.

Red laughed from his belly, 'I really would like to see you try to throw me.'

Stella turned on her heel and marched out of the common room, slamming the door as she exited. Red looked over at Eben with a wide smile.

'She's your friend?' asked Eben.

'Yeah,' answered Red. Eben realised there was some history between them and thought it best not to ask any more questions. He took his backpack up to room five, which had a small window with metal bars and a narrow bed. It was a simple but comfortable room. He set his backpack against the wall and lay down to rest.

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Eben awoke to the smell of eggs and onions cooking. He got up, put on his clothes, and then walked down the stairwell to the common room where Red was chatting to Stella who seemed much more relaxed than she had been the night before.

'Would you like some eggs, Eben?' asked Stella as he approached the bar.

'Thanks, that sounds great,' he replied, taking a seat beside Red.

Red had some new clean clothes and had trimmed his shaggy beard into a neat style, but he had left his hair long.

'What's your plan for the day?' asked Stella, looking to Eben.

'I'm actually in Ancora to find answers about my heritage.'

'Red did say something about that,' said Stella, handing him a plate of fried eggs and onions.

The taste of eggs was delicious compared to the salted meat that he and Red had been eating for the last few days.

'Do you have any idea where you would start looking?' asked Stella.

'I am searching for a woman by the name of Lady Kaloren, I think she would probably know where I could find my parents.'

'The nobles don't tend to mix with the commoners in Ancora, especially these days,' said Stella. 'Lady Kaloren, I don't know the name, perhaps she's the wife of a knight or lord.'

'You could try the Royal Library,' suggested Red. 'They probably won't let you in, but if you pay one of the scholars they might be able to point you in the right direction.'

'I'll give it a try,' said Eben.

He looked to Stella and she smiled back at him warmly.

'So you and Red worked together in the circus?' asked Eben.

'I was an acrobat,' replied Stella. 'Unfortunately the circus burned to the ground a long time ago. I do miss those days; seeing you dressed up as a clown was always amusing,' she said to Red, a playful grin crossing her face. Red shot a nervous glance at Eben before uncomfortably looking away.

'You never said you were a clown,' said Eben, smiling at Red. Red twitched in his seat.

'I was only a clown for a little while; it was more like filling in really,' he said defensively.

'Filling in!' Stella laughed. 'Don't believe a word he says, Eben. He was employed as a clown from the very beginning.'

'No! I wasn't!' he cried, blushing crimson red.

'Come on, Red. You're a wonderful clown,' she said, trying to reassure him, but still laughing.

'It's true, I was a clown,' confessed Red, glancing awkwardly up at Eben.

'You are the first clown I've ever met,' said Eben, smiling.

Red nodded and his usual smile crossed his face. He was happy to hear the sound of their laughter, even though it was at his expense.

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Dozens of vultures slowly circled high in the sky above Ancora. They peered downward through the hazy smoke cloud to the dank and filthy streets below. To the town folk their arrival was a sign of the dark times they were living in. Never before had vultures circled the skies above their town. They were a constant symbolic reminder of the ever growing oppression that filled the Kingdom of Ortaria.

Eben walked through the streets and up the main cobblestone road that led toward the palace. A deep depression and despair pervaded the entire town. Stella had given basic directions to the library and he walked along quickly, not wanting to catch the attention of any of the unsavoury looking characters he saw along the way.

The main road ascended gradually toward the palace. At the top of the rise was a large town square, and across the square were several wide stone steps that led up to a mighty arched entrance gate that was set in a gatehouse. A stone wall stood about fifteen yards high and encircled the entire palace. Ten fully armoured guards with long spears stood at the gate. It seemed like the gate was the only way in or out of the palace. He passed by unnoticed and followed the lane that edged along the outer wall on the western side of the palace.

Just down from the wall on the northwest side was a large building with a set of stone steps that led up to a solid bronze door. At first glance the library looked closed. He walked up the steps. There was a big bronze doorknocker with the face of a dragon. Eben knocked three times. There was no reply. After a minute he knocked again, but still there was no answer.

After waiting several minutes he decided to push on the door. The hinge creaked as the door slowly opened revealing a dark hall beyond. Many bookshelves had been cast down and those that were still standing were completely empty. The library had been ransacked. A dim light drifted down from several smashed windows set high in the walls. There was no one around and the abandoned library had a spooky feeling about it.

'Hello,' called Eben as he walked forward into the gloom. His voice echoed off the stone walls.

He heard someone approaching and looked to his right and saw an old man with crazy dishevelled white hair and piercing blue eyes. He was carrying a large wooden staff. The man jumped over a broken bookcase with surprising agility and started to spring forward toward Eben.

'Who said you could come in here?' he shouted as he prepared to swing his staff. 'Damn young ragamuffins coming round here looking for something to steal! Can't you see the King closed the library and burned all the books? There is no money here! I'll teach you a lesson, thief!'

'Excuse me, Sir, you're mistaken. I was looking for a librarian or scholar,' replied Eben, having to jump back to avoid being struck.

'Nonsense!' shouted the old man, swinging the staff again. Eben ducked easily out of the way and stepped backward toward the door.

'Really, I'm searching for someone who can help me find...' Eben had to dodge quickly to avoid getting hit once again. He was almost at the door.

'Please stop swinging that thing. Listen to me for a moment! I need to find someone called Lady Kaloren,' he shouted. A moment later the old man stopped and looked at him curiously.

'Lady Kaloren,' he muttered and raised his thick white eyebrows. 'Why do you want to find her?'

'I believe she may know who my parents are,' replied Eben. 'Do you know who she is?'

The old man nodded slightly and turned around; he walked back into the gloomy library. It seemed to Eben he wasn't going to answer. 'I must find her.'

'You won't find her in Ancora,' said the old man as he continued to walk away. 'Lady Kaloren is a famous Everdonian from the Western Lands beyond the Iron Gate Pass. She was a brave warrior. She fought in many wars.'

'Everdonian. What's that?'

'Everdon is a kingdom,' said the old man with a patronising tone.

'What about someone called Carlin, have you heard of him?'

The old man froze in his tracks and glanced back over his shoulder. 'What do you know about Carlin?' He turned around and started to walk back toward Eben; his piercing blue eyes staring intently.

'Nothing really; all I know is that he may be able to help me find my parents.'

'Who are your parents?' asked the old man, his curiosity increasing.

'I don't know. I'm searching for some answers; that's why I came to Ancora. You seem to know Carlin; can you tell me where I can find him?'

'I did know him once. He served King Ignis. Unfortunately Carlin died many years ago, so you can't find him,' said the old man, staring down at the ground solemnly.

'He died?' murmured Eben, feeling dismayed at the news.

'Yes, I heard, years ago, that he was killed by a monster that had been terrorising the coastal people north of Ancora. He wasn't Ortarian. He was a knight from a distant western land.'

'Why was he in Ortaria?'

'I don't know why,' said the old man, shaking his head. 'However, I do know someone who may have some answers for you. Her name is Torela; I think she knew Carlin. I vaguely remember seeing them together in the old days. She lives in a house near the north gate. I will sketch the directions for you.'

The old man took charcoal and some parchment from his pocket and quickly scribbled down directions.

'Thanks for your help,' said Eben gratefully.

'You're welcome. I should also warn you there is mandatory conscription for every Ortarian man between sixteen and forty. The King is sending all the young men out west to the Iron Gate Pass, and only those who have permission from the crown can remain in Ancora. No one really knows why he is doing it. These are perilous times we live in; you should be careful because you may be forced to join the army and find yourself on your way out to Galdir.'

'Thanks for the advice,' said Eben.

'And one last thing,' said the old man. 'I'm sorry for my haste in trying to drive you away; most of the time the only people who visit the library are thieves looking for something to steal. Once, only a few years ago, I was the Chief Royal Librarian, and this was one of the finest libraries in Veredor. Now I am homeless and living out my days frightened for my own safety.' The old librarian stared vacantly at the ransacked shelves and drew a long breath.

'I'm sorry to hear about your troubles. I hope you can rebuild the library one day,' said Eben, seeing clearly that the man was truly devastated by the way his life had turned out.

'That day won't come until King Ignis comes to his senses and ends all this insanity,' said the old man.

A moment later he shuffled about nervously, realising he was probably saying too much and that he shouldn't be talking about the King in such a way to a stranger. 'Goodbye and good luck young man,' he said as he turned away and closed the library door.

CHAPTER THREE

Eben walked toward the north gate and found his way to a long and narrow laneway that cut away to the south. There were piles of debris and waste everywhere. The laneway was especially gloomy because the buildings on either side had high walls and very little light entered from above. He weaved his way through whilst searching for the red door. At the far end he found what he was looking for. The door was set in a very grimy stone building with no windows facing the laneway.

A black cat leapt off a ledge and knocked over some empty bottles; they fell to the ground and smashed, shattering the gloomy silence. Eben was feeling edgy; the mood of the place was oppressive.

He knocked three times and waited. Nothing happened. He knocked again. A small sliding hatch opened and an angry looking eye stared out at him from the other side.

'Who are you and what do you want?' asked a deep grumbling voice of a man.

'My name is Eben, I'm looking for Torela. I was told she lives here.' There was a short silence and the man shut the hatch abruptly.

'Go away stranger!' he yelled aggressively.

Eben knocked again. 'Please, I need to talk to her. She's the only one who can help me.' A few moments silently passed. The door burst open and a hulk of a man stood pointing an oversized crossbow at him.

'Don't move!' shouted the man as he glared down at Eben. Eben took a step back and then stood completely still. The man standing in the doorway was the biggest man Eben had ever seen in his whole life. He had deep lines in his forehead, black curly hair, and arms like tree trunks. An instant later a woman with a gentle face stepped into view from around the corner of the door. Her long hair was light brown with streaks of grey, and her eyes were remarkably turquoise blue. She wore a simple long green dress and brown leather boots. It was difficult for Eben to guess her age, but he thought she was at least forty. She studied Eben for a few moments and then glanced up to the huge man.

'Torg, be still, he means us no harm.' She seemed kind and peaceful in complete contrast with the fuming giant standing by her side. 'I am Torela and this is Torg. What do you want from us?'

Eben instantly felt reassured by her. She had a sense of peace that seemed to push the gloominess away; he had a feeling she could be trusted. She also had a strange accent that he had never heard before.

'My name is Eben. I was told that you knew Carlin when he was alive. I need to ask you some questions about him if you have time?'

She stared at him and pondered what he had just said. 'Yes, I did know him. What is your association to him?'

'I came to Ancora looking for him. I went to the library. An old man there told me that he had died years ago. I hoped to find him because he may have known my parents.' She nodded slightly in response and watched him for a few moments. She appeared to be contemplating what she should do next.

‘You should come in out of the cold,’ said Torela, directing him inside and into a long hallway that led to the back of the house. Eben stepped in, and Torg slammed the door behind them, bolting it solidly with two large steel latches. Torela led Eben down the hallway which opened into a large room. The room was full of exotic luxurious goods: rich carpet covered the floors, the couches were draped in silk, and beautiful artworks adorned the walls. The room didn’t have a single window and was lit entirely by candlelight. On the far side a staircase ascended to the second level. There was also a door to their right that led into a kitchen area.

‘It’s a beautiful house,’ said Eben, his eyes glancing around the room.

‘Thank you, Eben. Please take a seat.’ Torela directed him to a comfortable cushioned chair. He sat down and she sat in the chair opposite him.

‘Eben, you said that Carlin may have known your parents. What can you tell me about this?’

‘I was hoping you could tell me something because I really don’t know much at all,’ replied Eben as he took the parchment letter from his pocket and handed it to her. She opened the letter and read it to herself. Eben saw her eyes widen as she read; she looked up at him and stared directly into his eyes for several moments. She then glanced at the sword that was latched to his belt.

‘Your sword, is it the same sword mentioned in the letter?’

‘Yes,’ he replied.

‘May I have a look?’ He nodded and handed the sword to her. She unsheathed the blade. ‘This sword is ancient. I never expected that I would ever come to hold the Ecorian Sword in my own hands.’ She studied the blade and hilt closely for at least a minute.

‘What do you know about the sword?’ asked Eben, very curious to know what she was implying.

‘I know it once belonged to the emperors of the Ecorian Empire.’

‘But why do I have it, and why did Carlin hide me away in a remote hill village?’

‘I don’t know why,’ replied Torela, handing the sword back to him. ‘However, I know that Carlin had many secrets that he never told. He never told me about you or the sword.’

‘Who exactly was Carlin?’

‘He was not from Ortaria. He came from Iarthar, a land far in the west of Veredor. He was a member of an ancient order of knights, and he was a noble warrior who worked tirelessly to protect the lands from evil.’ She paused for a moment and stared at Eben. ‘I think you should not have come to Ancora. This city is living under a terrible curse; you are not safe here.’

‘I know we are living in dark and dangerous times, but I came because I needed answers.’

‘I understand your desire to find the answers you seek. I’m sure everything has a purpose, and I know that you have come at this particular time for a reason. I’m not sure what your purpose is yet.’ She cast her eyes down at the sword. ‘Every warrior who ever carried that sword fought for the good of all the people of Veredor.’ Her voice was calm and strong. Eben could feel in his heart that she spoke the truth. He looked down at the sword.

‘I want to help the people of Ortaria,’ said Eben, feeling a sense of conviction rise through his body. She stared at him for a little while as if she could read his thoughts.

‘Tomorrow there will be a meeting here at sunset. You may find some more answers if you come. You may also find that there are ways you can help the people of Ortaria.’

‘I will come,’ said Eben, eager to learn what he could do to help.

‘Do you have a place to stay?’

‘I’m staying with some friends at a closed down inn near the docks called The Sea Dragon.’

‘Eben, you must be careful, this city has danger lurking around every corner.’

**

It was a rarity to see people out on the streets after dark in Ancora. Only vagrants, vagabonds, and other unsavoury characters would dare go out at night. There was a good reason to be cautious as many unsuspecting folk would simply disappear into the darkness never to be heard of again. Of course there was an argument to be made that the streets were actually safer at night simply because there were fewer people around. Either way the streets of Ancora were not safe at the best of times.

Early in the evening a pair of evil eyes caught sight of something peculiar. Anyone else may have thought that a young man passing by wearing a worn leather cloak was simply one of the many vagrants making a living from the misery of the townsfolk. But a glimmer of hope, like light in the darkness, lit up the murky street, and a darkened heart for a moment caught a glimpse of its own frozen state and felt powerless.

Eben walked back along the main road toward The Sea Dragon. It was getting late and he thought it best to hurry. He passed by the palace and continued to walk toward the docks. Rounding a corner he saw a hooded man mounted on a large black warhorse. The darkness and gloom seemed to accumulate around the rider. Slowing his pace, he looked up as he passed by, attempting to appear inconspicuous. The rider’s dark eyes stared directly at Eben; most of his face was shrouded by the shadow of his hood. For a few moments they made eye contact. Eben felt a shiver rise up his spine. He glanced away and continued along the far side of the road and passed by without incident. He quickened his pace and looked back over his shoulder to see the rider hadn’t moved.

A few minutes later Eben arrived at the inn and he knocked three times on the door. It was an icy evening and a cold gale was blowing in from the sea.

‘Who’s there?’ asked Stella a few moments later.

‘Eben,’ he replied in a shivering voice.

She opened the door and smiled as she ushered him in out of the cold.

Red appeared from the bar with a smile on his face. ‘We were starting to worry about you. I’m glad to see you’re all right. Come over and have a warm glass of ale.’ Eben followed them over to the bar and took a seat.

‘Did you find any news about your parents?’ asked Stella as Red poured him a mug of ale.

‘No,’ replied Eben. ‘But I did learn a few things about my past.’ Red handed him the ale. ‘I found the library you told me about. It is in a state of ruin. I met an old man who was once the librarian there. He directed me on to a wise woman who lives near the north gate. She knew Carlin, the one who sent me to Clemensdale when I was very young, although she had never heard of me. She also seems to know what’s going on in Ortaria. I’m going to meet her again tomorrow night.’

Stella raised her eyebrows and gave Eben a troubled look. 'You should be careful who you trust. Don't get involved in anything that's plotting against King Ignis unless you want to get yourself killed.'

'She's right,' agreed Red, nodding soberly. 'Everyone knows the reason we have these troubles is because the King doesn't care for the people anymore. Nobody likes the King; anyone and everyone who has tried to do something has been thrown in the dungeon or executed for treason.'

'Surely something needs to be done,' said Eben.

Red took another sip of his ale. 'True, something does need to be done, but it's probably best left to other people.'

**

Eben found his way back to Torela's house late the following day. The sun was setting sooner than he expected, and he was rushing because he was running late. He arrived at the laneway and quickly approached the red doorway. It was a little after sunset. A moment later the door opened.

'You're late,' grumbled Torg in his deep burly voice.

'I'm sorry,' said Eben, stepping into the hallway.

'They're all down there,' added Torg, pointing toward the room beyond the hall. Torg then closed and bolted the door.

Eben walked down the hall and came to the large furnished room. A group of about twenty people were seated in a semicircle. They were facing the far side where Torela was standing and speaking to them.

'....all of you have heard the rumours and have seen what is happening in Ancora. You know the darkness continues to grow.' She looked to Eben and directed him to a seat as she spoke. 'Each one of you is here because you are concerned. Each one of you is here because you care for the people of Ortaria and you want to see an end to all the villainy and evil.'

'How can we do anything if King Ignis won't listen to the people? Years ago he cared for us, and now he refuses to hear our cries for help,' said a man in response.

Torela nodded and paused for a moment before speaking, 'True, he doesn't listen. He refuses to give audience to anyone. He seems to have changed and hardened. He once was a much loved and honourable man. Three years ago everything changed, and for a long time there has been no explanation or reason. No one has known why, but tonight I believe you will learn the truth,' she said, and her words stunned the people. 'I want to introduce to you a young man named Cassiel. He was once a student of the magic academy on the island of Zyran. You will want to hear what he has to say.'

A tall and handsome young man stood up and walked over to stand beside Torela. He looked to be in his mid-twenties and was wearing a long brown coat. Cassiel held his chin high and his shoulders back and had a certain sense of pride about him. He had carefree dark hair, dark eyes, and a fair complexion.

'Thank you, Torela,' he said and she took a seat. He looked down at the group seated before him and cleared his throat before speaking. 'For you to understand what I have to tell you I first must inform you of a few details about myself and also about the Citadel of Zyran. Firstly about myself: I was once an apprentice at the Magic Academy of Zyran. Seven years ago I began my training; many of you know such training is rigorous and takes over a decade to complete. Honestly, I was never a talented wizard; nevertheless, I always worked hard and committed

myself to the study of magic, and in my first year or two it was a pleasure to learn.'

Cassiel scanned the faces of the group and for a moment he glanced at Eben. He drew a long breath before continuing. 'And secondly, what many of you probably don't know is that beneath the Citadel of Zyran there is a dungeon where the Zyranian Order keeps only the most dangerous prisoners. The dungeon is the home of rogue sorcerers, tyrants, and other evil individuals. The prison is bound by an ancient and very mysterious enchantment which makes the stone and hewn rock impenetrable. There is no way to break in, and it's impossible to break out. The only way in and out of the dungeon is through the main prison gate and a single corridor that leads down into the dungeon. The only way to open the dungeon gate and the cell doors is by using a magical key which is held by the Gatekeeper of Zyran.'

He paused for a moment, catching his breath. The whole group were listening intently.

'The dungeon door is guarded at all times by two wizards of the academy. About three years ago I was placed on guard, which I might add is a particularly tedious job. Late that night, when I was nearing the end of my watch, I was approached by two wizards who were leading a man. The man's face was covered by a cloth sack. It's not unusual to see wizards in Zyran, especially within the grounds of the Citadel, but these two were two of the most important wizards on the island. Baltac at the time was the second in command of the Zyranian Order, and Trebax was and still is the Gatekeeper of Zyran. You also know that Baltac is now the High Commander of the Zyranian Order and the Lord of Zyran. I wondered why the prisoner's face was hidden. As they came back up from the deep I overheard Baltac say that Ortaria was defenceless now that the fool was locked away.'

There was a gasp among those seated.

'Are you saying they imprisoned King Ignis? Why would the Zyranian Order do such a thing? The Zyranian Order has stood by us for centuries. Surely they are our allies,' said an old man near the front.

'Let me tell it plainly: I believe the Zyranians have taken an evil path and are working to sow seeds of wickedness in our lands. I also believe you are being ruled by an imposter. The real King Ignis is imprisoned in the Dungeons of Zyran.'

'We must free him!' shouted a woman who was seated next to Eben. The group started talking frantically. Eben could hear the outrage and shock in their voices. Torela stood and turned to the group.

'Please listen,' she said. The room fell silent. 'With Cassiel's help we have devised a plan to free the King. Cassiel, if you would please describe the plan.'

Cassiel nodded and waited for the room to become completely silent. 'It will not be easy. You have been called here because you are trusted, and we need some volunteers to complete this difficult task. Firstly we must sneak into the Citadel of Zyran. Secondly we must steal the key from Trebax, the Gatekeeper of Zyran; thirdly we must get to the dungeon gate without being seen, and last of all, we must free the King and safely escape the island. There is no way that any of us could take on the full force of the Zyranian Order, and the Citadel also has a dedicated group of one hundred highly skilled guardsmen. It is extremely important that we don't get seen and we complete this mission in secret. The wizards are very powerful and wouldn't hesitate to kill us if we were discovered.'

There was a silence as the group absorbed all that Cassiel had said. The silence was suddenly broken when Torg rushed down the hallway from the front of the house.

'My Lady, palace guardsmen are entering the laneway!' he cried.

Torela remained calm and closed her eyes for a few seconds. Everyone in the room looked up at her, waiting for her guidance. A few moments later her eyes opened. She looked up at Torg.

'Torg, lead the people out the back door. We have been discovered. They are coming for us,' she said. Everyone in the room stood up quickly. Torg drew his massive two handed broadsword.

Eben could feel the ground begin to shake. A groaning and screeching sound resonated down the hallway. They looked toward the entrance. An explosion blasted from the front door and shook the entire house. A wave of fire approached them at a blistering speed from the hallway, setting fire to everything in its path.

Torela lifted her hand; a ray of blue light issued forth creating a rippling energetic barrier which shielded them from the approaching fire. Eben drew his sword as Cassiel moved to stand beside Torela. The room emptied of people as Torg led the group through the kitchen and out the back door. Only Torela, Cassiel, and Eben remained in the room. The intense flames suddenly faded away. A man in a dark cape stood at the entrance to the hallway.

'Meara,' he grunted, his eyes full of hate. His lips curled down at the edges with malice. He was entirely bald which seemed to increase the look of brutality that was etched into his features. 'I thought the Irilian Order had agreed to stay out of the Eastern Lands.'

'That agreement ended when the Zyranians decided to turn against the people of Veredor,' said Torela. 'The Irilians work for the good of all people, you know that, Zarcerel.' At the sound of his own name the caped man smirked and stepped forward as a group of guardsmen dashed down the hallway to stand behind him.

'Oh yes, how noble of you,' said Zarcerel mockingly, with an evil grin from ear to ear. Zarcerel raised his hand. There was a flash of red light. Beams of orange energy burst through the air toward Torela. Torela lifted her hands and blue light streamed forth creating a barrier that looked like a transparent shimmering wall of energy. It shielded them from the hissing fiery energy blasts. Zarcerel didn't stop bombarding the shield with his sinister attacks. They hissed and smashed into the barrier.

A moment later a group of brutish guardsmen appeared in the kitchen at the back of the house.

'Cassiel, take Eben and get out of here!' cried Torela. Cassiel raised his hand and hurled several orbs of fire at the approaching soldiers in the kitchen. The blasts knocked the soldiers back, and they all tumbled away.

'We can't leave you!' shouted Cassiel.

'You must go!' she cried out, looking back over her shoulder. 'Please, Cassiel. Go!' Cassiel hesitated for a moment and then turned toward the stairs.

'Quick, up the stairs,' cried Cassiel, pushing Eben across the room toward the staircase. Eben climbed the stairs in seconds and reached the door at the top. The door opened out into a large bedroom. At the far side of the room there was a small window. Eben went to the window and started to open it. Cassiel was not far behind.

'No! Eben, climb the ladder to the roof!'

Cassiel locked the door and touched the handle. He muttered some words under his breath; an orange light streamed forth from his hand and entered the door causing it to instantly lock. In a heartbeat Eben had climbed the ladder and pushed open the trapdoor. A moment later he was on the empty rooftop. The whole house was shaking from the raging battle inside between Torela and Zarceler. Eben stood with his sword in hand as Cassiel climbed onto the roof after him.

‘Eben, run and hide. I’m going back down there to help Torela.’

‘I’ll come too,’ said Eben, not wanting to leave them to fight Zarceler and the soldiers alone.

‘No!’ said Cassiel firmly. ‘She wanted you out...’ His words were cut short.

The entire building started to groan and shake under their feet. A moment later it began to collapse around them. Cassiel managed to scurry across and grab onto the solid wall of the adjoining house, but Eben slipped backward over the edge. For a few moments he fell, completely losing control. His back struck the solid ground as a dust cloud from the collapsing building blasted out into the surrounding alleyways and lanes. He slowly got to his feet and picked up his sword. After a dazed moment he started to move down the alleyway and out of the dust. He could feel his left leg was aching and his head was throbbing from the fall. He turned and saw a great pile of rubble where Torela’s house had once stood. Cassiel was nowhere in sight.

‘Find them! I want them dead or alive!’ cried Zarceler’s furious voice in the distance.

Eben limped away as quickly as he could into the darkness and edged down through a thin gap between two buildings that opened up into a small square. He crossed the square and moved through a laneway full of waste and rotting food.

‘This way!’ shouted a voice from behind him. Eben looked over his shoulder and could see a group of soldiers in the distance. They hadn’t noticed him yet, and he glanced around for somewhere to hide. There was a wooden crate full of waste. He jumped in, covering himself as they approached. They passed by, not noticing the crate or the young man hiding within. Lying completely still in the rot and stench he waited until all was quiet.

After a short time he lifted his head and looked over the top of the crate in the direction the guardsmen had gone. The laneway was empty. He climbed out of the crate and started searching for a side laneway to escape. He found a long and thin alley that led back in the direction of the north gate. Dragging his aching leg he quietly staggered forward. The pain was also growing in the back of his head, and blood was dripping down the back of his neck. Shouting voices echoed through the lanes and alleys behind him. He hurried along and moments later the lane opened out onto the main street that led from the north gate back toward the palace.

He crossed the road and ducked into a back street on the opposite side. He gradually stumbled his way through a network of narrow lanes and alleys until he arrived at the docks. An icy wind blew across the docks. Completely exhausted he found the door of The Sea Dragon and almost collapsed on the doorstep as he struggled to knock. A few moments passed before Stella opened the door.

‘What happened to you?’ asked Stella, stepping out and gently taking him by the arm.

‘Really, I’m fine,’ he said as he unsteadily made an attempt to step through the doorway.

A moment later Red was at the door. ‘By Teodric! Eben. You smell like rotting fish,’ he said, grinning.

'This isn't a time for jokes,' shouted Stella. 'He's badly hurt.'

'No really, I'm fine...' whispered Eben as he started to lose consciousness.

Stella lay him down on the floor of the common room. 'Get some clean cloth from under the bench in the kitchen! And get some water!' Red's smile disappeared instantly. He ran off quickly to the kitchen.

Eben looked up at Stella. She stared down at him; her green eyes full of concern for him.

'Eben, you will be fine. Everything is going to be...' Those were the last words he heard that night. Everything went dark.

CHAPTER FOUR

Eben awoke and looked around to find he was lying in his bed at The Sea Dragon. His head was bandaged, and he could feel his leg still hurt, but the pain had lost most of its sharpness. His body was covered in grazes and bruises, but he had been cleaned and washed. He thought back over the night before and the ill-fated meeting and wondered if any of the others had survived the raid. Everything had happened so quickly that he had no time to think. He pulled himself out of bed and slowly walked to the door, making his way down the stairs to the common room. Flickering firelight lit up the common room. Red was sitting next to the open fireplace warming his feet and hadn't heard Eben coming down the stairs.

As Eben approached Red turned and looked up. 'Eben, you're awake. I thought you were never going to get up. You've been out for two days.'

'Thanks for looking after me.'

'You should thank Stella. She's the one who cleaned you up. You must have lost a lot of blood. You have a mighty gash on the back of your head and a bruise on your leg bigger than any I've ever seen. Take a seat before you fall over again.'

Eben took the seat across from Red. He looked at the blazing fireplace and felt its calming warmth.

'Where's Stella?'

'She's gone out to visit a friend,' replied Red as he looked back over his shoulder toward the front door. 'So, what happened to you the other night? How did you end up all beaten up like that?'

'I went to the meeting I told you and Stella about. It was about the evil in Ancora...'

At that moment the front door opened and Stella stepped in carrying a leather bag. She locked the door and approached them. 'You're up,' she said, surprised. 'Are you feeling better?'

'Much better,' replied Eben. 'Thanks for taking care of me.'

'You're lucky you made it back here. If you had fallen over in the streets it would have been the end of you,' she said as she walked by them and placed the leather bag on the bar.

'At least you managed to gain us two extra nights here at The Sea Dragon,' said Red, slightly chuckling. Stella glared across at Red and then walked into the kitchen without saying another word. Red didn't seem at all troubled by her and smiled as he looked back over his shoulder toward the kitchen. Turning his head he glanced back at the fire. 'That reminds me. Remember you said you had some silver.' Eben nodded. 'We probably should give some to Stella. I think she'll let us stay a little while longer; at least until you're completely well, but we definitely have to pay her something, and you're the only one of us who has any money.'

‘Sure, I will pay, but I don’t want to be a burden on her. Maybe we should leave sooner rather than later.’

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ replied Red. ‘She likes having us around.’ Red put his feet back up to warm them again.

‘She doesn’t seem to like you much.’

Red’s threw his head back and laughed. ‘Don’t be ridiculous. Of course she likes me.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked Eben, not convinced.

Red didn’t answer. He watched the flames of the fire for a few seconds. ‘So, you were saying about your meeting,’ he said, changing the topic. Eben thought he probably shouldn’t ask about Red and Stella’s relationship.

‘Yes, the meeting was brought to an end when the house was attacked by a sorcerer.’

‘A what?’ cried Red, his eyes widening in shock.

‘They were discussing some very serious matters and the house was attacked. I made it to the roof in an attempt to escape. I fell when the house collapsed, and that was when I was injured, but I managed to escape through the back alleys and made my way back here.’

‘We did warn you. Getting involved in anything that questions the King is dangerous,’ said Red, taking an unfamiliar serious tone.

‘Red’s right,’ said Stella as she came back into the room from the kitchen. ‘He may be a bad king, but King Ignis is our king...’

‘He’s your king, Stella. Remember I’m Silvorian,’ said Red, lifting his chin proudly.

‘Actually he’s not a king at all. He’s an imposter,’ said Eben. Stella and Red froze.

‘An imposter!’ shouted Red, almost slipping from his chair

‘That’s what the meeting was called to discuss. The real King Ignis is imprisoned in a dungeon on the island of Zyran. An imposter sits on the throne of Ortaria. It’s an evil plot put together by a group of Zyranian wizards,’ said Eben. There was a stunned silence. Only the crackle of the fire made any sound.

‘Surely this can’t be true,’ said Red. ‘How can they be sure?’ Stella looked to Red and then her eyes darted back to Eben.

‘They believed it enough to put their lives at risk,’ said Eben. ‘And look what happened to me. I was lucky to escape. The authorities didn’t want anyone to get out. They want to make sure no one knows what I just told you.’

Stella looked to be deep in thought. A moment later there was a thudding knock at the door. Stella took a quick breath and anxiously stared across at Eben.

‘They don’t know where you are staying do they?’ asked Stella, whispering fearfully.

‘I don’t think so,’ whispered Eben.

They stood up and walked toward the door. Again the heavy knock rang out.

‘Who is it?’ asked Stella.

‘I’m looking for Eben. Is he staying here?’ asked a man’s voice from outside. Stella backed away, and she looked back at Red and Eben. Red signalled for her to reveal nothing.

‘There’s no one by that name here,’ she answered.

There was silence for a few moments. Suddenly the locked bolt of the door started moving and opening by itself.

'Bloody magic!' gasped Red, clenching his fists. Stella stepped back behind the young men. A moment later the door opened. Cassiel stood in the doorway.

'Die Zyranian!' shouted Red, instantly leaping forward. Cassiel lifted his hand and stopped Red in his tracks; an invisible wall barred his way. Red pushed forward but couldn't move.

'Red, he's not against us,' cried Eben. Red stopped trying to press against the barrier and moved back a little. Cassiel walked into the room and gently closed the door.

'That's the kind of bravery we need,' said Cassiel with a slight smile. 'I'm sorry to surprise you like this.'

'Who is he?' asked Stella nervously, glancing across at Eben.

'This is Cassiel,' said Eben. 'He was at the meeting. He's a wizard. Cassiel, I would like you to meet my friends, Red and Stella'

Stella and Red stared at Cassiel. It was extremely rare to meet a wizard in Ortaria.

'You seem far too young to be a wizard,' said Red, still upset that he had been restrained by Cassiel's spell.

'I'm an outcast. I never finished my training,' said Cassiel, unperturbed.

'That explains it then; you're a dropout,' said Red. Stella shot Red a disapproving look.

'Yes, that's true, but under the circumstances I'm happy to be a dropout,' said Cassiel with a confident smile.

'Would you like a drink?' asked Stella politely.

'Indeed I would,' replied Cassiel as he casually took off his coat and hung it on a hook beside the door. They walked back over to the warmth of the fire.

'I was worried about you, Eben. I thought you were killed in the battle,' said Cassiel. Stella pulled up a seat for the young wizard.

'He arrived back here in a terrible state two nights ago,' said Stella as she went to grab a pitcher of ale from the bar.

'What happened to the others?' asked Eben.

'Everyone who escaped through the back door was captured by waiting guardsmen. It was a trap. Torg and the others were taken to the palace dungeons. I expect they met a terrible fate.'

'And Torela?'

'I'm not sure if she made it out or not before the building collapsed. I managed to escape along the rooftops. I returned the next day to have a look around. The city guard were still searching the area, so I had to move on. I spent yesterday and today looking for Torela to no avail.'

'How did you know where I was staying?' asked Eben.

'I had spoken about you at length with Torela earlier on the day of the meeting. She held you in high regard. She thought that you could help us in our struggle against the Zyranian Order. I think she thought you were special in some way.'

Red laughed and folded his arms across his chest as he leaned back in his chair. 'You should be careful, Eben. It looks like he wants you to join his rebel army.'

Cassiel frowned and took a sip of his ale. 'There is no army, just me,' he said coolly. 'Everyone in Ancora who wanted to help was captured two nights ago. So if something is going to be done it is up to me to do it.'

'So you're going to free King Ignis yourself?' asked Red.

Cassiel stared at Red for a long moment. He then glanced across at Stella. 'I assume you and Stella both know what's going on with King Ignis?' Red nodded

curtly. 'Good. Eben trusts you. The enemy would kill you if they knew you were aware of the King's imprisonment.' Red was taken aback and scratched his chin nervously. 'You are right, Red. I do need help. I'm working on a plan to free King Ignis, and I can't do it alone. The enemy may have had an infiltrator at our meeting. They may also know some of my plan. If we're going to free King Ignis then we should do it as soon as possible.'

'We! Don't include me in your plan,' said Red sharply.

'I'll help,' said Stella.

'Stella! Don't be ridiculous. You can't get involved; it's too risky,' protested Red.

'King Ignis is my king, Red. You're Silvorian, so it doesn't matter much to you. I want Ortaria to return to how it was years ago.'

'I'm definitely in too,' said Eben.

'Good,' said Cassiel. 'I'm very grateful for any assistance.'

Red stood up and heavily sighed. 'If Stella goes I'll have to go too.' Cassiel smiled at hearing Red's words.

**

Later that evening they were sitting around a table in the kitchen. Cassiel placed a large piece of parchment on the table top. A few candles were lit and provided a soft light. It was a map of the Citadel of Zyran, which included details of the main gate, diagrams of the academy, and the location of the Dungeons of Zyran.

'The Citadel is surrounded by an outer wall and has three main gates; it is about a thousand yards in diameter. Only Zyranian Wizards and students at the academy are allowed inside, and the gates are well guarded by a fierce band of guardsmen. Outside the Citadel there is a village beside the docks; it exists mainly to serve the Citadel itself and...'

'I've been there and...,' said Red.

Cassiel stared across at him. 'Good, Red, but Stella and Eben haven't, so let me continue. The Citadel is quite impressive and consists of over one hundred stone towers that rise high into the sky above. Many bridges make a network of pathways between the towers. In the past each wizard was given their own tower to live in; now some of the towers are used for other purposes because there are less than a hundred Zyranian wizards. Trebax, the Gatekeeper of Zyran, lives in a tower near the main front gate. He holds the key to the prison which looks like this.' He took from his pocket another small piece of paper and unfolded it, showing a picture of an octagonal crystal.

'It doesn't look like a key,' said Stella.

'It's an ancient and mysterious amulet which can be used to open any door,' said Cassiel. 'Our mission is to enter the Citadel, steal the key, free the King, and escape before anyone knows we've been there.'

'Impossible,' said Red, shaking his head. 'I don't want to dampen your enthusiasm, but even getting into the Citadel of Zyran will be a great task in itself, and trying not to be seen will probably be even harder. I've seen those towers; assuming Trebax locks his door the only way in would be through the high windows that are a hundred feet above the ground.'

'I didn't say it was going to be easy,' said Cassiel.

'I can do it,' said Stella. They were surprised by her words. 'If we can get into the Citadel then I can climb into those windows. Acrobatics, rope climbing, and trapeze were my specialties in the circus.'

‘Stella, Trebax will kill you if he sees you. I don’t like the sound of this plan,’ said Red.

‘It’s risky for all of us, Red,’ replied Stella.

‘But we still have to get into the Citadel,’ said Eben.

Red started lightly tapping on the table, and they turned and looked at him. ‘When I was a sailor we delivered Silvorian wine to Zyran in big oak barrels. I know a man who may be able to smuggle us inside the Citadel. He’s not the charitable type; he’ll require payment.’

Cassiel took from his pocket a leather pouch and tipped the contents of gold and silver coins onto the map. A gold coin could buy a great deal in Ortaria.

‘Money isn’t a problem,’ stated Cassiel. ‘Assuming we can get into the Citadel and steal the key, we will still need a distraction to get into the dungeons. The prison is guarded by two wizards and there is only one way in and out. If there was only one wizard I could probably deal with it; two make it impossible for me. I’m simply not powerful enough to deal with two wizards at once.’

‘Fireworks,’ said Red with a cheeky grin.

‘Fireworks!’ repeated Stella, shaking her head. ‘We don’t want to wake the whole of Zyran.’

‘Why not? I could create absolute chaos by setting off the fireworks, and everyone’s focus would be on me. No one will have any idea that a prison break was happening. Maybe the guards will leave their posts long enough to investigate.’

‘Hmmm,’ groaned Cassiel, not liking the idea. ‘Firstly, there is no guarantee the wizards will leave their posts, and secondly, you will be completely destroyed by the Zyranians.’

‘I won’t!’ said Red defensively. ‘I can light them up and run. By the time they start looking for me I’ll be long gone.’

‘Do you know enough about fireworks though?’ asked Cassiel hesitantly, still not convinced by the idea.

‘You’re talking to the unsurpassed master of fireworks himself!’ said Red confidently. Both Eben and Cassiel looked to Stella for confirmation.

‘Yes, it’s true, Red is very experienced. In the circus he was a Fire Master and prepared a display every night,’ said Stella.

‘A man of many talents,’ said Cassiel. Cassiel paused and reflected for a few moments on the idea. ‘It’s possible that fireworks could be used as a diversion within the walls which could help us escape after we free King Ignis. We should definitely bring some fireworks, yet I doubt the wizard guards will leave their posts for anything. We still have to think up a way of getting by them.’

The room fell silent. They all sat in quiet reflection, searching for a solution.

Eben broke the silence. ‘I once hunted mountain deer in a special way. Mountain deer can’t be shot with an ordinary arrow because they are likely to run leagues away before they collapse. I would wait for them quietly in a hidden place. When they appeared I would use a small harmless dart with a tiny amount of the common herbs Ortarian Mugwort and Valerian Root. Within seconds the dart would cause them to fall to the ground asleep. We could use this same method on the wizards.’

‘Brilliant,’ said Cassiel. ‘This is just what we need. If you could approach the wizard guards with a long cloak and hood they would probably mistake you for a wizard, and then before they realised you weren’t...they would be sound asleep.’

‘But how do we escape once we free King Ignis?’ asked Eben.

‘That’s the easy part. The supply gate near the docks is always locked except for when they’re taking supplies in. If we make it that far we will have the key; we should be able to open the gate and walk straight down to the docks to our waiting boat. So that’s our plan. We arrive on the island and pay your acquaintance to smuggle us into the Citadel. Stella will infiltrate Trebax’s tower and steal the key. Eben will put the wizard guards to sleep, and I will then enter the prison and free King Ignis. We will then escape via the supply gate and sail back to Ortaria.’

‘We have a plan at last,’ said Red merrily.

‘Indeed we do,’ said Eben, feeling uneasy at the many difficulties such a plan may entail.

CHAPTER FIVE

They spent several days preparing for their mission. Cassiel had organised passage to Zyran aboard a small trading ship. They had gathered all the required equipment: ropes and grappling hooks for Stella, the herbs and darts for Eben, and Red had organised a supply of fireworks. They had discussed all aspects of the plan in detail, and they knew that if they could free King Ignis he would be able to rally the people and bring back all the good men who had been sent away to Galdir and the Iron Gate Pass. The liberation of Ortaria depended on their success.

Cassiel had purchased some swords for them from a local armourer. Stella now carried a short sword at her side, and Red had a broadsword. Red was in the common room practicing with his new sword. Eben, sitting by the fireplace, watched on and was surprised that Red was actually a skilled swordsman.

‘When I was a sailor there was always the risk of being attacked by pirates on the high seas,’ said Red as he keenly practiced his cuts and stabs against thin air.

Stella sat on a chair in the corner of the room watching Red. Cassiel had gone to gather some last minute supplies for the journey. They planned to leave the following day at sunrise.

‘Are you any good with a sword?’ asked Red, glancing across at Eben as he continued to practice.

‘My adoptive father taught me how to use a sword when I was young, but I think I am a lot better at archery.’

A moment later the door opened and Cassiel walked into the common room. He quickly closed the door and bolted the lock. His face was flushed, and he was visibly shaking.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Stella, alarmed at his state.

‘I saw Zarceler on my way back here. I rounded a corner and he was across the street from me. Unfortunately he recognised me and sent his guardsmen after me. I escaped through the back lanes. I managed to lose them, but only just,’ he said.

‘Who’s Zarceler?’ asked Stella.

‘He is a Zyranian Enforcer. He is highly skilled in the art of battle magic. They send him to hunt the enemies of Zyran. He’s not someone you want to meet in a dark alley,’ answered Cassiel. Eben handed Cassiel a mug of water.

‘He was the one who attacked us at the meeting,’ said Eben, remembering that Torela had said his name.

‘Yes, that was Zarceler,’ said Cassiel, before pausing to drink from the mug. ‘Torela’s real name is Meara. Meara has been using the name Torela to hide herself from the Zyranians in Ancora. She’s an Irilian. The Irilians are the largest order of wizards in the Far Western Lands of Veredor. Long ago the Irilians and the

Zyranians went to war against each other. After many battles the Zyranians scattered and almost destroyed the Irilian Order. The Zyranian Order has patronised the Irilians ever since those days. Meara came to Ancora to contest the power of the Zyranian Order and to free the lands of the east from their evil schemes, but the Zyranians are powerful and there are many of them. Few wizards are brave enough to challenge the power of Zyran. For a long time the Zyranian Order has been the most powerful order of wizards in Veredor.'

'How many orders of wizards are there?' asked Eben curiously.

'There are four main orders and a few smaller groups of wizards here and there,' replied Cassiel. 'The Zyranians are the largest order. The Irilians live in the Far West, and they are mainly based in the land of Dravania. The Fire Order is a small and very ancient order based in the Old Guardian Mountains between Vastoria and Everdon.'

'And the fourth?' asked Red as he sheathed his sword.

'The Northern Sorcerers,' said Cassiel with a grimace. 'The Northern Sorcerers are from the Kaznor Empire in the Northern Lands of Veredor. Their magic is very different in nature to the magic of the wizards who live in the South.'

'How so?' asked Eben.

'I can't easily explain magic; it's very mysterious. The Irilians, Zyranians, and Fire Order all learn about the subtle potential hidden in their surroundings. They learn to manipulate this power. The Northern Sorcerers are different, they howl deep within; in the process they devour themselves and their bodies wither away, and they often hunger for power.'

'Which wizards are the most powerful?' asked Red.

'The Northern Sorcerers almost always defeat the wizards of the South. Usually several wizards from the South are required to overcome a single Northern Sorcerer, and on several occasions in history a Northern Sorcerer has been so powerful that the entire Zyranian Order has had to fight them. But the magic of the Northern Sorcerers is not refined. They can't do things like heal a broken arm or open a locked door. They're much more likely to blast the door open. Thankfully, they rarely come south from Kaznor and if they do they tend to come alone. Two decades ago a very powerful Northern Sorcerer came south with a small army and attacked Zyran. I was a child at the time of the invasion. It was a terrible time for the people living on the island.'

Stella stood up and walked over toward the kitchen area. 'All this talk of wizards is fascinating, but we will have to have something to eat if we're going to be at sea for a couple of days.'

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The following morning they rose about an hour before sunrise and did a final check on their packs before leaving the inn and walking across to the docks. Anchored against a pier was a small weatherworn ship. Sailors and dockworkers were rushing about and completing the last minute preparations before setting out. Cassiel led the way along a gangplank. The old captain, standing atop a large wooden crate, was a fiery man with a bushy black beard and a heavily lined face. He was furiously shouting commands to the sailors below. They jumped and ran about, creating quite a chaotic scene.

'Come on ya naw good fish guts; work harda. We need da git moven! I aint pain ya to run a social club,' he shouted, his voice was coarse and guttural.

'Captain Orstag,' said Cassiel as he stepped up onto the deck of the ship.

‘Not naw,’ he blurted back, dismissively waving Cassiel away. They stood on the deck as sailors ducked and weaved about them.

‘Git outda da way!’ shouted Captain Orstag down at them.

‘Where to?’ asked Cassiel, surprised at the tone Captain Orstag was taking.

‘Beelow da deck!’

They were a little taken aback by his gruffness, and it looked like Cassiel was going to say something. A moment later the fuming captain turned his back to them and began shouting at the sailors on the other side of the ship. Cassiel thought it better to hold his tongue. Red led the way down below the deck and into a dimly lit and confined area below. Barrels, wooden boxes, and many traded goods were loaded everywhere in the stuffy and exceedingly dank space. A stench of something putrid permeated the entire ship.

‘What do we do now?’ asked Stella.

‘Wait. I assume the Captain will assign us a cabin soon,’ replied Cassiel. That was the deal I made with him yesterday.’ They could hear voices toward the back of the ship.

‘I’ll see if I can find our cabin,’ said Red. He walked off toward the back and was lost from view behind large wooden crates.

Eben sat down on a barrel. ‘This is cosy,’ he said, trying to be positive.

Stella smiled bleakly; she looked down at the floor as two rats scurried around the edge of a crate and ran along an edge, jumping into a gap in the floorboards. Her bleak smile quickly turned to a deep frown, and she covered her mouth with her hand.

‘Were there any other boats?’ she asked anxiously.

‘Don’t worry; they won’t hurt you, they’re only rats,’ replied Cassiel. They could hear voices merrily shouting from the back of the ship. A moment later Red appeared with a wide smile.

‘Hey, come on. A friend of mine is here,’ said Red cheerfully.

They followed him between the crates and made their way to the back of the ship where there was a slightly cleared area. Seated on a small wooden chair was a very overweight middle-aged man, with greasy hair, dark circles under his eyes, and a big grin on his face. He was surrounded by a group of five gangly men, all with swords at their belts. Stella cautiously glanced at Eben.

‘Stella, Cassiel, Eben; I would like you to meet Falsig,’ said Red, indicating toward the overweight man.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ said Falsig in a throaty voice, a greasy smile crossing his face.

‘Years ago we worked together on a ship called the Gale Blazer,’ said Red, who seemed happy to have met up with his old friend.

‘Those were the days,’ said Falsig, grinning across at Red.

‘Remember when those crazy villagers thought we had stolen a pig. We had to swim five hundred yards out to our anchored ship!’ said Red, laughing as he spoke.

‘Sure do, Red.’ said Falsig, chuckling along. ‘So why are you heading out to Zyran?’

‘Business,’ replied Cassiel coolly.

‘What kind of business are you in, Cassiel?’ asked Falsig, paying close attention.

‘Trading rare goods,’ said Cassiel quickly. ‘What about you, Falsig; why are you going to Zyran?’ asked Cassiel, turning the topic away from their mission.

'I work for the Zyranian Order,' said Falsig casually. 'I bring the wizards some of the finest spices and delicacies in Veredor. Whilst I'm not travelling I help govern the kitchen in the Citadel of Zyran. I also help a little to manage the Citadel's guardsmen.'

'Do you think you can get us into the Citadel?' asked Red carelessly. Cassiel's jaw dropped as Red revealed a part of their plan, and he stared harshly at Red, obviously not wanting him to say another word. Red realised he had made a gaff and his eyes shifted from side to side.

'Why do you want to get into the Citadel?' asked Falsig inquisitively.

Red looked to Cassiel and Eben nervously, not sure what to say. Falsig could see they were uncomfortable about the subject, and he looked up to Cassiel, assuming he was the leader.

'Why don't we have a private talk a little later this evening,' suggested Falsig. Cassiel agreed.

**

The Sea of Zyran was considered by most seafaring folk to be one of the finest stretches of water in all of Veredor. It was often said that the life of a fisherman was that of a blissful dream; however, in recent times few boats journeyed between the coasts of Ortaria and Zyran. It was widely told that a foul curse blew with the wind and scourged every ship that dared to sail the stretch of sea. Many of the once numerous seafarers had sailed away in search of safer waters in the south.

After the ship had set out from Ancora they had been assigned a small cabin toward the front. The sound of the waves and the ocean seemed strangely familiar to Eben, even though he had never been on a boat before. The four of them sat on the floor of their tiny cabin.

'I shouldn't have said anything, I know,' said Red remorsefully.

'Our plan is already hanging in the balance. If we start giving everyone we meet an idea of what we're planning we are sure to be killed by the Zyranians before we even reach the front gate of the Citadel,' said Cassiel angrily.

'I won't say another word,' said Red.

'It was stupid. You may have placed us in danger and jeopardised our plan,' said Cassiel.

'Falsig was a good friend once. We should be able to trust him,' said Red, trying to reassure them, but clearly doubting his own words.

'What about the five others standing around him?' asked Cassiel sharply.

'I'm sorry. What can I do about it now? I can't take back what I've said.'

'Don't worry about it Red,' said Eben calmly. 'We'll work it out. After all they don't know anything except that we want to get inside the Citadel.'

'But that's enough to make them suspicious,' said Cassiel.

There was a tapping on the cabin door. Eben stood up and reached over to open it. Falsig stood in the doorway with a big smoking pipe in his mouth and a sly grin on his lips.

'Hello there. Thought I would come by and have a little talk. Can I come in?' he asked, stepping inside before they had answered his question.

There was scarcely enough room in the cabin to accommodate the massive man. Somehow he managed to sit cross-legged on the floor. He continued to smoke his pipe which quickly filled the room with a thick haze. Eben closed the door and resumed his place which was now beside Falsig.

'Red, you said you and your friends want to get inside the Citadel of Zyran?'

'Maybe,' said Red, not wanting to give away anything more.

‘Maybe means yes with you,’ said Falsig with a hoarse chuckle. ‘Now let me guess. You’re planning to get inside the Citadel and rob the treasury, right? It sounds like the most ridiculous thing in the world to do, and under normal conditions I’d think you wouldn’t stand a chance, but I gave it some thought, and I know Red wouldn’t try such a thing unless he thought the odds were good. That made me think the three of you,’ he indicated to everyone except Red, ‘must all be professional thieves. Am I right?’

They looked at each other, not sure what to say for a few moments.

‘Perhaps we are and perhaps we’re not,’ said Cassiel with an expressionless face. ‘What’s it to you?’

‘Well, well, well,’ said Falsig, grinning widely. ‘I’ve been looking for an opportunity to move out of the kitchen and into my own palace. If we can strike a deal then I think I can get you into the Citadel.’

‘So you want to make some money?’ asked Cassiel coolly.

‘I provide the service and you pay me my money, plain and simple,’ replied Falsig, his grin extending from ear to ear. Cassiel looked to be deep in thought for a few moments. He was formulating a new plan in the space of ten seconds.

‘If you get us inside then we’ll give you a third of everything we take,’ said Cassiel with a firm tone that completely convinced Falsig. Red’s mouth fell open at Cassiel’s words.

‘We have a deal,’ agreed Falsig.

‘Good, but no more than a third,’ repeated Cassiel.

‘I accept your offer,’ said Falsig.

**

They sat in the cabin after Falsig had left. All their eyes were cast downward. They knew that Falsig was a real risk to their plan succeeding.

‘He’ll be furious when he discovers that we aren’t thieves and there is nothing in it for him,’ whispered Eben.

‘He’ll have to be happy with a third of nothing,’ whispered Cassiel with a slightly humorous smile, which was rare for him.

‘It’s not honest,’ whispered Stella.

‘It’s also not dishonest. None of us said that we were thieves; he made that assumption himself. We didn’t say we were stealing anything; he assumed that too. I said that he can have a third of what we take. He will have to be happy with a third of nothing. A deal is a deal. We need a way into the Citadel of Zyran, and we can’t tell anyone our plan. The truth is that if our plan succeeds Falsig will be rewarded in the end; he just might have to wait until King Ignis takes back his throne.’

‘You’re cunning like a Zyranian,’ said Red. ‘I think we should tell him what we’re really up to and see if he wants to help us.’

‘Firstly, I was born on the Island of Zyran; that makes me a Zyranian by birth. Naturally, I am well versed in Zyranian lore and culture. And secondly, we have to make the best of our situation and that means never letting Falsig know our real plan,’ said Cassiel firmly.

Red stared at Cassiel frostily for a few moments. ‘You’re not the leader of our group, Cassiel.’ Cassiel took a deep breath and looked away.

‘We don’t have a leader,’ said Eben. ‘We are in this together and must try to get along. We have to rely on each other to succeed. This arguing is not helping us.’

A few moments went by and no one said a word.

‘Falsig won’t be happy,’ said Red. ‘I already have enough people who want me dead. King Ignis better give him the reward after we free him.’

‘Our plan is risky to say the least. I’m willing to take any opportunity that will help us succeed,’ said Cassiel.

**

Eben and Red stood on the deck at the front of the ship looking out at the sea as the sunset cast flickering orange light across the gentle waves. Eben felt he had never seen such beauty as the light reflecting on the water.

Falsig appeared and walked over from the back of the ship. ‘What a lovely evening,’ he said, a big sly grin covering his face.

The sun was slowly sinking beneath the waves ahead. It was truly a beautiful sight. Eben felt a sense of wonder looking out over the sea at the shining light. Watching the water brought a sense of peace to his heart.

‘I’m wondering, Red. What does a thief need a bag of fireworks for?’ asked Falsig.

‘Have you been looking in my bag?’ asked Red tensely.

‘Just checking on my investment,’ replied Falsig, his grin instantly fading into a stony expression. ‘Red, I get the feeling you’re not telling me everything.’

Red looked away toward the sunset and waited for a few moments before replying. ‘The full details of our plan will remain a secret, Falsig’.

Falsig roughly grabbed Red’s arm. ‘Listen to me. If your cheating me I’ll make sure you pay,’ he said fiercely.

Eben quickly turned and immediately raised himself to his full height and clenched his fists in readiness to defend his friend. Falsig sneered up at Eben. A moment later Red smiled. He was not afraid of Falsig at all.

‘Relax, you’ll get your reward, Falsig,’ said Red as he removed his arm from Falsig’s grip.

‘Make sure of it,’ said Falsig as he turned and walked away.

‘I don’t like this. I hope I haven’t foiled our plan,’ said Red, his eyes narrowing as he watched Falsig head toward the back of the ship.

‘Maybe we should go back to our original plan of the wine barrels,’ suggested Eben.

‘No, it’s too late. He’ll probably go straight to the Zyranians if we change anything now. He can’t comprehend that we would be prepared to risk our lives for anything other than treasure, and he’s determined to get his share.’ Red glanced back out toward the sun as it descended beneath the waves. The cool evening was growing dark.

CHAPTER SIX

It was late in the afternoon on the second day after leaving Ancora. The ship crossed a small bay and was approaching the docks. Eben looked out at the sight of the Citadel of Zyran that towered ominously above the docks. At least a hundred stone towers rose high into the sky above and a weblike network of dozens of stone bridges linked the towers together. A massive grey stone wall, at least a hundred and fifty feet high, completely surrounded the Citadel. Hundreds of ravens circled in the gloomy haze above the towers, and dark murky clouds hung low in the sky.

Cassiel, Red, and Stella stood with Eben toward the front of the deck; they stared out at the Citadel as the ship neared the docks.

'It looks intimidating,' said Stella.

'The wizards of Zyran are by far the most cunning in all of Veredor. We must be careful,' said Cassiel, looking up at the Citadel uneasily.

The ship slowly approached and entered under the dark cloud which hovered not far above the tops of the towers. The gloominess was oppressive. The area of the docks was about three hundred feet down from the edge of the wall of the Citadel. A large village made up of many huts and small houses surrounded the dock area. The sailors threw ropes and tied the ship to the dock. Captain Orstag began yelling at his sailors.

Falsig approached as the ship came up beside the docks. The sailors rushed about and secured lines and placed a gangplank. Eben and the others were preparing to disembark. 'You would be wise to get a room in the inn over there,' said Falsig, pointing toward a large inn at the edge of the village. 'I'll meet you at the bar around noon tomorrow, and we'll discuss our dealings in more detail.' He shuffled down the gangplank and was followed by his five shadowy companions.

'I don't trust him,' said Stella, grimacing as she watched Falsig walk away. Eben nodded in agreement.

Cassiel walked down the plank and across the docks. Eben, Stella, and Red followed him across the way and up the slight slope toward the inn. The sign above the door read: 'The Lost Mermaid,' and had a faded picture of a sad mermaid sitting on a beach. It was a large stone building with an upper floor and a gabled roof. Cassiel pushed the door open and stepped in. Eben, Stella, and Red followed Cassiel's lead.

The common room was crowded and very warm with large open fire burning at the far end. Groups of men filled most of the tables and many others stood at the bar. A long bar stretched along the wall on the right side of the room.

Cassiel stopped and scanned the room. He then leaned toward Eben. 'Some of these people could be dangerous, so be cautious and discreet. I'm going to see if we can reserve some rooms for tonight.' He then turned and walked toward the bar. No one in the room seemed to notice the small group of newcomers.

'Let's take the table in the corner,' said Red. They walked over and sat down. 'At least this place is warm. I remember staying here once a few years ago when I was a sailor.' He looked toward the big open fire across the room; the flames were burning brightly. 'I'm going to get us some drinks.' Red jumped up out of his seat and approached the bar.

Cassiel returned at the same time as Red. 'We have rooms on the upper floor,' he said as he took the spare seat at the table. A barmaid walked over and placed the three ales down on the table in front of the three of them.

Cassiel's eyes narrowed at the sight of the three ales. He looked up at Red and raised an eyebrow. 'You don't like me much do you, Red?'

'Sorry Cassiel, you were talking with the innkeeper. I didn't know how long you would be gone,' said Red defensively. Cassiel stared at Red for a few silent seconds. He then stood up and walked over to the bar to buy himself a drink.

'Zyranians,' muttered Red when Cassiel was out of earshot.

Stella eyed Red with a harsh frown. 'Cassiel is our friend, Red. At least try to get along with him.'

Red looked down at the table and nervously scratched his forehead. 'I'll respect him when he shows me a little respect,' he muttered.

Eben was aware that tension had been growing between Cassiel and Red ever since the two of them met back in Ancora. Red was rarely serious and always tried

to turn everything into a joke. Cassiel was almost always serious and stern in demeanour and rarely had time for joking around.

Cassiel returned to the table with a mug of ale. He sat down and took a sip. 'I visited this inn regularly when I was studying at the academy,' said Cassiel, glancing around the room nostalgically.

'How far did you get into your training?' asked Eben.

'Seven years,' replied Cassiel. He then took another sip of his ale. 'I was cast out of the academy.'

'Why were you cast out?' asked Stella.

'That's something I don't like to talk about; it was a rather unpleasant experience. I will say that I was glad to see the end of my time there. When an apprentice is cast out they can never return to the Citadel and they are forbidden to practice magic,' he said soberly.

Before long a barmaid appeared with steaming plates of mutton and vegetables. They hungrily devoured their meals before retiring to their beds.

**

The next day was less gloomy. Eben looked out of his window; the dark clouds had reduced above the Citadel. Sunlight was pushing its way down through small gaps in the sky. The Citadel of Zyran was a daunting sight; it dominated the skyline above the small village. Eben could see a large group of guards marching across the top of the wall in the distance.

There was a knock at his door. Cassiel stepped into Eben's room.

'Good morning, Eben. I think we should go down to the docks and buy a small boat. We're going to need one to leave after we finish our mission here.'

'How do you feel about the plan now that we are here?' asked Eben as he stood at the window and continued surveying the immense dark walls of the Citadel.

'I hope we can succeed,' replied Cassiel. 'Falsig has made our task more challenging; hopefully he won't be a problem until after King Ignis is safely away from here. Stella's task is very dangerous. I think it is doubtful that Trebax will leave the dungeon key out of sight. If he sees her he will not hesitate to kill her.'

'Maybe we should find another way,' suggested Eben, feeling concerned for Stella.

'There is no other way into the dungeon. Only the key will open the prison door and the doors to the cells within. We are the only people who know King Ignis is imprisoned in the Dungeons of Zyran. If we fail then we fail.'

Eben stood up and put on his leather cloak. Cassiel led the way down the stairs and out of the inn. They walked across to the bustling area of the docks. Sailors were offloading crates and barrels from a large ship that had only just come into port. Across the docks, on the southern side, was a smaller pier set apart from the main docks. A few smaller fishing boats were moored to the pier. Eben and Cassiel approached the smaller pier.

An old man was fixing a net at the edge of the dock. He was a bearded short man with a very big nose, weathered skin, and a dirty old sailor's hat with a big eagle's feather attached.

'Hello there,' said Cassiel as they approached.

The man glanced up at Cassiel as he continued to fix his net. 'Hello to you too.'

'Can you tell me where I could buy a boat?'

The old man stopped fixing his net and looked up. 'A boat? You don't look like a sailor or a fisherman.'

'I'm neither,' said Cassiel coolly.

‘Perhaps you’re wishing to sail the wild seas and see some far off lands. I’ve been around sea folk for a few years now, and I know a sailor when I see one. Let me give you some free advice: if you sail out to sea without experience you’ll be sailing to your grave,’ said the old man with a slight chuckle.

‘I appreciate your interest, but if you can’t assist me I will ask someone else,’ said Cassiel impatiently. The old man laughed. ‘What’s so funny?’ asked Cassiel.

‘You don’t remember me do you, Cassiel?’

Cassiel’s eyes widened as he suddenly recognised the old man. ‘Baftel!’ he cried, stunned by the sudden revelation. Eben looked from Cassiel to the old fisherman. Baftel threw his net aside and stood up. ‘What brings you to Zyran?’

‘I was going to ask the same question of you,’ said Baftel.

‘What are you doing here? I heard you were banished from the Zyranian Order,’ stammered Cassiel.

Baftel sighed and looked around nervously. ‘Yes, I was banished from the Citadel and cast out of the Zyranian Order. The Zyranian High Council voted seven for my death and eight for my banishment.’ He sadly glanced back across the docks to the walls of the Citadel of Zyran. ‘I have watched as the shadows have grown in Zyran. The dark cloud constantly hovers over the island, but this morning, for the first time in years, the sun seemed to find a way through.’ The old man looked to Eben for a moment. ‘I believe there may be reason to hope again.’

Cassiel, still pale with shock, slowly regained his regular composure.

‘I heard you betrayed the Zyranian Order and were forbidden to practice magic,’ said Cassiel.

Baftel flinched at hearing Cassiel’s words and then nodded his head sadly. ‘Yes, I heard that was their story. The real truth was hidden beneath a shroud of lies. Now I don’t suppose it matters. I can never again enter the Citadel of Zyran. I have enjoyed fixing nets and fishing for the last five years. The life of a wizard was always full of adventure, but fishing is much more fun.’

‘Can you help us find a boat to sail to Ortaria?’ asked Cassiel.

‘As I said, sailing these seas would be dangerous for someone without any experience,’ replied Baftel, shaking his head.

Cassiel looked out to sea and then back to Baftel. ‘Can you take us back to Ortaria, Baftel?’

‘I only have a twenty foot fishing boat. You would be better off going on one of the larger trading ships.’

‘I can’t wait for one of those ships. When I have to leave Zyran I will need to leave at once. I can pay you, Baftel,’ said Cassiel.

Baftel’s eyes narrowed. He glanced away, and a deep frown crossed his face. He picked up his net and walked down the pier a little before he answered.

‘Cassiel, I know you’re an outcast like me. I wonder why you would want to come back to Zyran in these dark times. There’s only a coastal village here, and we both know you can’t go into the Citadel. Am I correct in supposing that you are involved in something untoward?’ Cassiel ignored the suggestion as Baftel threw his net into an open deck sailboat and then walked back to the two of them. ‘I remember when you were at the academy. You never did like taking direction, and you always had a very strong will. I only hope whatever you have planned doesn’t kill you and your friend. Your enemies may know more than you realise.’

‘What do you see?’ asked Cassiel nervously. He knew Baftel was renowned for his ability to see what was hidden.

'A candle left out in the rain. Sharks circling a man stranded at sea. You have brought hope into a place of shadows. You are like a man wading in the rough waves with an oil lantern in his hand,' said Baftel, seeming troubled by his own thoughts.

'Do you think my plan has been discovered?' Baftel looked to Eben for a moment and then back to Cassiel; the strain was visible on his face.

'There's a greater plan at work.'

'Can you help us? You say that I have brought hope to Zyran; would you help that hope?' Baftel drew a long breath and then whispered something they could not hear. A long silence followed before he answered.

'I will take you back to Ortaria if you succeed.'

'Thank you,' said Cassiel, bowing to the old man.

'You will have to come and tell me when I should be ready for the journey.'

'I will,' said Cassiel.

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They walked back toward the inn and Cassiel seemed troubled by some of the things that Baftel had said.

'Who is he?' asked Eben, curious to know more.

'Baftel was once the leader of the Seers of Zyran. They were a minor fraternity within the Zyranian Order. They focused on developing an ability to see the true nature of what lies beneath the surface and what lies beyond normal perception. Five years ago Baftel was accused of using his powers to plot against the Zyranian Order. He was banished from the Citadel and cast out of the Zyranian Order. I'm concerned that he has foreseen trouble ahead for us.'

'Could we be walking into a trap?' asked Eben.

'Perhaps,' said Cassiel uneasily.

'Should we change our plan?'

'No, the longer we stay here the more at risk we are. This is our one chance,' he said as they reached the door of The Lost Mermaid.

**

At noon the four friends were seated in a small private room that was set off from the main common room. The table was large and hardly fit into the confined space. Falsig was seated across from them and was grinning slyly. They all felt uncomfortable in his presence. His pungent body odour drifted across the table.

'I assume you are ready to start the undertaking at any moment,' said Falsig. He slurped on a large mug of ale.

'That's correct,' said Cassiel with a stony expression.

'Good. Tonight there is a banquet in the hall of the Citadel and nearly all the Zyranians will attend. I've brought a group of servants up from the village to help with preparations and to work in the kitchen. Tonight, shortly after nightfall, I will let the servants out through the supply gate to return home to the village. Wait by the gate; I'll let you in after I let them out.'

He took another gulp of his ale and a moment later burped. Stella averted her eyes in disgust. Falsig saw her expression and smirked. 'There are a few conditions,' he continued. 'If you get caught you never knew me, and be sure I will not let you out of the gate without getting my share of the loot. If you try anything shifty I'll have you buried.'

'We will be waiting at the gate after dark,' said Cassiel.

'I'll see the four of you tonight.' Falsig skulled his remaining ale. He then stood up and nodded with approval before walking from the small room. A moment later he was gone.

'He is the foulest man I have ever met,' said Stella, grimacing at the thought of him.

'What do you think?' asked Eben, looking across to Cassiel.

'I don't trust him,' said Cassiel. 'But this is our only chance to free King Ignis. I will tell Baftel to be ready to leave tonight.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

They hid in the shadows about fifty feet from the wall and were huddled behind a group of shrubs. The supply gate was a rectangular wooden door that stood about ten feet high at the base of the wall. The gate was closed and the Citadel was completely silent. From their place behind the shrubs they had a wide view of the area. They waited and watched. Eben could sense the feeling of anticipation was growing among the small company. He looked up to the top of the wall high above and saw a brigade of guards passing by.

'I don't like this,' said Red.

'Be quiet,' whispered Stella.

The gate opened. Lantern light lit up the gateway. The group of servants who were carrying small lanterns stepped out and scurried away along the outer base of the wall in the direction of the village. Falsig stood alone in the dark entrance holding a large lantern.

'Let's go,' whispered Cassiel. They followed him quickly across to the gate.

'Come on,' whispered Falsig with urgency as they approached. He ushered them inside and locked the gate behind them. 'You're on your own now. I'll be across the way. I will wait here until you return.'

Falsig walked away leaving them in the dark just inside the gate. Eben looked up at the amazing sight above. The stone towers rose high into the dark sky. Many stone bridges crossed from tower to tower; some not far from the cobblestoned streets and others hundreds of feet above. Lanterns lit the bridges and lanes below providing a soft light that permeated the entire Citadel.

'Let's move,' whispered Cassiel. He hastily led them away from the gate. They kept to the shadows as they followed Cassiel into a small alleyway that wound back toward the main front gate. The lanes and squares were completely empty. Eben looked ahead and saw that the alley came to an end and opened into a large square. Cassiel stopped just before they reached the end of the alley. He glanced around the corner. The area beyond was dimly lit by several street lanterns, and down the way they could see the main gate. Just across the square was the base of a tower that rose high into the sky. Eben looked up and could see a bridge spanned a gap of fifty feet between the larger tower and a smaller tower further into the Citadel. The bridge was about a hundred feet above the square.

'That's the Gatekeeper's tower,' whispered Cassiel, pointing to the tower across the square. He looked at Stella. 'Are you sure you want to do this?'

'Of course,' replied Stella confidently.

'See the window above the door where the bridge meets the tower. The door will be locked and probably have a trap; you must be careful. The arched window above the door should take you into the main chamber where the key would be kept. Trebax should be at the banquet, but there is still a chance he is in there.'

Stella looked up and her green eyes flickered in the faint lantern light. She took from her bag a pair of leather gloves and a long coiled rope with a grappling hook.

‘Do you want me to come with you?’ asked Red nervously.

‘No,’ she whispered as she prepared her ropes.

‘We will be waiting for you here,’ whispered Cassiel.

She entered the square and edged along the near wall until she was standing directly beneath the bridge. They watched as she took the rope and started swinging it in large loops. A moment later she released the hook. The grappling hook flew upward with total accuracy and hooked onto the railing of the bridge. Stella pulled the rope tight, and a moment later she was ascending the rope with amazing skill. Within a minute she had reached the bridge. She climbed over the stone railing and hastily took from her bag a second rope and hook. She walked toward the Gatekeeper’s tower and looked up at the window above.

With a small swing she sent the second rope over the ledge of the window and an instant later she was climbing. She reached the window and stood for a moment in the opening. They watched as she stepped into the tower and was gone from sight.

‘She’s amazing,’ whispered Red, staring up in wonder.

A little time passed and she didn’t reappear. Eben kept his eyes fixed on the window. Red’s expression of wonder was gradually turning to one of concern. A few more moments passed and still nothing happened.

‘She’s probably in trouble,’ whispered Red anxiously. He started to move toward the first rope.

Cassiel grabbed his arm and stopped him from leaving the dark alleyway. ‘Wait,’ he said firmly.

A moment later Stella leapt from the window and grasped the rope as she flew through the air and slid down to the bridge in a matter of seconds. They watched as she ran across the bridge and quickly climbed over the edge. She glided down the first rope to the square below. There was no sign of anyone chasing her. She ran over to them and was holding the crystal key.

‘He was there; he saw me as I was leaving,’ she said as she looked back up to the window high above. They all looked up and could see the silhouette of a robed man in the window.

‘Quick, let’s go,’ said Cassiel.

They dashed along the alleyway in the direction they had come. They ran through the narrow laneways and squares and took many turns to the left and right. The laneways of the Citadel were like a maze. Eben had lost all sense of direction. They suddenly stopped before rounding a final corner.

‘Just ahead of us is the gate to the Dungeons of Zyran. We must act quickly before Trebax raises the alarm. We have no time for any delay,’ said Cassiel.

Eben took the sleeping darts from his bag. They looked around the corner toward the prison entrance. Directly ahead of them was a round cobblestoned area about forty yards in diameter. On the far side there was a large iron door with no apparent handle.

‘The wizard guards are gone,’ stuttered Cassiel, his eyes scanning the area ahead. He turned to Eben with a deep frown; a moment later the blood drained from his face. ‘It’s a trap,’ he cried.

They looked back the way they had come and saw a group of robed wizards approaching with a large number of guardsmen. Across the open area they could

see other wizards were approaching from the opposite alleyway that led to the prison gate. Flames started blasting toward them. Cassiel raised his hands and created an invisible shield. The onslaught of fire smashed against the unseen barrier. There was no escape.

'Into the prison!' shouted Red, grabbing Stella's hand, he led her quickly across to the door. Eben and Cassiel followed as Stella took the key and touched it to the dungeon door. The door started to slowly open. Eben drew his sword as the Zyranian wizards rushed from the alleyways behind them. Stella and Red backed away inside the prison and were out of sight moments later. Cassiel raised both hands and sent multiple blasts of fire at the approaching wizards. The Zyranian wizards instantly retaliated. A blazing torrent of fire blasted through the air toward them. Eben and Cassiel leapt into the prison only just avoiding the onslaught. A moment later Red slammed the door as the powerful surge of fire and energy smashed against it.

They stood in the dimly lit entrance chamber. On the opposite side of the chamber was a stairwell which led down into the dungeon below. The enchanted walls glowed around them. Cassiel leaned against the door, hanging his head low. He crouched down and stared at the stone floor. 'The entire Zyranian Order will be out there waiting for us. They must have known we were going to try to steal the key and allowed us to. I think the only reason they let us take the key was because they wanted to make sure they caught all of us.'

'We're safe in here though. There's no way they can enter the dungeon,' said Red, trying to be positive about the situation.

'But how will we get out of here?' asked Eben.

'We should free King Ignis,' said Stella.

'But we won't be able to leave with him now that the Zyranians know we are here. We are completely trapped,' said Cassiel.

'We should free the King; perhaps he can help,' said Eben as he walked toward the stairwell.

Red, Stella, and Eben walked down the stairs. Cassiel followed. The stairwell led about fifty feet down through solid rock and opened into a large subterranean passageway that was about a hundred feet long with iron doors lining both sides of the way. There were at least twenty cell doors.

'We must be careful and ensure we don't free the wrong person. Who knows what's behind each door,' said Red as he led them along the passageway.

'King Ignis is in the last cell,' said Cassiel as he came into the passage from the stairwell. They walked to the door that Cassiel had indicated. Stella took the key and touched it to the door; a moment later the cell door slowly opened. They peered into the small dimly lit dungeon room; on the far side was the shape of a man curled up on the ground and clothed in rags. He lifted his head slightly and looked at them.

'Who are you?' he asked in a low and deep voice as he slowly got to his feet. The man was perhaps fifty years old with strong features. He had long brown hair that was streaked with silver, a beard that he had tied up neatly, and strong dark eyes. He looked proud and dignified, even though he was clothed in rags.

'Your Highness, we are here to rescue you,' said Stella, stepping into the cell. He walked over to them, his eyes wide with bewilderment. 'My name is Stella and these are my friends: Red, Eben, and Cassiel.'

'You are Ortarians. How did you know I was here?' asked King Ignis.

Cassiel interrupted before Stella could answer. 'Your Highness, there will be plenty of time to explain everything later. Unfortunately our attempt to rescue you was discovered by the Zyranians. The Zyranian Order is waiting for us outside the prison. We don't know how we can possibly escape.' The King nodded as he stepped out of his cell into the passageway. He looked up and down the corridor and scratched his beard as he pondered an idea.

'You have the key?' asked King Ignis.

'Yes,' replied Stella.

'In my time here I have become acquainted with the man in the cell next to mine. We have talked with each other through the walls for years, and we have become quite good friends. May I have the key so I can free him?'

Stella handed over the key. King Ignis stepped toward the door to the right of his own cell.

'No!' shouted Cassiel, leaping forward to stand in the way.

'What are you doing?' asked the King, surprised by Cassiel's move to block him.

'You can't free Azagord,' said Cassiel firmly.

'Who is Azagord?' asked Eben.

'He's a powerful and evil sorcerer,' replied Cassiel. 'He's the Northern Sorcerer who came south from Kaznor nearly twenty years ago and attacked Zyran. He's a merciless tyrant who possesses great power. Only this prison can contain him; he should never be released.'

'Cassiel, no one is beyond redemption, not even Azagord,' said King Ignis. 'Furthermore, he may be our only hope of escape.'

'I can't allow this,' said Cassiel defiantly.

'Azagord was once my personal enemy,' said King Ignis. 'I worked with the Zyranians against him and fought his army in Ortaria before he attacked Zyran. He has been imprisoned here since those days, and he is not the same man he was when he entered this place.'

'But, Your Highness...'

'Step aside,' commanded the King.

Cassiel reluctantly moved away from the door. King Ignis stepped forward and touched the key to the iron surface. The door opened and revealed a very skinny older man with thin dark hair, deep hollow cheeks, and sunken dark eyes. He was short and clothed in rags with a dishevelled beard.

'Azagord,' said King Ignis warmly.

'My King,' said Azagord in a deep foreign accent. The sorcerer stepped out of the cell and embraced his friend.

The others stepped back at the sight of him. Azagord glanced over at them with sunken eyes which were like pools of darkness. His eyes instantly fixed on Eben and the sword he was carrying. He stepped away from the King toward Eben and stared at him more intensely. Eben sensed danger as Azagord slowly approached.

'Is everything all right, Azagord?' asked King Ignis. Azagord didn't answer and kept his eyes fixed on Eben.

'It seems strange that the Sword of Light should fall into my hands after so long in exile,' answered Azagord in a rasping voice.

The King looked from Azagord to Eben. Azagord moved forward with lightning speed. Cassiel tried to step in the way, but a blast of glowing green energy sent him sliding along the floor and pinned him to the stony surface. Eben raised his sword, but before he could react the sorcerer grabbed him by the throat. He felt a

shock of energy pass through his body, paralysing his arms and legs. Azagord lifted him off the ground with incredible strength.

Red tried to swing his sword at the sorcerer, but his blade struck an invisible barrier. Red then found that he was unable to move; his feet were completely frozen in place. Azagord then flicked his wrist and sent Red flying backward.

The King stepped toward Azagord. 'Azagord, stop!' he commanded. The sorcerer looked at King Ignis for a moment.

'I can't, my King. This is my duty, my reason, and my purpose. I was sent to recover the sword and to kill the one who carried it. The Master needs the Sword of Light. The Master will cast it through the Cosmic Gate,' hissed Azagord.

King Ignis placed his hand on Azagord's shoulder. 'Please, Azagord. Remember our pledge. You do not have to be a slave to the darkness. You can choose the path toward the light.'

Azagord looked over his shoulder at the King again. His body was trembling. He looked down and away from Eben and tears started to issue forth. 'I am sorry. I'm so sorry for what I am,' he said shakily. A moment later he released Eben. Azagord then fell to his knees and grasped his head in his hands, hiding his face from them.

Eben shrank back from the sorcerer and watched on as Azagord began weeping bitterly. Cassiel was also released. Stella and Red helped Eben up. Eben felt his blood returning to his limbs.

'The Zyranian Order waits outside the prison. Can you help us escape?' asked King Ignis.

Azagord glanced up at King Ignis with tortured and sorrowful eyes. 'I once fought the entire Zyranian Order and failed. I can save you, but only with my life.' The sorcerer slowly stood up and turned to look at Eben. 'I am sorry for hurting you, forgive me. I will pay my debt to you and your noble ancestors.' Azagord resolutely took the key from the hands of King Ignis and started walking toward the stairs.

They followed Azagord up the stairs and across the entrance chamber. The sorcerer touched the key to the iron door. Slowly the door opened revealing the area outside which was crowded with Zyranian wizards. The wizards watched as Azagord stepped out.

'Greetings,' said Azagord. There were several gasps and cries when they saw him.

'Azagord is free!' cried a Zyranian.

Instantly the area lit up as the wizards all raised their hands and unleashed a torrent of bright yellow energy, masses of sparks, fire, and flaming columns toward Azagord. Azagord howled and a blanket of bright green energy blasted forth, completely matching the incoming fire and creating an explosion just outside the door that shook the ground. He then raised his hands high above his head and a bright green beam of liquid light rushed up toward the clouds above. The energetic light created a twisting vortex in the sky. The Zyranians looked up at the swirling clouds. The energy whirled in a massive circular motion hundreds of feet in diameter and then suddenly started funnelling downward toward Azagord.

Azagord glanced back over his shoulder and smiled for the first time in his life. 'Run my friends!' he cried as he walked toward the Zyranians surrounded by swirls of bright green light. The battle exploded between the sorcerer and the wizards. Fire, sparks, and shockwaves of energy blasted in every direction.

Cassiel led the way out of the door and down a narrow lane that cut away from the prison. Explosions thundered and shook the ground as they ran.

'This way!' cried Cassiel. He knew the way back and they followed him. They ran quickly through the laneways and made their way toward the supply gate. Eben looked back and could see the entire Citadel was ablaze with fire and light. He noticed silhouettes in the light coming after them.

'We are being followed,' shouted Eben as they approached the gate. Three wizards and a group of guardsmen came into view.

'Red, the fireworks!' cried Cassiel. Red took his bag of fireworks and threw it with all his might toward the approaching wizards as Cassiel sent a flame through the air that ignited the bag as it struck the ground. The fireworks started blasting in all directions and created a spectacular multi-coloured barrier of blazing light.

'Quick, to the gate!' commanded King Ignis.

They dashed down toward the gate. Falsig stood waiting for them.

'What have you done?' shouted Falsig, looking up at the fireworks exploding in the sky and the blazing fires in the distance.

'Get out of the way, Falsig!' shouted Cassiel.

'Where's my payment?' cried Falsig, his face was red like a beetroot, and his veins were clearly visible on his neck. 'We had a deal.' He drew a large dagger from his belt; the blade shone in the light of the fireworks. 'You can't leave!' he bellowed. 'I want my payment!' He stood in front of the supply gate and blocked their way. They stopped in their tracks.

'There is no gold,' said Cassiel firmly.

'The Zyranians are going to hang you up by your toes!' screamed Falsig, jumping forward and stabbing at Cassiel with his dagger. Eben reacted quickly and threw one of his sleeping darts. A moment later, to the surprise of the entire company, Falsig fell to the ground asleep.

'Well done, Eben, he needs a good nap,' said Cassiel.

Red took the gate key from Falsig's hand as he lay sleeping. A moment later he had opened the gate. They all raced outside and hurried down toward the docks. The Citadel of Zyran shook and burned behind them as they ran.

Baftel stood by his boat staring up at the Citadel; he was mesmerised by the sight. The dark clouds above were glowing from flashes of light that issued up.

'Cassiel! What's going on?' asked Baftel, not taking his eyes from the Citadel.

'Ahh, we had some help from an unexpected ally,' answered Cassiel. Baftel stared in shock as they jumped into his boat. 'We have to make haste.' Baftel nodded as he hurriedly loosened the ropes. He guided the boat away from the docks and into the night.

Before long they were out in the bay. They looked back at the Citadel as the fiery battle raged on. Suddenly there was a mighty flash of green light accompanied by a great explosion. An instant later the Citadel of Zyran became dark and silent.

'Goodbye Azagord,' said King Ignis sadly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They had sailed west across the Sea of Zyran throughout the night. Few of them slept at all; the feeling that they were being followed kept them on edge. The morning arrived and the sun slowly rose above the horizon in the eastern sky. Baftel often looked back anxiously, but no other boats or ships could be seen.

Zyran was out of sight, and the sail was fully raised; a strong wind was blowing them toward Ortaria.

‘It’s a good wind, and the currents favour us,’ said Baftel as he took a seat at the back of the boat. ‘The Zyranians may have power over fire and earth, but the weather and tides are mostly beyond them.’

Cassiel had explained to King Ignis much of what had been occurring in Ortaria since his imprisonment. King Ignis was deeply saddened by the news of how bad the situation was in his kingdom.

‘Monsters roam freely in the wilderness, and the main highways around Ortaria have become mostly impassable,’ said Cassiel.

‘What about the port city of Sevadir; does my cousin Duke Julian still rule there?’

‘Your Highness, I am sorry to say that your cousin Duke Julian died two years ago. The imposter has placed an evil ruler in his place to govern Sevadir.’

King Ignis nodded. ‘It would seem our only hope is to travel to Galdir and the Iron Gate Pass where my army waits.’

‘Yes, I think it would be a wise course of action,’ agreed Cassiel.

‘I know that the imposter was placed there by the Zyranian Order,’ said King Ignis. ‘I also know they will send word quickly to intercept us if we try to dock at Ancora or Sevadir. Our only choice is to dock at a smaller village or to land on a secluded beach and make our way through the wilderness. We can stock up on supplies once we find a village. It is at least a twelve day march out to the Iron Gate Pass, and the wilderness will slow us down. Perhaps we can acquire some horses.’

‘You are right, Your Highness. I’m also sure our enemies will do all they can to try to stop us reaching your army,’ said Cassiel.

Baftel looked up into the sky and saw a sea eagle ascending as the sun rose higher in the east. He glanced toward King Ignis anxiously. ‘They will send the Zyranian Enforcers after you.’

King Ignis nodded sternly. ‘Yes. I would expect them to do that; however, I believe we can avoid them,’ said King Ignis confidently.

‘There is something else you should be aware of,’ said Baftel. ‘I see a shadow like black smoke drifting across Ortaria. Something evil will stand in your way.’

‘Skatheans,’ said King Ignis, flinching as he said the word.

‘What are Skatheans?’ asked Eben.

‘The Skathean Knights are an evil order from the north of Veredor,’ replied King Ignis. ‘They have been the bane of good folk for many ages. For a long time the Fiorian Knights matched their strength and prevented them from entering the Southern and Eastern Lands. Now there are few Fiorians remaining in Veredor, and the Skatheans have come south without hindrance.’

‘I thought Fiorian Knights were a myth,’ said Red.

‘I believe the Fiorian Knights still exist, but their numbers have greatly diminished,’ said King Ignis.

Stella interrupted the conversation and excitedly pointed out a group of five dolphins from the front of the boat. The creatures approached and swam by the small vessel. Eben looked over the edge; they were very close to the side. He reached out; gliding his hand through the water, and a dolphin came very close and was only just out of reach. Eben was sure that the beautiful creature had looked up at him for a moment before swimming onward.

‘They seem to like you, Eben,’ said Red.

He had never seen such beautiful creatures; they looked so graceful and gentle. Before long the dolphins were gone from sight and disappeared beneath the waves.

They continued sailing throughout the day. A brisk breeze brought them ever closer to Ortaria. Several hours passed. Red had fallen asleep and the others were also resting. Cassiel was seated at the front of the boat and was in a deep meditative trance, completely oblivious to what was happening around him. Eben reflected on the recent events as the boat became quiet. He felt that he had been caught up in a whirlwind of happenings and had barely had a chance to think about everything that had occurred since he left Clemensdale. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see King Ignis was standing beside him.

'May I sit here?' asked the King, indicating to the place beside Eben. Eben nodded and the King sat down. 'It was quite a night last night. I must thank you for your bravery,' said King Ignis, lowering the volume of his voice so no one else in the boat could hear.

'You're welcome,' said Eben.

'I have wanted to talk to you about your sword; this is the first chance I have had,' he whispered.

'What do you want to know about it?'

'Where did you come across the sword?'

'It was left to me when I was a child,' said Eben, also lowering his voice.

'I see, and who bequeathed the sword to you?' asked the King.

'A man named Carlin at the request of Lady Kaloren,' replied Eben. King Ignis stared at Eben with wide eyes for a moment.

'I knew Carlin and Lady Kaloren.'

Eben felt his weariness leave him. 'Can you tell me who my parents are?'

The King raised an eyebrow and seemed puzzled by the question. 'You don't know them?'

'No, I was adopted by a hunter: Erako of Clemensdale. I have lived for most of my life in the hills in the south of Ortaria. I only recently came to Ancora.'

'A hunter...' repeated King Ignis, scratching his chin and pondering Eben's words. He stared at Eben for a few moments, and a look of surprise was clearly evident in his eyes.

'What can you tell me of Carlin and Lady Kaloren?' asked Eben.

'Carlin was a Fiorian Knight. He died twelve years ago in battle.' The King stared out to sea and was sad at recalling the memory of Carlin. Eben could see that Carlin must have been a friend to him.

'And Lady Kaloren?' asked Eben

'Lady Kaloren, she was the leader of the Fiorian Knights, the Gatekeeper of Emeril. She was the greatest and most noble warrior in all the lands of Veredor. Almost twenty years ago Ortaria and Zyran were at war with Azagord and his army from Kaznor. I requested the help of the Fiorian Order, and they sent five Fiorian Knights. Kaloren was their leader. Carlin and the other Fiorians worked with my army and the Zyranian Order. They vanquished Azagord's army after a long and bloody war. It was Carlin who captured Azagord and imprisoned him beneath the Citadel. Kaloren at the time was pregnant, and she stayed in Ancora whilst the war was being fought in Zyran. The other Fiorians went west after the battle, but Kaloren and Carlin stayed with me in Ancora for several months. Kaloren waited on news from her husband; a great warrior who I knew as Elons. He was helping the Irilian Order in a battle against a Northern Sorcerer called Baramak in the Far Western Lands.'

King Ignis paused and looked about to make sure no one would overhear him before he continued.

‘We heard news that her husband had been captured by the sorcerer Baramak who was in league with the Skatheans. Sir Dorn, an Irvarian Knight, came to tell us this terrible news, and Kaloren was deeply saddened. Not long after this time a group of Skathean assassins attacked the palace in Ancora and attempted to kill Kaloren. Carlin defeated them. We later discovered there were various Skathean plots designed to assassinate Lady Kaloren. She was forced to leave Ancora and went into hiding somewhere in Ortaria. Only Carlin knew where she was hiding. He kept it a secret because he believed the Skatheans had spies all over Ortaria. Two years later Carlin told me that she had gone west to search for her husband. I have not seen her for over eighteen years, and to be honest I do not know what became of Lady Kaloren.’

Eben took from his pocket the parchment letter and handed it to King Ignis. He opened the letter and read it to himself.

‘I suspected this was so, and now I can see it is true. I think Lady Kaloren is your mother,’ he said. Eben felt a rush of excitement at the news.

‘My mother. Are you certain?’ he asked, his heart pounding from the revelation.

‘Yes, I am sure. She is a great woman, and I know she wouldn’t have wanted to be separated from you. She would have left you with Carlin for your own protection. I’m certain Carlin sent you to the hunter to ensure you were safe. He did not tell me about you. It troubles me that no one ever came to take you back to your parents.’

Eben felt his elation turn to apprehension. ‘Do you think she is...?’ He felt distraught at the thought that something terrible had happened to his parents and couldn’t finish the question.

‘I don’t know,’ replied King Ignis as he handed the letter back to Eben.

Eben felt like a thousand thoughts of possibilities were going through his head at once. He realised that he would have to go west to find the answers.

‘Your sword; it’s the Ecorian Sword,’ said King Ignis.

‘Ecorian; what does that mean?’ asked Eben.

‘Your sword is one of three swords which were used to defend Veredor. In ancient times Veredor was ruled by a powerful and virtuous lineage of emperors called the Ecorians. That sword became known as the Ecorian Sword because the Ecorian Emperor always carried it. The original name of the sword is the Sword of Light.’

Eben looked down at the sword that lay by his side in its scabbard. ‘Why would my mother leave such a sword with a small child?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied King Ignis. ‘However, I do know that the Sword of Light is a powerful weapon and much more than a simple sword. It was forged out of the essence of the cosmos and has many mystical powers. Your mother wanted you to have this sword, and I know you will have to learn to use it. These are dark times, Eben. Few men stand against the darkness; a powerful evil is growing in Veredor.’

Eben felt a sudden weight of responsibility at hearing these words from the King. He thought back to his time in Clemensdale where he was safe and secure.

‘Azagord said that his master wanted to cast the sword through the Cosmic Gate. What did he mean?’

King Ignis pondered the question for a few moments. 'Azagord came south to find the Sword of Light and take it back to his evil master in the north. His instructions were to recover the sword and kill the one who carried it. He believed the Zyranians had the sword. Azagord attacked Zyran because of this belief. Only now do I see that Kaloren secretly carried the Sword of Light all along.'

'What is the Cosmic Gate?' asked Eben.

'I only know of the Cosmic Gate from folk stories. I never believed that it existed until I had spoken with Azagord,' said King Ignis. 'The Cosmic Gate is a place where Veredor meets with the cosmos beyond. It is the only way to come into Veredor and the only way out of Veredor. The old stories tell that the Cosmic Gate was built by an ancient race to protect Veredor from the powers of darkness. I think Azagord's former master wanted to cast the Sword of Light out of Veredor so no one could use it against him. This news worries me deeply. If the gate has collapsed we are all at risk. The outer cosmos is said to be a realm inhabited by many creatures of darkness.'

'Did Azagord say that it had collapsed?' asked Eben.

'No, he didn't say; however, your letter from Carlin to Erako says the Fiorians were hoping for the Cosmic Gate to remain firm, and the letter was written when you were very young. This concerns me: if they were worried about it then, what now?'

'We should ask the Fiorians Knights,' suggested Eben. King Ignis cast his eyes downward.

'After Carlin died and until the time of my imprisonment I was searching for any remaining Fiorians. I never found any.'

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They had been sailing all the first day and into the second night. The sun was high in the sky on the following day. The sight of the Ortarian coast gladdened their hearts. Eben could see high cliff faces to the north which gave way further south to a rugged coastline interspersed with small bays and inlets. A blue sky and a warm breeze welcomed them as they approached the coast.

'There's a small fishing village to the south,' said Baftel, turning the rudder and angling the boat.

Eben hadn't slept since the conversation with King Ignis. Learning that his mother was the leader of the Fiorian Knights had sent his mind into a spin. There were so many questions racing through his head. Why didn't his mother use the Sword of Light to fight the evil if it is such a powerful weapon? Why would she leave the sword with him when he was so young? Where had she gone? Why hadn't she returned? What happened to his father? What did the Fiorians know? Were there any Fiorians remaining in Veredor? He needed to know the answers.

They slowly approached a little fishing village that was set on rocky slopes around a small cove. There were various fishermen's huts and several small boats that had been pulled up onto the beach. Baftel slowly steered the boat into the small cove, and a few of the villagers stood on the beach and looked out fearfully toward them as they entered the cove.

They softly struck the sand a little back from the water's edge. Red leapt out of the boat, and waist high in the water, he started to pull the boat toward the beach. Eben jumped overboard and helped Red drag the boat to the shore.

'Ahoy!' shouted King Ignis as he stepped off the boat into his kingdom.

The others followed. A few moments later they were all on the beach just down from the village. One of the villagers approached. He was an older man with a

short beard, slightly balding, and a weathered face. He seemed somewhat anxious about their arrival.

'Hello Strangers,' he said, looking at Baftel, who was the only one of their company clothed as a seafarer.

'Hello there,' said Baftel politely.

'We don't have anything for you here. It would be best for you to move on,' said the villager; his hands were trembling as he spoke.

'We don't want anything from you,' said King Ignis diplomatically.

'I assume you will be leaving then,' said the villager.

'We were hoping to buy horses and some food for our journey.'

'We only have fish,' replied the villager grimly. 'The King has taxed all our possessions. He has left us in poverty.'

King Ignis looked concerned at hearing the news. 'We won't bother you, and we will move on in a few minutes. We would be very happy to buy some fish.'

'We can sell you some fish. I'll go back to the village and bring some back for you.' The man turned and walked back to the village and was out of sight a few moments later.

'These seaside villages were thriving a few years ago,' said King Ignis, staring up at the huts with sad eyes.

'Where will we go from here?' asked Red.

'Directly west,' said King Ignis. 'The coastal road is up on the hills just yonder. We will cross the road and travel overland through the wilderness.'

'If I come with you I will never again sail across the Sea of Zyran,' said Baftel.

'What do you mean?' questioned Cassiel, troubled by Baftel's words.

'I can also see with my magic that I will not make it to Galdir.'

'What will happen?' asked Cassiel.

'I'm not sure. I know my life will be in grave danger if I follow you, and perhaps I will die, but if I return to the sea I will live.'

'What about us. What will happen to us?' asked Red.

'I don't know,' said Baftel. 'I only see mist. Your way is hidden from my eyes. I believe a secret power is defending your company from prying eyes; the power prevents me from seeing anything about you.'

'If this is true you should return to the sea and not accompany us,' said King Ignis.

Baftel looked to the King for a moment. 'Is it better to be a dead eagle or a living toad?' he asked.

'A living toad,' answered Red, as if the answer was simple.

'But the living toad never knew what it was like to soar in the clouds,' said Baftel. He paused and his eyes drifted back to the sea. 'And eventually the toad will die as all living things do; therefore, I will come with you. If I can help you it would be better than returning to the sea. I have no skill with battle magic, yet I can see things that are hidden.' He then went back to the boat to gather his supplies and his bag.

The villager returned and handed a sack of fish to King Ignis.

'That will be a bronze piece,' said the villager. Cassiel paid him for the fish.

A few moments later Baftel came walking up from the boat. 'You can keep my boat.' The villager looked uneasy at hearing the offer. 'I won't be coming back for it.'

'We should move on,' said Cassiel, looking toward the track that led away from the village and up the slopes toward the hinterland. A few moments later they walked by the village and made their way up the hill.

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They crossed the coastal road and entered the wilderness. King Ignis led the way. The land was hilly and wild; often they would come to small patches of forest, but mostly they were trekking through rocky treeless hills. They were all hungry and hadn't eaten a decent meal since before the rescue. It was agreed that they should find a hidden grove to set up camp. They found a small gully with a perfect clearing for camping that was hidden from view and protected from the wind. The day had started to grow cold and heavy clouds had gradually covered the sky.

Red was busy trying to get a fire started; he was clicking together flint rocks which Eben had given him from his bag.

'That's not how you do it,' said Cassiel with a slight laugh.

'I know what I'm doing,' snapped Red as he continued to strike the flint rocks.

'Let me have a try,' suggested Cassiel. He stepped over, but Red wouldn't hand him the rocks.

'Leave it to me,' said Red, raising his voice.

Cassiel pointed his hand at the fire and a magical flame shot forth instantly igniting the wood. Within a few moments the fire started blazing. Red recoiled back and stared up at Cassiel.

'Cheat,' muttered Red. He stood up, crossed his arms and turned away. Cassiel seated himself down beside the fire. Eben watched as Red walked to the edge of the gully and sat on a fallen tree trunk. The others sat around the fire and enjoyed the warmth. Eben stood up and walked over to Red.

'Is everything all right, Red?'

'Sometimes Cassiel makes me feel like a clown.' Eben sat beside Red and they both looked back toward the fire as the evening darkened. Red glanced at Eben with a smile. 'I was a clown. Now I'm in the business of rescuing kings.'

'True,' said Eben.

'You know, Eben. Some people are wizards and others are great warriors; some people are rich royals and others are respected nobles, but in the end all of that doesn't matter much.'

'What do you mean?' asked Eben.

'I mean: what good is it to have all the gold, power, and fortune if you don't have friends and people who stand by you?' Eben could see the point that Red was trying to make. 'In the end, that's all that matters in life. Remember when you freed me. I was really worried before you came walking into that abandoned village. I thought I was going to die hanging upside down from that old tree.'

'You repaid me soon after when you saved me from the muckron,' said Eben.

'I couldn't leave you there fighting that muckron alone. You saved my life and no one had ever done that before. You could have easily left me hanging there to die. The truth is that I could have been a really big problem for you; you didn't seem worried about that. You made me believe that there are good people in this world.'

They watched the fire from the edge of the clearing. King Ignis was stoking it up with a stick as Stella and Baftel prepared the fish for cooking.

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After a meal of fish they slept by the fire and took turns keeping watch. It was a quiet night and uneventful. The following morning the company rose early and

prepared for the journey further west through the wilderness. They started out, and King Ignis led the way at a marching pace. Eben could sense his impatience; the terrain was proving rough and difficult. They made slow progress westward.

'We must find some horses,' said King Ignis.

'We could go further north and stop at a village on the main highway and buy some,' suggested Cassiel.

'Our enemies will be searching the highways,' said King Ignis.

'We shouldn't go near the highway. I don't think horses will help us much,' said Red. 'I think it would be best for us to walk to Galdir. It wouldn't be wise for us to leave the wilderness.'

'I'm sure horses will help us move quickly,' said Cassiel. 'We also must buy supplies somewhere; the fish will only last a couple of days.'

'I agree with Cassiel,' said the King. 'Lantern Hill is a small town west of Ancora on the main highway and probably only a day north of where we are now. We could buy some horses and food and quickly return to the wilderness.'

'It's a bad idea,' said Red, shaking his head. 'Eben can hunt and has his bow, and we could collect mushrooms.'

'I can hunt, although it would take some time out of our day,' said Eben

'We can't afford any delay,' said Cassiel. 'The enemy will learn where we landed and will follow our tracks from the village. We can be sure they will have horses, and once they find our tracks they will catch up to us in no time.'

'Exactly,' said King Ignis. 'If we continue without stopping for horses and supplies our enemies will most likely catch us before we reach Galdir. Stopping at Lantern Hill is our best option. It may be worth the risk.'

'North it is then,' said Cassiel, happy the decision had been made

'I still don't like this idea,' said Red. 'I stopped over at Lantern Hill not so long ago. It's a dangerous town.'

'What Red says is true; it will be dangerous,' said Baftel. 'I see a menacing evil hovering over the town of Lantern Hill. We should be cautious of this idea.'

'What do you see, Baftel?' asked Cassiel.

'I can't be sure. Evil gathers further north. The highway is being watched by our enemies.'

'It is a risk we'll have to take,' said King Ignis.

CHAPTER NINE

The company journeyed north and the land flattened out as they marched toward Lantern Hill. As they progressed the trees grew more numerous and the landscape gradually turned into forest. Eben and Red had passed through the same forest weeks earlier on their way to Ancora. The forest was the magnificent Altus Forest, the largest forest in Ortaria. They found a goat track that led northward through the woods, and by the mid-afternoon the trees gave way to the muddy highway that cut directly through the forest from east to west.

'Is Lantern Hill to the east or west?' asked Cassiel as he looked from left to right.

'West,' replied Red.

'I thought east,' said King Ignis. The highway gradually curved out of sight through the forest.

'Is that horses?' questioned Stella softly.

'Quick, off the highway!' cried Baftel.

They all dashed back off the highway and made their way into the trees as the sound of galloping horses could be heard growing louder from the west. They ducked out of sight behind trees and bushes and watched as a group of at least two dozen armour clad horsemen rode by at full speed. A few moments later they were gone from sight, and the sound of the galloping faded away into the east.

When they were certain the horsemen were gone they walked back toward the highway. Baftel led the way and looked in the direction the horsemen had ridden.

‘They’re gone,’ he said.

‘We should go west,’ said Red. King Ignis nodded. ‘Lantern Hill is west. I travelled back and forth along this highway when I was a trader. The town is about an hour from here. We should stay off the highway for our safety.’

The group walked through the forest and kept just south of the highway to avoid the possibility of an ambush. After about half an hour the forest started to thin and gave way to a long lush field that stretched out into the distance. At the far side a line of yew trees grew along the base of a small hill that the town of Lantern Hill was built upon. They could clearly see the outline of the gabled rooftops and smoking chimneys of the stone houses and huts. They stopped short of the field and stood just within the last trees of the forest.

‘How should we proceed?’ asked Cassiel, looking to King Ignis.

‘We can split up the tasks; that would reduce the time we spend in the town. One group can get the food, and the other group can buy the horses and the swords,’ suggested King Ignis.

‘There’s a dark shadow covering the town. I don’t think we are safe here,’ said Baftel.

‘What do you see,’ asked King Ignis, glancing uneasily back at the wizard.

‘Vultures feeding on a carcass,’ said Baftel gravely.

‘Keep your eyes open. If we get separated then we’ll meet back here,’ said King Ignis.

‘I can buy the six horses we need,’ said Red. ‘I know a merchant in the town who sells horses and travelling goods, and we may even be able to buy some swords from him. After I buy the horses I’ll lead them to the other side of the town.’

‘Good,’ said King Ignis. ‘I’ll go with Red and Baftel to buy the horses and swords. Cassiel, Eben, and Stella can gather the food supplies. We’ll meet on the western side of town as quickly as we possibly can. Don’t talk to anyone unless it cannot be avoided, and keep your heads down.’

Cassiel divided his gold between the two groups. They crossed the field quickly and ascended the slope of the hill up to the eastern entrance of the town. The town had no wall and was cut in two by the main road that ascended directly over the hilltop and ran straight down the opposite side. A few scruffy guardsmen near the entrance scowled as they passed by. The whole town was very dank and grimy. The streets were full of mud and rot. The people of Lantern Hill looked to be downtrodden and miserable. Eben felt dismayed by the haunted and bleak faces of the townsfolk.

Red led the King and Baftel away to the right as Cassiel, Stella, and Eben walked up the hill to the top of the town. At the top of the hill there was a large open square and in the centre was a marble statue that had been smashed and was missing its arms and head. Cassiel sighed at seeing it.

‘That statue was of Teodric the Builder. He was one of the greatest kings who ever lived,’ whispered Cassiel.

They walked by the broken statue and down the road leading toward the western side of the town. A little down from the top of the hill they found a merchant storehouse. Cassiel went inside to arrange the supplies whilst Stella and Eben waited at the door just outside. Eben looked over the rooftops and down across the countryside as the view from the hill was panoramic. He could see the many fields that surrounded the town. His eyes glanced up the road and his heart froze when he saw a hooded horseman passing the ruined statue and heading in their direction. The rider was dressed in black and had a deathly pale complexion. His eyes were fixed on Eben and Stella.

'Get inside,' said Eben, taking Stella by the arm; he led her into the storehouse. Cassiel was finalising his deal and had slung a large sack of food over his shoulder.

'Cassiel!' shouted Eben. Cassiel quickly turned and looked back at Eben and Stella. 'We're in trouble.'

'What is it? What did you see?' asked Cassiel.

'There's a horseman near the statue. I think he's a Skathean,' said Eben. The colour instantly drained from Cassiel's face.

'A Skathean!' he repeated as he dashed to the window beside the door. He looked out and leapt back an instant later. The whole storehouse shuddered, and the window shattered with the sound of a mighty crash. Orange flames smashed through, knocking Cassiel to the floor, and setting fire to the far side of the storeroom.

'Zarceler! Zarceler is here, and he has Skatheans with him!' cried Cassiel. Cassiel struggled to get up off the floor; he was clearly injured from the fiery blast. The storeman ran out a side door as Eben drew his sword. Stella looked horrified and went to help Cassiel.

'Eben!' cried Stella as Eben moved toward the front door. The store around them started to burn.

'I'll protect you!' shouted Eben. He threw his bag, axe, and bow aside and looked to the Sword of Light in his hand. Courage pushed the fear from his veins. A shockwave smashed into the door, blasting it off its hinges and forcing Eben to stumble back. A moment later a fierce Skathean stepped in through the doorway. His face was deeply pale, and his piercing blue eyes revealed his murderous intention. He was clothed completely in black and wore a long dark cloak. He held a large sword in his hand, and he stared directly at Eben with malice.

Suddenly a blast of fire from the hand of Cassiel struck the Skathean, knocking the evil warrior toward the door. With great agility the Skathean recovered his balance. He leapt towards Cassiel and Stella furiously, ready to swing his blade, but Eben moved forward and stood between the Skathean and his friends. Their blades clashed with a screech of steel on steel. The Skathean fell back and stared at Eben with menacing eyes. Eben quickly advanced. He struck at the Skathean several times and forced his opponent to parry. The Skathean stepped backward and out through the doorway onto the street.

'Go out the back!' shouted Eben, glancing over his shoulder to Stella and Cassiel. Stella helped Cassiel. They went toward the back door as the fires blazed around them.

'Eben, they're Skatheans! You can't beat them!' shouted Cassiel as they exited out the back.

Feeling confident, Eben leapt out into the street after the Skathean. Instantly he was surrounded by five waiting Skatheans. Zarceler was standing across the

way and grinning wickedly. Eben stood at the doorway as the storehouse burned behind him. He raised his sword and was ready for combat.

‘That looks like a wonderful sword, boy!’ said Zarceler with a smirk. ‘You are surrounded, surrender!’

‘Never!’ cried Eben defiantly.

Instantly he found himself defending multiple blows from the Skatheans. He struggled to parry and counter attack as the Skatheans pushed him away from the storehouse and down the road. He kept stepping back as they advanced and strained to defend the incoming strikes, stabs, and slashes. The five of them worked together like a machine. They surrounded him and forced him further down the hill until he was eventually near the western edge of the town.

With his back against a stone wall he desperately tried to defend himself. His sword flickered in the light of day and moved so gracefully in his hand, but his faith and courage were diminishing and his weariness was growing. A moment later a flash of bright red light struck him in the chest and he dropped to the ground; the Sword of Light fell from his hand as he curled over in pain. A burning sensation of fire circulated in his abdomen. Completely breathless he curled up against the stone wall as the Skatheans pointed their swords at him and were ready to finish him off. Zarceler approached and looked down at him with a mocking smirk.

‘In truth, I have never seen such a wonderful display of swordsmanship. What fool in all of history would challenge five Skatheans at once? You lasted so long. It’s a pity you are not my servant. You would make a good bodyguard; unfortunately I have to kill you,’ said Zarceler, grinning viciously.

‘He has the Sword of Light,’ hissed one of the Skatheans. Zarceler’s jaw dropped, and his eyes filled with devious wonder at hearing the words.

Eben found some energy within and started to get up off the ground. He looked up at Zarceler who was grinning down at him and gloating.

‘Where did you get that sword, boy?’ asked Zarceler.

Eben didn’t answer and stared defiantly up at the wizard.

‘We will take the Sword of Light to the Master,’ said Zarceler, grinning with malicious delight.

Suddenly a bright blue wave of energetic light blasted out from the stone wall behind Eben. The shockwave knocked all the Skatheans and Zarceler away from him; they tumbled to the ground. Eben grabbed his sword and regained his feet. A moment later he could see Red charging down from the top of the hill on a large horse.

‘Eben!’ cried Red.

Eben felt his confidence return at seeing his friend coming to his aid. He dashed away from the Skatheans and rushed back up the hill toward Red. The Skatheans were quick to regain their feet and turned to pursue him. Zarceler watched with a sneer as Eben ran. Moments later he reached Red. Red leaned down and helped Eben up onto his horse.

‘We have to get out of here! The others are already out of the town.’

‘What about Stella and Cassiel?’

‘They’re safe with King Ignis,’ said Red.

The Skatheans were almost upon them. Red turned his horse around and charged away. Zarceler snarled and was furiously enraged. Several dozen town guardsmen appeared at the top of the hill and attempted to block their escape. Red turned the horse and charged down a side lane that led out of the town.

'Kill them! Kill them all!' screamed Zarceler in the distance.

Moments later Red and Eben rode westward out of the town, leaving the Skatheans and Zarceler staring after them. They met with King Ignis and the others about three hundred yards from the eastern edge of Lantern Hill. The whole company had acquired horses and swords. Eben jumped down off Red's horse and mounted his own.

'Are you all right, Eben?' asked Stella.

'I'm fine,' said Eben.

'We have to go before they come after us,' said Red.

King Ignis turned his horse. They galloped away west toward the edge of the forest.

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They rode west along the highway for several minutes before King Ignis led them off the road into the forest to the north. They kept moving through the woods for quite some time and eventually stopped beside a small stream.

'I can't believe you tried to fight them. They were Skatheans!' said Cassiel.

'He saved our lives,' said Stella, clearly annoyed that Cassiel was questioning Eben's choice.

'You were very brave, Eben. Thanks for saving us,' said Cassiel.

'We have to keep moving,' said King Ignis. 'They will surely follow us.'

They rode west through the forest for the remainder of the afternoon, and the day grew darker as thick clouds crossed the sky and gentle misty rain started falling. At the end of the day they set up camp beside in a wide clearing and made a small fire. They sat around the fire and tried to keep warm as the frosty evening progressed into an icy cold night.

'We have swords and horses now and enough food for the journey to Galdir,' said King Ignis. 'The Skatheans will follow our tracks through the forest, so we will have to ride constantly tomorrow to put as much distance between us and Lantern Hill.'

Baftel looked to the sky above. 'A big storm will arrive tomorrow and will slow us down.'

'We must persevere,' said King Ignis sternly.

That night few of them slept. The rain grew heavier and the horses stirred and were anxious. The morning was cold, and the rain was torrential. A little after sunrise they rode west from the clearing. By midday they arrived at a wide and slow flowing river. A thin track followed the bank.

'This is the Merus River; it flows all the way from the Endora Mountains to Ancora,' said King Ignis.

'There's a town along the river further west called Riverside. I recommend that we take my advice this time and avoid it,' said Red.

'Red is right; we must not go there,' said Baftel. 'Riverside is shrouded by a shadow that is as dark as night.'

'We will follow the river west and go around Riverside,' said King Ignis. 'I believe there may be several places where the river is shallow enough to cross. We are probably safer on the northern bank.'

They moved on and followed the river. The rain grew heavier with each passing hour. They could hear thunder booming in the east. Eben could see the dark clouds were moving in their direction. Before long the rain became torrential, and the thunder was directly above them. The track beside the river was growing muddy and difficult for the horses. They were making slow progress. They came to a

shallow area of rapids; King Ignis led them across the river to the north bank. The track that followed the river on the north side was little more than a muddy goat track.

‘We should find shelter from this storm,’ said Red.

‘No, Red, we must persist,’ said King Ignis.

‘This rain will wash away our tracks,’ said Red. ‘The Skatheans and Zarceler won’t be able to follow us through this. There’s no point trying to push forward.’

The thunder boomed above and flashes of lighting lit up the sky illuminating the gloom around them.

‘There is an abandoned farmhouse further along the river,’ said Baftel. ‘It is about an hour from here.’

‘Good. If it is safe we will stop there,’ said King Ignis.

They continued through the heavy rain and mud. After an hour they arrived at a cleared area of forest. A farmhouse was near the riverbank. It looked to be long abandoned and mostly in disrepair. King Ignis led them over to the farmhouse and dismounted. He walked in through the front door which was hanging by one rusted hinge. Eben and the others did the same. Inside was a large living area that made up most of the lower level of the house. To the left there was an open fireplace. A few broken chairs and a half rotting table were the only other contents of the room. Cobwebs covered the interior. King Ignis cleared away the cobwebs with his sword, and Cassiel picked up the scattered chairs.

They felt relieved to be out of the rain and took off their coats and cloaks. Before long Red was busy trying to build a fire in the fireplace.

‘We should stay here until the storm passes,’ said King Ignis. ‘Red is right, Zarceler won’t ride through this wild weather. They won’t be able to follow our tracks after this heavy rain.’

‘We are safe here,’ said Baftel. ‘I can’t see the Skatheans following us. There are no enemies close by.’

‘Good, we must rest well whilst we can,’ said King Ignis.

Red managed to get the fire started and gathered some wood from around the farmhouse. The day faded into the evening. The company huddled around the warmth of the fire. Stella and Red prepared a meal of bread and potatoes. They all ate well and felt revived after a proper meal.

It was agreed that they should take turns to keep watch through the night. Eben lay down in a corner of the room and rested. He drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER TEN

Eben awoke to the sound of voices. He sat up and looked over to see Cassiel, Baftel, and King Ignis standing by the front door.

‘Wolves,’ said Baftel. ‘There are packs of wolves and other forest creatures across the river.’

Eben could hear the howl of wolves in the distance. He stood up and walked over to the others.

‘Is everything all right?’ asked Eben.

‘No, there is something else,’ said Baftel. He was in a trancelike state.

‘What?’ asked Cassiel, staring out the doorway into the darkness.

The heavy storm had passed and the rain had mostly stopped, only a light drizzle remained.

'A wizard,' said Baftel as he stared blankly out at the darkness. King Ignis drew his sword.

'There,' said Baftel, pointing out the doorway across the river. There was a blue glow on the far bank that was gradually growing brighter. 'I can't see any ill will. The wizard may not be against us.'

Cassiel boldly stepped out of the house and walked toward the river. King Ignis, Eben, and Baftel followed him down to the bank as the blue light across the river grew even brighter. The light flew down and struck the water. The surface of the water started to freeze as the light glided across the river creating a bridge of ice. A silhouette mounted on a large horse appeared on the far bank. The rider moved out onto the ice bridge toward them.

'Look,' said King Ignis. A large wolf and a fox followed the approaching rider. They waited nervously as the wizard drew near.

'Who are you?' shouted Cassiel.

'Cassiel,' said a woman's voice.

'Meara. I can't believe you found us,' said Cassiel happily.

'Meara!' said the King gladly.

'Torela,' said Eben.

'King Ignis. I am very glad to see you again,' said Meara as she arrived at the bank. The icy bridge dissolved behind her. 'I have been following you for several days now.' She dismounted and stepped over to them.

'These are my friends, Kiarn and Gasta,' she said, indicating to the large wolf beside her and the smaller red fox. The mighty black wolf stared at them with fierce golden eyes, and the fox stayed some distance back.

They walked with Meara back to the farmhouse. She took a seat at the table as Kiarn the wolf sat beside the fire directly next to Red who was still sleeping. Gasta, the fox, refused to enter the house and waited outside the door.

'I bring many tidings,' said Meara as she took a seat at the table.

'Are you hungry? We have food,' said Cassiel.

'No, thank you, I'm fine. Kiarn, Gasta, and the other creatures of Altus Forest have been bringing me food.'

'What news can you tell us, Meara?' asked King Ignis.

'I will tell you what I know. I escaped my first confrontation with Zarceler in Ancora, and soon after I learned that Cassiel and Eben had left for Zyran to attempt to free you. I was very worried because I didn't expect the mission to succeed. By the time I discovered the plan it was too late for me to follow. The Zyranians would have detected my presence if I had followed you to the island. I waited in Ancora for news. Eventually the news of your escape came to me. I was astounded to hear that Azagord saved you and sacrificed his life.'

'I knew that you would not come to Ancora or Sevadir. I soon learned that the Zyranians had sent five Enforcers to find and capture all of you. I also became aware that the Zyranians have been working with the Skatheans. Soon after I discovered you had landed south of Ancora. I believe a secret power has been protecting your company. The power has prevented anyone from following you,' she said, looking to Eben for a moment. 'I met Kiarn and the wolves of Altus Forest. Kiarn showed me the plight of the forest creatures. Muckrons and other monsters have been roaming the forests and killing everything. The wolves, jackals, bears, and foxes have fought against them for two years. Only recently the wolves learned that an army of muckrons has been brought to Ortaria by the Skatheans.'

‘An army of muckrons!’ cried King Ignis, shocked by the revelation.

‘Yes, an entire army. The forest creatures are not fond of men, yet they know that only with the help of men can they free the lands of muckrons and other monsters. Kiarn is a king among wolves. I asked for his help to find your company. The wolves helped me to follow you all the way to Lantern Hill; I almost met you there. I was in Lantern Hill when Eben fought the five Skatheans, and I helped him in the battle. You rode away without knowing of my presence. We then followed you to this farmhouse. Without the help of Kiarn and the other forest creatures I would have never found you. They had to communicate with other creatures that had seen you passing by. That is how we followed you.’

‘You created the blue flash of light that saved me from the Skatheans,’ said Eben. ‘You saved my life.’ Meara smiled warmly across at Eben.

‘I’m glad that I did,’ she said. ‘You fought valiantly against those Skatheans’.

‘Thank you,’ said Eben. Meara nodded and then looked back to King Ignis.

‘I told Kiarn that you, King Ignis, would help the forest creatures free the land of muckrons.’

‘I will,’ said King Ignis resolutely. ‘Tell Kiarn that I will help.’

‘You both want to free the land of this evil shadow that is destroying Ortaria. An alliance will be formed.’

King Ignis nodded and Meara looked across at Kiarn. The black wolf stared at her with his large golden eyes.

‘He welcomes your offer of help,’ said Meara, looking back to King Ignis.

‘Good. This army of muckrons will not live long in Ortaria,’ said King Ignis decisively.

‘We are heading for Galdir. Once we arrive I will lead my army back to Ancora and destroy our enemies,’ said King Ignis firmly.

‘I have some bad news. The Imposter who sits on your throne has ordered your army to invade Scaldonia,’ said Meara. The King was deeply concerned at hearing the news. ‘The Imposter and the Skatheans know you are heading for Galdir and that you hope to lead your army back to Ancora. The Skatheans rule most of Scaldonia; only one resistance army remains at the town of Orelin. The Scaldonian army in Orelin is led by Duke Egil. Your army has been ordered to attack Orelin, which will destroy any remaining resistance in Scaldonia. The battle will also likely weaken the Ortarian army. Our enemies plan to destroy both the resistance in Scaldonia and to cripple the Ortarian army.’

Stella woke and walked over to join the group at the table.

‘Is there time to intercept my army?’ asked King Ignis, his face showing his strain and grave concern.

‘If we ride quickly we may be able to catch them,’ said Meara.

‘Then we will have to ride like the wind to the Iron Gate Pass,’ said King Ignis. He stood up and took his coat from the back of his chair. He was ready to go at once.

‘It won’t help,’ said Baftel.

‘Why?’

‘Skatheans and Zyranian Enforcers are riding out to the Iron Gate Pass. They will wait there and attempt to prevent us from following the army into the pass.’

‘You have shown the strength of your perception,’ said Meara. She was intrigued by Baftel’s skill with magic.

‘There are many Skatheans, perhaps twenty, and there are five Zyranian Enforcers,’ said Baftel. Meara cast her eyes downward and shook her head.

'We can't possibly defeat so many Skatheans and Zyranian Enforcers,' said Meara.

'Perhaps we can ride back to the sea and sail around the Endora Mountains. We could come to Orelin across Southern Scaldonia,' suggested Cassiel.

'No, by the time we arrived the battle would be over,' said King Ignis, shaking his head in frustration.

'Is there no other way?' asked Cassiel.

'There is one way,' said Baftel softly, as if what he was about to suggest would not be received well.

'What way?' asked King Ignis with eagerness.

'The Northern Pass,' said Baftel solemnly.

The King shook his head again and was clearly against the idea. 'No man has passed that way for hundreds of years. A powerful draug lives there.'

'The power of Eben's sword may protect us from the draug,' said Meara.

'The draug that lives in the Northern Pass is particularly formidable. I don't think the Sword of Light will help us. A draug usually won't attack directly; it will be more likely to set a trap,' said King Ignis.

'True, King Ignis is right, the draug won't attack us directly, but we have no chance against the Skatheans and Enforcers; we may have a chance at defeating a draug,' said Baftel.

'Wolf! There's a wolf!' cried Red, waking up to find the massive black wolf by his side. He bounded across the room, stumbling away from Kiarn. Kiarn leapt up and growled at him fiercely.

'Red, he's a friend!' cried Eben, but Red fumbled for his sword as Kiarn snarled. Eben crossed the room and held out his hand to Kiarn. 'Calm down, Red!'

Red stared, bewildered at the sight of Eben standing beside the wolf. He put his sword back in its scabbard and shook his head in disbelief.

'We have no choice. We will attempt the Northern Pass,' said King Ignis.

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They left the farmhouse early the following morning and rode north away from the river. The forest slowly gave way to grassy hills. As they progressed northward the land about gradually became rockier. Kiarn and several other forest creatures followed the company, including two other wolves, Gasta the fox, and two jackals. A number of large birds also followed the company.

'How do you communicate with these animals?' asked Cassiel.

'The creatures share images with me,' replied Meara.

'What a wonderful gift you possess,' said Baftel.

'This is a secret mystery understood by all the wizards of the Irilian Order,' said Meara.

'No Zyranian can do what you do,' said Baftel.

'The Zyranian Order saw little worth in befriending the lesser creatures of Veredor. The Irilians have always included this skill as an essential part of our training, and as you can see, Zyranian, the ability has proved useful,' said Meara.

'It is very clear to me how useful such a skill is,' said Baftel. 'You should know, Irilian, that I was banished from the Zyranian Order for trying to fight against the evil that is growing in Zyran. I was once the leader of the Seers of Zyran; now I am a lone wizard and an outcast. I no longer belong to any order of wizards. You should also know the Zyranians have long known that the Irilians are stronger; however, they deny it to themselves.'

Meara looked across at Baftel. She stared at him for a few moments. Her expression softened.

'I would like to invite you to come to Dravania with me to join the Irilian Order, Baftel,' said Meara.

Baftel's jaw dropped at the suggestion, and he stared at Meara with wide eyes full of wonder. A wizard had never been known to change from one order to another in all of history.

'Are you saying that you want me to become an Irilian?' asked Baftel. 'I...I...would be honoured,' he stammered.

'It's a long journey to Dravania; I am sure the Irilian Order will welcome you,' said Meara warmly, smiling across at Baftel. Baftel was glowing with happiness.

'For a long time I have been out in the cold, banished and alone. Thank you, Meara. I accept your gracious offer.'

Meara simply nodded as they rode onward.

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The landscape became continuously more craggy and rocky the further they journeyed north. Kiarn led the way. Gasta, the fox, often ran ahead and would frequently disappear, only to reappear soon after. In the distance Eben could see a line of tall mountains stretching across the horizon from east to west.

'The Endora Mountains,' said King Ignis. 'The Northern Pass isn't far from us. It is above the source of the Merus River. We should be there by tomorrow afternoon.'

They rode on through the rugged landscape. The day was cold, and dark clouds hung over the mountains ahead. They found that the land was gradually becoming hillier and more barren. The afternoon progressed toward the end of the day, and the company together decided to set up camp in a sheltered flat area between two small hills. Red made a campfire, and Stella gathered firewood with King Ignis and Baftel. Cassiel was talking with Meara. Eben sat by the edge of the clearing and looked down at his sword, which glinted in the soft light of the setting sun.

He pondered the grave responsibility the possession of the sword had bestowed on him. He wondered why his mother didn't use it to fight the evil in the lands. Why had she left the sword with him as an infant? Surely such a great sword would have helped her to free Eben's father from his captors. He knew he would have to travel west to search for the answers. He also knew that he would have to find a Fiorian Knight, if any remained in Veredor.

A moment later Meara approached. 'Eben, you look concerned. What is troubling you?' she asked. He looked up at her. 'King Ignis told me that you are the son of the wise and beautiful Lady Kaloren.'

'Yes, that is so,' said Eben. 'Why would she leave the Sword of Light with me if it has such great powers? Why didn't she use the sword to fight the evil in the land?'

'She wanted you to have the Sword of Light,' replied Meara. 'You must trust her. The sword has many powers; in time you will learn to understand them. The people of Veredor need you to be brave. There were three swords that once protected Veredor from the powers of darkness; you have one of those three swords. You have a duty to protect Veredor with your sword as others who carried the sword before you did.'

Eben looked down to the ground; he felt the weight of the responsibility. 'I'm a simple villager, Meara. I want to help the people of Veredor, but perhaps someone else should take the Sword of Light.'

Meara sat down beside him and stared at the campfire across the clearing. 'Eben, the power of the sword increases when you believe. The Sword of Light magnifies your skill by a measure of your belief, trust, and bravery.'

'But how can my belief change the way things are?' asked Eben. Meara continued staring across at the fire and was contemplating the question.

'What you are asking me is a deep mystery, yet I may be able to shed some light on the matter. Think of it like this: would you cross a bridge if you believed it wasn't secure?'

'Of course not,' he replied, not sure where she was leading with the question.

'Therefore what you believe changes what you would do.'

'But you said the bridge wasn't secure.'

'Only according to your belief. Because you believed the bridge wasn't secure you wouldn't cross it; therefore, you would never know what was on the far side of the river.' She paused for a moment and then glanced across at him. 'Every action, every plan, and every step in life relies on your belief. You must believe to trust, and you must trust before taking action. It is the same with your sword. If you believe you will do amazing things, yet if you do not believe the Sword of Light will diminish in power and you will never see the sword as it truly is.'

Eben glanced at her and then across to the fire. The fire was blazing and lighting up the area as the evening grew darker. His eyes followed the sparks that drifted up into the cold night air. He knew there was truth in what she was saying.

Meara gestured toward Red and Stella. Red and Stella were sitting close beside each other near the fire. 'Can you see the way they look at each other? Can you see how they are falling in love? They are shining with hope. They believe in each other, and they trust each other. They have so much hope. They will have a strong relationship. Their trust and belief will be the foundation which will allow their love to grow strong. Without trust and belief such an outcome would be impossible. Can you see they believe in each other?'

Eben looked across at his two friends. He could see Stella smiling at Red, and Red was beaming back at her. Meara was right, they were falling in love. He had been so distracted that he hadn't noticed.

'I think I'm beginning to understand,' he said, glancing back at Meara.

'You are a good young man, Eben. I will help you on your journey as much as I can. Eventually there will come a time when I can help you no longer.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Eben slept well that night for the first time in many nights. They left the cleared area and rode quickly toward the enormous mountains ahead. Ominous dark clouds filled the sky above, but there was no wind or rain. Kiarn and Gasta led the way through the wilderness, and the craggy slopes slowly started to become significant foothills. All the other forest creatures had left their company overnight. They turned to the west and came upon the Merus River once again. The river gushed down from the hills above. The company found an old path that followed along beside the riverbank. The path was carved from the rocks and wound a way through the hills ever upward toward the towering snow-capped mountains above.

'This path leads directly to the Northern Pass,' said King Ignis, staring sternly upward to the mountains above. 'The Northern Pass was once a well-travelled way

to Scaldonia. Many knights and wizards tried to vanquish the draug; none of them ever returned. This is a cursed way.'

'Draugs often try to trap their prey. It has long been said that they flee from the goodhearted,' said Baftel. 'The draug will attack our weaknesses. They are ghostly wraiths that prey on the innocent creatures of our world. The draug of the Northern Pass is said to be very powerful, a dark shadow from the Forgotten Age.'

'Can you see the draug with your powers, Baftel?' asked Meara as they proceeded along the path.

'When I look toward the Northern Pass all I see is an image of myself staring back at me. It is like looking into a mirror. I have never seen this vision before,' replied Baftel.

They rode onwards, following the path up into the mountains. Eben stared up at the enormous icy peaks that rose high into the clouds above. The path led them along the base of a valley. At the far side of the valley they reached a wide stairway that was carved from the rock and ascended for hundreds of yards directly up the side of a great mountain. Each step was big enough for a horse to stand on, being over thirty feet wide and twenty feet in length.

'These stairs are called the Sky Steps and were built by the Ecorian Emperors in the days of old. I have always wanted to see them,' said King Ignis, looking up with wonder. 'At the top of the steps we will find the Astrum Chasm; that is where the draug is said to live.'

'Kiarn and Gasta will not go any further. They say that they will honour the forged alliance with men; however, they will not go to a place of such hopelessness,' said Meara. 'They're frightened for us. They sense evil above the Sky Steps, and they warn us not to proceed. An image of despair drifts down from the mountain.'

'We are three wizards and four warriors. If we cannot defeat this draug, no one can,' said King Ignis as he rode forward and started moving up the steps.

They followed King Ignis as he boldly ascended the Sky Steps. Eben looked back and could see the red fox and the large black wolf staring up after them. After the company had gone a short way up the fox and wolf ran off and were gone from sight. The climb was difficult for the horses, but eventually they reached the top.

Directly before them was the opening of a chasm cut between two vertical cliffs that ascended high above. The chasm was about ten feet wide at its entrance and only a pale light flowed down from above. Eben couldn't see very far into the gloom and shadows. The path led directly between the cliff faces of two adjacent mountains. A bleak feeling of dread seemed to flow out of the darkness. The horses were anxious and didn't want to continue. King Ignis jumped down from his horse and drew his sword.

'We will have to lead the horses,' he said as he took the reins and tried to pull his horse forward; the horse wouldn't move. Cassiel tried the same; his horse also refused to go on.

'They will not enter the chasm,' said Meara.

'Then we will have to kill the draug so they will,' said King Ignis, shaking his head in frustration.

The King then turned and walked into the opening between the two cliffs, holding his sword up as he proceeded. Eben dismounted and drew his sword and followed after the King. The others weren't far behind. The way was shadowy and full of oppressive gloom. King Ignis strode forward with confidence. Red caught up

to Eben and had his own sword ready. An overwhelming smell of decay permeated their surroundings.

As they advanced the distance between the cliffs widened to about forty feet. Hundreds of feet above they could see the slight gap between the two cliffs; the faintest light drifted down from above. Eben could see an object ahead on the ground. King Ignis stopped. A few moments later Eben and Red were standing by his side. The object was the skull of a horse. Various other bones were scattered about. Cassiel reached them and a moment later the others arrived.

'The draug is very close,' said Baftel, his eyes scanning the rock walls of the chasm. The group looked about and could see nothing in the gloomy shadows.

'Here, old draug,' whispered Red, attempting to lighten the mood. A nervous smile crossed his face.

'Let's keep moving,' said King Ignis. He led them forward a little further through the chasm. More and more bones were scattered across the stony ground the further they went and the smell of death grew stronger. The King stopped suddenly and seemed frozen in place.

'What is it?' whispered Eben, but King Ignis didn't answer and only stared ahead and seemed to be in a trance. Eben looked back to see that the others were all frozen and staring ahead with glazed over eyes. Only Baftel was unaffected and he quickly rushed to Eben's side.

'Eben, listen to me,' stammered Baftel urgently.

'What's going on?' asked Eben, looking towards the King who was still frozen. His eyes darted about, searching for the hidden enemy in the shadows.

'What you see you do not see; what you hear you do not...' said Baftel. He didn't finish his sentence

'Do not what?' asked Eben, looking back to Baftel. Baftel simply smiled. 'Do not what, Baftel?' repeated Eben.

Baftel pointed ahead. Eben looked further down into the chasm, and the gloom began to disappear. The area lit up with a soft warm light.

'Down there, Eben. She is waiting for you,' said Baftel calmly.

'Who?' asked Eben, feeling confused for a few moments. He looked to King Ignis, but the King was gone.

'Go and see,' said Baftel.

Eben stepped further along the way and could see someone approaching from up ahead. He stared as the person grew closer. She appeared to him, and he was taken aback by her exquisite beauty. Her long hair was blonde and like silk, her eyes like blue sapphires, and her skin was translucent. She was dressed in a fine flowing linen dress, and she smiled at him as she approached. Eben felt all his fears drift away as she grew nearer. Her exquisite beauty set his mind at ease.

'Who are you?' asked Eben softly, awestruck in her presence.

'Eben, how is it that you don't know me. I am your wife,' she said. For a moment he felt confused.

'What! My wife! Am I married?' he asked, feeling bewildered. His mind seemed to be drifting in a cloud, and he couldn't focus on anything but the woman in front of him.

'Of course,' she said as she beamed at him; her beauty was like nothing he had ever seen before. Eben looked about and saw the chasm was gone. An instant later he was standing in a field of long green grass and the sun was shining brightly. She took his arm gently.

'We must go,' she said as she tried to lead him away.

'But my friends, I can't leave them,' he said. Her smile faded from her face for a moment.

'Your friends are gone.'

'Where are they?' asked Eben, feeling the confusion was overwhelming.

'They left you, Eben. Don't you remember? They no longer have any need of you. You are a simple villager. Adventures should be left for heroes. Surely everything you want and need is here with me,' she said, smiling at him reassuringly. Again she tried to lead him away.

'They wouldn't leave me,' said Eben, resisting her. She looked back and frowned.

'They had to go. They are glad you decided to leave the important things to them. You know you could never be a hero. Eben, it is your right to be here. You deserve to be here with me after all your suffering and pain. You have had such a hard and lonely life. Look at the beauty of this place. You deserve all this.'

Eben thought of Red and Stella. He thought of Cassiel, Meara, and King Ignis. He wondered why they had left him and felt deeply disturbed. He could feel his sadness growing.

'I need to go back to them and say one last goodbye. They are my friends; I can't desert my friends. They need me,' said Eben.

'You can't go back,' said the beautiful woman, her voice becoming firm.

'Why?' asked Eben, feeling his sadness growing even stronger.

'Because your parents are waiting for us,' she said as she tried again to take him away. Eben felt a sudden sense of joy at hearing the news and the sadness melted away.

'My parents are here?' he asked as he felt his happiness growing again.

'Yes,' she said smiling. 'They want to see you so much. We must hurry before they leave,' she added.

The world around him shimmered and she faded. A flickering shadow replaced her for a moment. Eben felt like he was about to wake, but a moment later she returned.

'What was that?' he asked as he looked about the beautiful meadow.

'Nothing,' she replied and smiled appealingly. 'Absolutely nothing,' she added, trying to reassure him.

Suddenly the shimmering happened again. Her smile quickly faded into a sneer. This time the world around Eben started to collapse and dissolve like smoke being blown away by the wind. He looked about and could see the rock walls and gloom of the chasm again.

Eben could hear the gasps and moans of the others as they all woke from the illusion. He looked back and saw they were in shock. Meara sat down and King Ignis stood looking down at the ground gravely. Baftel lay beside Eben on the ground. The old wizard had aged many years and the irises of his blue eyes were almost completely white. His hair had also become as white as snow.

'Eben...' he muttered. 'Eben,' he repeated in a soft and weak voice.

'I'm here, Baftel. What happened?' He took Baftel's hand and helped him to sit up. Meara came to their side and had regained her composure.

'I vanquished the draug. It fled into the mountains and is now little more than a harmless shadow,' said Baftel with a croaky and weak voice. 'But it took much of my life essence and my eyes. I will never see again.'

'What happened?' asked Meara calmly.

‘The draug set a trap for us. It tried to lead us into an illusion of what it believed was the fulfilment of our deepest desires. My ability to see beyond such lies saved me from falling into the illusion. I didn’t have time to warn you properly. My will locked with the will of the draug in a fight to the death. I had to sacrifice much of my life force to defeat the monster. I had to show I was prepared to lose something of myself to save you; it was the only way I could overcome the draug.’

‘Then you saved us,’ said Meara. King Ignis walked over and joined them. ‘Baftel destroyed the draug.’

‘You did well, Baftel,’ said King Ignis as he knelt beside the frail old man and tried to help him to stand up. ‘Never have I seen such things as the things I have just seen.’

‘What did you see?’ asked Eben.

King Ignis looked at Eben with deep sadness in his eyes. ‘I can’t speak of what I saw,’ he replied sorrowfully. ‘We should move on from this cursed place.’

The company slowly recovered from the dream illusions of the draug. They collected their horses from the southern entrance to the chasm and then moved along the way heading north toward Scaldonia.

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The chasm opened onto a stone platform that was about a hundred foot wide and long. The view of the mountains was magnificent. They could see the Kingdom of Scaldonia in the distance. A vast plain extended as far as they could see. A stairway, much like the Sky Steps they had ascended, led down the far side of the mountains. The company said very little. The trauma of being offered such temptations had shocked and tested them all.

‘We will be in Scaldonia soon,’ said King Ignis. ‘From there we will ride quickly to intercept my army before they attack Orelin. I hope we are not too late.’

The day was slowly drifting into night. They found a place to camp in a valley between two mountains. Cassiel and Meara managed to make a fire from magic alone as there was no wood to burn in the mountains, and the night was icy cold. They sat around the warm fire in silence and rested. Baftel was now dependent on others to lead him onward.

They rested that night and very little was said. The following morning the sky was blue and there were fewer clouds. They all felt like a shadow had passed, and a renewed hope grew in their hearts. They set off and by midday the pass was leading them out of the mountains. Lush grass plains stretched out into the distant horizon. Scaldonia looked to be mostly flat with few trees.

They came out of the mountains and into the plain. King Ignis increased the pace. Baftel’s frail condition kept them from galloping; at best they could move at a slow canter. The King was growing impatient.

‘My army will be moving ever closer to Orelin.’

‘You should ride ahead,’ said Meara. ‘Baftel is in no condition to move so quickly. I will stay here with him and come to meet with you at Orelin.’

‘I don’t want to leave you here alone on these cold plains, yet I fear that if we do not ride like the wind our mission will be in vain.’

‘I will stay behind with Meara and Baftel,’ said Stella.

‘So will I,’ said Red, obviously not wanting to go ahead without Stella.

‘And you, Eben?’ asked King Ignis.

‘I will come with you,’ said Eben.

‘I’ll also go with you, Your Highness,’ said Cassiel. ‘If we ride quickly we will reach Orelin in a matter of days.’

‘Good. We will take the three fastest horses and ride as quickly as we can. If everything goes to plan we will meet with the four of you in Orelin.’

They all agreed to the plan and exchanged horses. The swiftest steeds were given to the King’s company. The three of them then rode out across the flat grass plain, galloping into the northwest. For many miles they rode at a dashing pace.

‘No hills, just horizon,’ said Cassiel. He stared out into the distance. The flat plain stretched onwards as far as they could see with nothing but grass.

‘Only Scaldonian nomads live in these cold grasslands. I admire them for making their lives out of this bleak land,’ said King Ignis, his strong dark eyes scanning the distance.

They continued riding as quickly as possible.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Eben, Cassiel, and the King rode until the day was too dark to continue. They set up a basic camp. Cassiel created a small fire with his magic. The night grew cool; an icy wind constantly blew across the plain. King Ignis woke them before sunrise and was eager to continue.

‘We will rest when we come to my army.’

The King led them onward. They pushed their horses to their limits, galloping as much as they would allow. Later in the day they reached the end of the plain. The land gradually grew more undulating and rocky. Small birch trees were scattered about. They crossed several crystal clear streams, and by mid-afternoon they came upon a road that led north and south.

‘This is the road from the Iron Gate Pass to Orelin,’ said King Ignis. The road itself looked muddy and well-trodden with fresh wagon, horse, and boot tracks. ‘My army came by here not long ago. We must ride with haste!’ he cried. They turned their horses and galloped northward along the winding road.

The landscape around became hillier and the trees more numerous. As the evening approached they came to a rise in the road, and when they reached the top of the ridge they could see out across a large basin dotted with stone farmhouses. In the centre of the basin was a walled town. Camped on the southern side of the town, about half a mile from the wall, was the Ortarian army. Hundreds of tents dotted the fields to the south of the town, and a multitude of banners flew above the army depicting the red flag with the golden lion of Ortaria.

Orelin was a large town; the wall that surrounded the town was almost a perfect circle. Eight towers rose from the wall, set at even intervals. At no point was the wall more than a thousand yards in diameter. A large keep was situated at the centre of Orelin, and the Scaldonian flag still flew above the town. The dark blue Scaldonian flag depicted a white eagle with outstretched wings. The road they were on led to a large gate that was securely closed. Eben could see the walls were manned with many men.

‘They have not attacked the town!’ shouted King Ignis happily. He charged forward. Eben and Cassiel rode after him down the slope toward the Ortarian encampment.

As they approached the camp several armoured riders broke away and rode out to meet them. They were carrying spears and were prepared to fight. They stopped about fifty feet from them.

'What is your business?' shouted one of the riders.

'Who is your commander?' asked King Ignis.

'What is your business?' repeated the same rider angrily.

'We are here to speak with your commander!' cried King Ignis. The leading rider moved his horse forward and came closer.

'I will spear you if you don't tell me your real business.'

'You would spear your own King,' responded King Ignis, staring harshly at the rider.

'What nonsense is this?' asked the rider sharply.

'Take me to your commander, now!' commanded King Ignis.

The rider stared at King Ignis for a few moments and seemed to be considering the situation. 'At very least I hear you are Ortarian by your accent. If you make any trouble for me you will pay with your life,' he said, turning his horse. 'Follow me.'

They followed the rider toward the edge of the encampment, and after the rider had spoken with several other soldiers they were asked to dismount.

'I hear that you want to see General Hugo?' asked another soldier, who was clearly of higher rank due to his impressive armour. He was an older and very skinny man with a long face and a receding chin, yet the fierce look in his eyes revealed he was a seasoned warrior.

'That's right,' replied King Ignis.

'I cannot permit you to see General Hugo unless the purpose of your visit is clearly stated,' said the soldier.

'I have a message from King Ignis,' said King Ignis.

'What message would that be?' asked the soldier.

'I will tell him myself,' said King Ignis resolutely.

'No you won't,' replied the soldier firmly, crossing his arms and standing tall.

King Ignis saw that he was clearly not going to be taken to General Hugo. He gave the situation some thought for a few moments.

'Tell him this: the shadow will never overcome the light.'

The proud soldier looked puzzled for a moment and scratched his chin. 'That is your only message?'

'Yes, that is all,' said King Ignis. 'Tell him just what I have said.'

'All right, but I will have you flogged if you are making a fool of me,' said the soldier. He then turned and walked away into the encampment.

King Ignis turned to Eben with a smile. 'I said that to Hugo just before we went into battle against Azagord's army. He never forgot those words.'

They waited for a few minutes and nothing happened. Eben could see the army was preparing for battle, swords were being sharpened, catapults were being assembled, and armour was being prepared. The whole camp was bustling.

A few minutes later they could hear some commotion. They saw a man approaching who was adorned in fine armour and wore a long red cape. He was an older man with greying hair, a noble face with large green eyes, and a big dark moustache. He moved with determination and strength, and he stood tall with pride. General Hugo looked very noble and the picture of a warrior. He was flanked by several fully armoured knights and other guardsmen. The General approached the edge of the encampment and stared at King Ignis, greatly shocked by the sight before him.

'What sorcery is this?'

'No sorcery, Hugo,' replied King Ignis.

'I see King Ignis before me. Why are you clothed like a peasant, and why are you here in Scaldonia when I received word from you in Ancora only a day ago?'

'Perhaps you are taking orders from the wrong man,' said King Ignis.

'I serve the King of Ortaria with complete loyalty; I do not question his orders,' said General Hugo.

'That was always one of your faults, Hugo,' said King Ignis, shaking his head. 'You were always a little too good at following my orders. You should remember what I said to you when I made you commander of my army.'

'If you tell me that then I will kneel before you here and now. Only King Ignis knows what he said to me that day.'

'I said there may come a day when I may order you to do something you thought was wrong and if that day should come you should question me.'

General Hugo stared in astonishment at King Ignis. He was speechless for several moments.

'My King!' he cried, and he fell upon a knee, bowing his head to the ground. All the knights and soldiers who stood around did the same. There was a sense of great shock among the men who had witnessed what had happened. Cassiel and Eben remained standing.

'What foolishness is this; why are you invading the lands of our Scaldonian friends? Why didn't you question this order?'

General Hugo looked up, confused by the question. 'I did question the order,' he said, his shock still obvious.

'Then you should know the truth. I have been imprisoned in the Dungeons of Zyran for three years. The Zyranian Order has placed an imposter on my throne. What they did not expect was that I would escape with the help of these two friends and some others,' he indicated to Cassiel and Eben. 'Now the time has come to rise up against the tyranny in our land.'

General Hugo stood up. 'There is much we need to talk about.'

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As the day neared its end they were led through the encampment to a large command tent where a command table had been set. General Hugo sat at the table with three of his field commanders and two knights. King Ignis sat on the other side with Eben and Cassiel.

'The Imposter's commands were to invade Scaldonia and capture Orelin. He ordered me to kill Duke Egil and destroy any resistance,' said Hugo with a tone of regret. King Ignis nodded soberly at hearing the news.

'Recently I have spoken with Meara of the Irilian Order,' said King Ignis. 'She told me the enemy's plan is to have us destroy each other. Tomorrow we will make peace with Duke Egil. We will see if he needs our help. I have also heard news that an army of muckrons has landed near Ancora. We must return to Ortaria and clear the evil army from our land.'

'There are muckrons everywhere. We encountered a group of forty on the road south of here, and we saw many smaller groups near the entrance to the Iron Gate Pass. I have also heard the Scaldonians were driven south by armies of muckrons. Apparently the muckrons and Skatheans control the north of Scaldonia.'

'Perhaps we can work with Duke Egil and clear these monsters from both our kingdoms.'

'My King, it may prove difficult to convince Duke Egil that we are his allies. I sent him a message this morning; I have asked him to surrender and allow us to enter Orelin,' said General Hugo, staring down at his own hands.

King Ignis cringed at hearing the words. 'Did he send a reply?'

'Yes, he did. He said every man and woman in Orelin would fight to the end, and he also said that we are traitors.'

King Ignis stared down at the table gravely. 'This will be difficult for me to repair.'

'They blame us for much of their suffering. The Imposter closed the Iron Gate Pass and stopped all trade going north and west from Ortaria. The Scaldonians relied on our exports, and they have been impoverished by the closure of the pass. They also blame us for not assisting them when they were first invaded. An army from Kaznor attacked the north of Scaldonia several months ago, and King Vidar was taken in chains back to the Dungeons of Zarkanor. Perhaps we should not attempt to reconcile. Our army could be ready to march for Ancora tomorrow morning.'

King Ignis heavily sighed as he contemplated the situation. 'No, Hugo, I want to talk with Duke Egil. A shadow has covered both our lands. Evil is everywhere. We need our friends in these dark times. The Scaldonians are our age old allies; we must stand by them. I will talk with Duke Egil myself in the morning.'

'We will send a messenger at first light to arrange a meeting,' said General Hugo.

**

Eben was given new clothes and his own tent. He felt exhausted and realised that he hadn't slept properly for many days. He went to sleep quickly and woke to the sound of the clambering encampment. He put on his new clothing and walked outside. About ten yards away he could see Cassiel sitting by a small campfire. There were hundreds of tents surrounding them. Most of the soldiers in the encampment were busy making preparations. Cassiel was talking with two soldiers who were seated across the fire. The symbol on most of their shields and banners was a golden lion set against a dark red background. Eben walked over to Cassiel and took a seat beside him.

'These two men are called Max and Marius. They've been assigned to help us,' said Cassiel as Eben sat down. They were two young men, perhaps around the age of twenty. Both were clean shaven and dressed in chainmail armour, with shoulder plates, and swords at their sides. Eben greeted the two young soldiers.

Max looked across at Eben. 'I have been told to take you to an armourer and allow you to select some fine armour. We have also prepared breakfast for you and Cassiel.'

'The breakfast is really very good, you should try it,' said Cassiel.

'Thank you,' said Eben. Marius handed him a bowl of oats with honey.

After he had finished his oats Max led him through the camp to where a group of large wagons were situated. They approached an older man who had a thick black beard, a completely bald head, and a fierce looking face. He was busy sharpening a sword.

'Weapons Master Rufus, this is Eben, a friend of King Ignis himself. I have been instructed to bring him to you so you could provide him with some new armour.'

The weathered and rough looking man looked up at Eben and gave a curt nod. 'You're young to be a friend of the King,' said Rufus in a deep and hoarse voice. 'How old are you?'

'Eighteen,' replied Eben.

‘Old enough to die in battle,’ said Rufus gruffly as he looked Eben up and down and gave a tight smile. His eyes glanced at Eben’s sword for a few moments. ‘That sword you have is interesting. Who made it?’

‘I don’t know,’ answered Eben.

‘I haven’t seen a sword like it, and I’ve seen thousands of swords,’ said Rufus as he moved toward one of the wagons. ‘So, what kind of armour do you want? If you are a swordsman you’ll probably like something light that won’t slow you down.’

Rufus opened the back of one of his wagons and inside were racks of swords, spears, shields, and suits of armour. He climbed up into the wagon and selected a chainmail shirt, a steel chest plate, and an open face helm.

He stepped back down with the armour. ‘This is what the infantry field commanders wear,’ he said, handing Eben the polished chest plate latched to a back plate. ‘Here are some schybalds, you probably call them shin plates, and here are some shoulder plates, which I call pauldrons; these latch easily to the top of your back plate. You can choose between leather or metal plated vambraces to cover your forearms. This is a very light and high quality chainmail shirt; you wear it beneath your plate armour, it stops cuts and slashes. And this is an open face helm; this one is good for swordsmen because it doesn’t block your view. The knights often wear them when they’re using their swords. Do you need any weapons?’

‘No, the armour will be enough,’ said Eben.

‘Good, it should be easy enough to put on yourself.’

‘Thank you for your help,’ said Eben.

‘I’m just following orders,’ said Rufus gruffly.

Eben returned to his tent and tried on the armour. It added a little weight, but he thought he would be able to move almost as well with the armour on. He noticed instantly that the soldiers greeted him with increased respect. Cassiel was still seated beside the fire outside his tent.

‘Well, don’t you look fine in that new armour,’ said Cassiel. ‘You look like a real soldier now.’ Eben nodded and smiled. ‘I just heard that King Ignis received word back from Duke Egil. The Duke won’t come out of Orelin to meet with him. He’ll only meet with him if King Ignis comes into the city. I don’t think it’s safe. The Scaldonians are likely to kill him once he’s inside the walls. He’s only permitted to take one soldier with him inside.’

‘Do you think he will go?’ asked Eben.

‘King Ignis is keen to reforge the alliance with the Scaldonians. I think he will go, but it’s not until noon tomorrow.’

‘Who’s going to go with him?’ asked Eben.

‘I don’t know; probably one of his knights. We’ll have to wait and see.’

**

Meara, Red, Stella, and Baftel arrived at the edge of the encampment as the sun was setting in the western sky. Eben and Cassiel greeted them and led them through the encampment toward the command tent.

Red was looking at Eben with a cheeky grin. ‘When do I get my armour?’

Eben smiled across at his friend. ‘I’m sure King Ignis can arrange that.’

King Ignis came out of the large tent and greeted them. ‘I’m glad to see you have arrived safely.’

‘We’re glad to see you weren’t too late,’ said Meara.

'One more day and we would have been too late. My army was going to attack Orelin this morning,' said King Ignis. 'Please, come in out of the cold. We are discussing some serious matters.'

They entered the tent and took seats around the table. General Hugo, several field commanders, and two knights were also seated at the table. They greeted the newcomers warmly.

'I think this plan is simply wrong,' said Hugo.

'It is dangerous, but it's the right thing to do,' said King Ignis. 'If we don't reforge the alliance and we allow Scaldonia to fall then we can be sure Ortaria will be next. We need to work with our friends.'

'But Duke Egil's request that you enter Orelin sounds like a trap,' said Sir Victar, an older and noble knight who was seated beside General Hugo. 'He's only allowing you to take one soldier into Orelin. Duke Egil knows you will be vulnerable. Why wouldn't he let you take more guards?'

'This is about trust,' said Meara. 'Duke Egil wants to see if you trust him. Trust is shared in all friendships. He knows that if you trust him you will go. If you don't trust him he knows he cannot trust you.'

'Meara is right; this is a test of trust,' said Baftel, his voice weak and croaky. He looked very old in the dull light. 'There is one other thing that I can see within Orelin. They have one of the Fire Order with them.'

'A Fire Wizard?' asked Meara, raising her eyebrows at the revelation.

'Yes,' replied Baftel. 'He resists my seer ability. He is aware of our presence, Meara.' He paused and caught his breath. It was a struggle for Baftel to speak. 'King Ignis, if you can only take one soldier then that soldier should be Eben.' Everyone at the table looked across to Eben. 'He is the greatest warrior in the encampment.' Eben didn't know if he believed what Baftel was saying.

'This is true, Eben,' said Meara. 'I saw you fight those five Skatheans in Lantern Hill. If only one person can go you would be the best choice.'

'Five Skatheans!' gasped General Hugo.

'I didn't win,' said Eben modestly.

'But you're still alive,' said Sir Victar, amazed and awed by the revelation.

'It's true, Eben proved himself to be quite a warrior in Lantern Hill, but I can't ask you to put your life at risk,' said King Ignis.

'I will go,' said Eben.

'We may be walking into a trap.'

'We've escaped traps before.' Eben smiled. King Ignis nodded with a slight smile back at Eben.

'All right then, Eben and I will go to meet with Duke Egil tomorrow at noon.'

**

The next morning Eben awoke early. He was feeling strong after two nights of solid sleep. He put on his armour and stepped out of the tent. The sun was already fairly high in the sky; it was a couple of hours after sunrise.

Max approached. 'I was asked to let you rest.'

'Thanks.'

'I have been ordered to take you to the Horse Master to find you a warhorse,' said Max.

Eben nodded. Max led him through the large encampment to the southern side where many horses were tied to wagons and carriages. They walked over to a young man who had long hair and a very long beard.

‘Horse Master Jorg, this is Eben, a friend of King Ignis. The King has requested you give him your best available warhorse.’

‘Certainly,’ said Jorg. The young Horse Master led them along the edge of the camp to where several horses were tied to a wagon. ‘These are three of my best,’ said Jorg. There were two dark brown warhorses and a grey one. They were all obviously bred for war. ‘I recommend this one,’ he said indicating the grey horse. ‘His name is Swiftwing; he is very fast and the wisest of the three. He was given to General Hugo by a drifter who said he had ridden him all the way from the lands beyond Irvania. The foreigner also said that Swiftwing has fought in several battles in the Western Lands.’

Eben walked up to the huge horse and touched his nose. The horse was friendly and clearly liked him.

‘Good, I’ll take Swiftwing,’ said Eben.

‘I’ll saddle him up and have him taken to you. I heard you’re going to go with the King into Orelin. Swiftwing will be a good horse for your mission. He won’t be frightened.’

They left Jorg and walked back toward his tent. An armoured soldier came running over to him.

‘Eben, look at me,’ said Red with a huge smile and a glimmer in his eyes. His new armour was shining brightly and was similar to armour Eben had been given by the Weapons Master. Red also had a new finely crafted sword latched to his side. He had his beard shaven to look neat and had tied his shaggy hair back.

‘You look great,’ said Eben.

‘Like a knight,’ cried Red heartily. ‘I can’t wait for Stella to see me like this,’ he said as he ran off to find her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The town of Orelin had served as the southern capital of Scaldonia since ancient times. It was often said that the Ecorian Emperors of old took a particular interest in the town as it was the gateway to the Scaldonian Highlands where the mysterious Scaldonian Oracle was said to live. The town’s proximity to the Iron Gate Pass led to it being the central point of many battles throughout the ages. The Scaldonians who lived in the south were regarded as a rugged and battle worn people.

The day was dark and clouds rumbled with thunder in the east. King Ignis and Eben rode together toward the main gate of Orelin. King Ignis was adorned in magnificent armour with intricate designs depicting two golden lions. His long red cape was draped down over his horse. The day was nearing noon when they reached the main gate. The wall stood about fifty feet high. Eben could see hundreds of men lining the walls.

‘I am King Ignis of Ortaria! I have come to meet with Duke Egil!’

There was a silence for several moments and then the gates opened enough to let them ride through. The King led the way through the open gate. On the far side were five rugged knights on horseback waiting for them. Their armour was unpolished and dark, and their capes were dark blue. They carried shields with them that had a depiction of a white eagle with outstretched wings, and they all wore helms with visors that covered their faces. The knight in the centre looked particularly rugged and fierce. He had his visor up and stared at them with angry eyes. For a moment Eben was worried they had ridden directly into a trap.

'I am Sir Leif of Scaldonia; Gaurdian of the South; Commander of the Orelin Guard,' said the severe looking knight in a rumbling harsh voice.

'I am King Ignis of Ortaria; direct descendent of the Ecorian Arbiters and rightful ruler of Ortaria,' said King Ignis.

'Duke Egil awaits you; follow me.' Sir Leif turned his horse and led them through the dreary looking town toward the main keep. The streets were mostly empty as almost all the people were indoors. The townsfolk that they did see looked to be living in complete poverty.

The keep was surrounded by a second smaller wall about two hundred yards from the southern gate. They were taken up to the gate of the keep and entered into a large courtyard. Two lines of armoured spearmen formed an honour guard for them. Sir Leif led them up to a big arched door and then dismounted. The other knights also dismounted and King Ignis did the same. Eben followed their example.

'I will now take you to see Duke Egil,' said Sir Leif. He led them in through the door which opened into a long corridor that had no windows and was lit by burning torches at intervals along the wall. Sir Leif led the way through the corridor; the other knights followed them closely.

They reached a second door; Sir Leif pushed it open. Directly before them was a large throne room with stained glass windows and white marble floors. The hall was about a hundred feet long and had two rows of spearmen lining both the long walls. Across the marble floor was a bright silver throne. Seated upon the throne was an old man with long grey hair that fell to his shoulders, a clean shaven face, and a very fearsome look in his grey eyes. He was dressed in amour of the manner of his men, and he stared at King Ignis with a look that bordered on contempt. Beside him on the right was a knight and the left was a crazy looking man wearing a worn brown robe; his hair was frizzy and flew out in every direction. Further to the right of the Duke stood three young maidens, all wearing fine dresses, impressive jewellery, and beautiful attire. To the left of the Duke stood several men who wore no armour; they appeared to be scholars or advisors.

Eben and King Ignis followed Sir Leif across the marble floor toward the Duke.

'Duke Egil, I present to you, King Ignis of Ortaria,' said Sir Leif. He then bowed to the Duke and walked aside. The Duke clapped his hands a few times and sat back deliberately in his chair with a smug smile on his face.

'To be honest, I thought you wouldn't come,' said Duke Egil, his voice was deep and strong. 'After all that my people have suffered at your hands, I can hardly believe that you would dare to come here unprotected. Of course I will let you explain yourself, King Ignis, but only because you apparently have some courage left in your old veins. Why have you brought your army to our gates? My knights say you have over twenty thousand men. Clearly we didn't invite you. First you ask me to surrender, and now you want to make peace. It looks like a trick to me. Explain, King Ignis.'

'Duke Egil, this is no trick. I only reached my army two nights ago. I came to put an end to this madness. I never asked my army to invade Scaldonia, and I never asked for the Iron Gate Pass to be closed...'

The Duke started laughing heavily and folded his arms across his chest. 'Trying to be innocent doesn't suit you, Ignis,' he said. King Ignis frowned and his eyes narrowed. He was clearly offended by the statement.

'I have been in a dungeon for three years!' said King Ignis firmly. 'I escaped the Dungeons of Zyran only recently. I had to race north to stop my army from

invading your lands. An imposter sits on my throne; he was the one who ordered this invasion. Now I have returned I plan to repair all the damage that has been done.'

The Duke stared at King Ignis with wide eyes at hearing the revelation. The throne room fell completely silent. Duke Egil looked to the man at his side in the brown robes with the crazy hair.

'Garnock, is this true?' The wizard stared intensely at King Ignis for a few moments; his eyes then darted across to Eben. He gazed at Eben with his crazy wide eyes. Eben wondered what he was thinking and felt uncomfortable.

'Yes,' replied Garnock, his extremely high tone made him sound completely insane. 'It's all true, Duke.' Garnock continued staring intently at Eben. 'You must ask the Ortarian who that is he brought with him.'

The Duke looked from the King to Eben. 'Who is your guardsman?'

'His name is Eben,' said King Ignis, surprised by the question.

'Why do you want to know about his guardsman?' asked the Duke, looking to the crazy wizard.

'He is not who we think he is,' said the wizard. 'The sea shall bend for this one.'

The Duke rolled his eyes at the cryptic reply of the wizard. 'What are you talking about? Why do you always speak in riddles?' The Duke looked from the wizard back to King Ignis. 'King Ignis, this story of your imprisonment is news to me; I knew nothing of it. We Scaldonians suspected Zyran had fallen beneath a shadow; however, we have never known for certain. You must know these are terrible times for us. Our northern city of Aldokan has fallen to the Kaznor Empire. There is an evil growing in the north, and armies of muckrons have landed on our shores. King Vidar, my brother, was captured by the enemy and taken as a prisoner to the Dungeons of Zarkanor. We have been pushed south and our people have suffered greatly. You should also know that our scouts say there is an army of muckrons camped about ten miles north of Orelin.'

'An army of muckrons!' exclaimed King Ignis, surprised that such an army was so close to Orelin. 'How many muckrons are there?'

'Thousands,' replied the Duke. 'And they have a wyvern with them.'

'A wyvern!' cried King Ignis, clearly shocked.

Eben's adoptive father Erako had told him that wyverns were very evil dragons. It was said that some wyverns flew and others crawled. Erako had also told him that real dragons were much larger than wyverns and often majestic and good creatures. Generally only the smaller wyverns were evil in nature. Eben had always thought they were just creatures in stories.

'Yes, the wyvern flies in circles above the muckron horde. It's not very big, only about five yards in length, but it is very ferocious. The beast killed two of our northern scouts and only one returned to tell the tale. It swoops down and takes them from their horses, like an eagle taking a rabbit,' said the Duke.

'An army of muckrons and a wyvern; these indeed are evil times,' said King Ignis. 'Armies of muckrons have not been seen in these lands since the Forgotten Age. I recently heard news that one such army landed on the shores of Ortaria. I plan to lead my army south to destroy the evil army that threatens my kingdom.' There were a few moments of silence as the two rulers stared at each other. 'We must rebuild our alliance of old. If we can reform our alliance we could march on this muckron army in the north, and together the Ortarians and Scaldonians could destroy all the evil that plagues our lands.'

The Duke glanced across at his knights and then uneasily looked back toward King Ignis. 'My men don't trust you or the Ortarian army beyond the gate. They told me that you would try to trick me into opening the gates of Orelin.'

'This is not a trick. You know I tell you the truth,' protested King Ignis.

'Yes, I know,' said the Duke, staring down at the white marble floor for a moment. 'But if you want the alliance restored you must prove to my men and my people that you and your army are trustworthy. If you lead your army north of Orelin and destroy the army of muckrons you will have the alliance you seek.'

King Ignis nodded and realised there was no other way. Duke Egil was resolute in what he had said.

'I see,' said King Ignis softly. 'I will consult with my commanders and inform you of our intention.'

**

They returned to the encampment and King Ignis arranged a meeting with General Hugo and the other commanders and knights. Eben, Meara, Cassiel, and Baftel sat at the command table with them.

'Garnock,' said Meara, intrigued by the revelation. 'He is a very powerful member of the Fire Order. I wonder why he is in Scaldonia, so far from the Old Guardian Mountains.'

'I don't know what he is doing here, but he was interested in Eben,' said King Ignis.

'What did he say about Eben?' asked Meara.

'He said that the sea would bend for him,' said King Ignis. Meara looked to Eben, and she pondered the saying for a moment. 'What does that mean?'

'I'm not entirely sure; I think one day we will find out,' said Meara. She gave a slight smile to Eben before looking back to King Ignis.

'He will restore our alliance if we destroy the muckron army which is camped ten miles north of here,' said King Ignis.

'A muckron army!' cried General Hugo.

'Indeed, we need to assess our options. How many men do we have?'

'Almost twenty five thousand,' replied General Hugo. 'We have sixteen thousand infantry, two thousand archers, five thousand light cavalry, one thousand heavy cavalry, and fifty knights. We also have eight mobile catapults and several other siege machines, but I think we should consider turning south. If we spend our strength fighting the muckron army in Scaldonia we may risk not having the men to fight the muckron army in Ortaria. Perhaps we should forsake rebuilding the alliance. The Scaldonians only have a small army remaining here in Orelin. We would be wise to focus on the needs of Ortaria and return home.'

The King contemplated in silence what General Hugo had said. Everyone at the table was looking at him and waiting for his answer.

'No, Hugo. We must keep our honour. If we lose our honour we would forsake everything we have fought for; I will never let that happen. Ortarians don't turn away from a fight. We stand by our allies and friends. That's who we are, and we won't change now or ever. The Scaldonians have suffered, and they are our friends; we will fight for them. Anyone can be a friend in peaceful times; I have learned it is in the dark times that loyalty and honour are truly tested.'

'I will order the army to prepare,' said General Hugo.

'We will need to send scouts to assess the muckron army. There is a problem though; they have a wyvern with them.'

'A wyvern!' gasped Meara.

‘Yes,’ said King Ignis. ‘Duke Egil said this beast has already killed some of his scouts. Send only scouts who know the danger and are prepared to take the risk.’

‘It will be a challenge to find a man willing to take on this task, especially if you give him a choice,’ said General Hugo.

The King thumped the table with his fist. ‘Forget the scouts, if we can’t beat this army of muckrons now it will eventually arrive in Ortaria and destroy us there. This battle will test our strength and bravery. Order the army to prepare; we ride north in the morning!’

**

The army started to make preparations for leaving that afternoon. Eben sat by a campfire with Cassiel.

‘We are going to war in the morning,’ said Cassiel. ‘I have never seen a muckron. I wonder if they are as terrible as the old stories say they are?’

‘I fought one once,’ said Eben. Cassiel was very surprised. ‘They’re fast and strong.’ He remembered back to the fight with the muckron in the forest. ‘If I didn’t have Red with me I would have been killed. He saved me.’

‘Red saved you?’

Eben nodded. A moment later Red walked quickly over to where they were sitting by the campfire. His face was pale, and he was deeply frowning.

‘Eben, you have to talk some sense into Stella, she’s gone mad! She’s preparing to fight in the battle tomorrow. You have to convince her otherwise.’

A moment later Stella came into view and marched over. Her eyes were blazing, and her face was red with anger. She was wearing a chainmail shirt, shoulder guards, shin guards, and she had two short swords latched to her belt.

‘What are you talking to them about, Red?’ she asked angrily.

‘Stella! The danger is too great,’ argued Red.

‘You know I can fight, Red. So stop trying to...’

‘But...but, you’ll be the only woman on the battlefield.’

‘Meara will be there, so I won’t be the only woman,’ she replied defiantly.

‘That’s true, Red. Meara will be there,’ confirmed Cassiel.

‘Shut up, Cassiel,’ yelled Red.

‘I’ve been through all this danger with you: Zyran, the wilderness, Lantern Hill, and the draug. I’m not going to stand aside now and watch from afar.’

Red didn’t know what to say. Eben could see Stella was determined and would not back down.

‘If we fight together and stay close we can defend each other and make sure that no one gets into trouble,’ said Eben. Red reluctantly accepted the fact that Stella was going to fight.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The army moved out the next morning and followed the road north away from the Orelin basin. The army looked like a giant metal serpent winding its way up through the rocky hills. Thick dark clouds hung low in the sky, and the air was dense as a morning mist was rising from the ground. A little rain had fallen earlier. Eben rode with King Ignis, Red, and Stella toward the front of the troops.

‘Do you feel like fighting in a battle today?’ asked King Ignis, looking across at Red.

‘Not really,’ replied Red. The King laughed heartily.

‘I’m sure you will fight well.’

'I'll do my best,' said Red.

'Not since the Forgotten Ages have armies of muckrons roamed these lands. The Prince of Shadows brought them to Veredor in those days from a dark place in the cosmos. At the end of the Forgotten Age the muckron armies were destroyed by the Astarian Fiora. The Prince of Shadows was cast into the darkness beyond the boundaries of Veredor.'

'So why have they come back now?' asked Red.

'I don't know,' said King Ignis.

'Maybe the Prince of Shadows has come back from the darkness,' suggested Red.

'I hope not. The Prince of Shadows was the most terrible adversary the people of Veredor have ever faced.'

'What's an Astarian?' asked Eben, curious to know more about the Astarian Fiora.

'The Astarians were immortals who lived in ancient times. They were a goodhearted and benevolent race.'

'Do any still live?'

'I have never heard of any who live near men. It is said the Scaldonian Oracle is an Astarian. I have also heard there is an oracle in the Far Western Lands. I don't know of any other Astarians living in Veredor other than the oracles, and many people don't believe that the oracles actually exist.'

The oracles were mystical beings that lived in the wilderness, one in Scaldonia and the other in the Far Western Lands. Eben had heard stories of heroes having to overcome many obstacles to find the oracles. It had long been said that the oracles could give insights into the deepest mysteries.

They rode on for an hour. The mist cleared. The hills came to a sudden end and a plain stretched out before them. Thick storm clouds had settled low in the sky above the plain. There was no rain at all and the air was still. From the hill they could see across a plain that extended about ten miles to another mountain range in the north. The road continued for two miles and they could see smoke rising from the encampment of the muckron army. The Ortarian Army halted. Eben could see the silhouette of the wyvern flying in circles through the smoke that hovered over the encampment of muckrons.

'How many muckrons do you think there are, Hugo?' asked King Ignis.

'Thousands, perhaps six or seven thousand,' replied General Hugo as his eyes scanned the encampment of their enemies.

The wyvern started flying toward them. Eben could see the orange and red scales of the creature as it approached. The beast had large horns, clawed feet, and batlike wings which were dark in colour. It ascended higher and within a minute was circling above the army of men and screeching in a deathly shrill tone. All the men of the army looked up in horror at the wyvern.

'I never thought I would see anything like that,' said King Ignis sternly, staring up at the evil creature high above.

Meara rode up to be beside King Ignis. 'They are said to be as intelligent as men. I believe the wyvern is spying for the enemy.'

'We must move quickly then,' said King Ignis. They moved down the slope of the hill and arrived at the plain within a few minutes. The muckron army was marshalling itself in the distance and preparing for battle.

‘We will move closer until we are about five hundred yards away from them,’ said General Hugo. ‘Our knights and heavy cavalry will charge them. We can use the light cavalry as support. The infantry can move in as a third wave.’

‘What about the archers?’ asked King Ignis.

‘They can support the infantry and stop the enemy flanking us.’

‘Good, let’s move out further across the plain and prepare our position,’ said King Ignis.

Eben could hear the drums of the enemy in the distance. Deep horns were being blown, and all the muckrons howled. The sound of the beasts froze their hearts.

‘Urs-shaka, Urs-shaka, Urs-shaka!’ The muckrons growled as they formed several lines and started moving toward the army of men.

The Ortarian army formed several opposing lines with the heavy cavalry and the knights to the front. The light cavalry formed a line directly behind the heavy cavalry. The infantry formed about ten lines behind the last horses, and the archers stood further back. By the time the army had formed a position the muckrons were about fifteen hundred yards away and were steadily advancing across the plain.

‘Are we ready, Hugo?’ asked the King. General Hugo sternly nodded. King Ignis rode out in front of his army on his great white warhorse. He looked magnificent against the dark horizon and the heavy clouds. His long red cape flew in the wind, and his bright armour was shining brilliantly. He was like a light set against the gloom.

‘We fight for Ortaria! Keep your honour! Be brave! Be true!’ he cried. The army cheered all at once. ‘We Ortarians have always fought for the good of all people! Now we are here, in a foreign land, and we are called to vanquish this evil horde of monsters from Veredor! I believe we have the courage! I believe we are brave! Fight well! Fight for your family! Fight for your people! And fight for all that is good!’ he cried. The cheers of the army echoed across the field.

‘Urs-shaka, Urs-shaka, Urs-shaka,’ bellowed the muckron army in response. The wyvern released a bloodcurdling scream, which sent shivers through the Ortarian army.

‘For Ortaria!’ cried King Ignis, drawing his sword as he turned his warhorse to face the enemy.

An Ortarian trumpet sounded and rang out across the plain. The heavy cavalry started to move forward. The polished armour of the knights shimmered as the sun shone through a gap in the clouds above. A second trumpet sounded and the light cavalry followed.

Stella was riding beside Red, and Meara was a little further back with Cassiel. Baftel was standing much further back behind the lines of archers. Eben smiled across at Red. He felt his confidence growing. A feeling grew in his heart that was similar to how he had felt in Lantern Hill, a sense of courage flowed through his veins.

‘Let’s ride!’ cried Eben, drawing the Sword of Light. The blade glimmered brightly as the light of the sun reflected on the smooth polished metal.

Swiftwing leapt forward, chasing after the cavalry. The pace was growing as their horses galloped. Stella and Red were beside Eben; Cassiel and Meara were a little further back trying to keep up. Eben stared ahead at the line of hideous muckrons. The sound of thousands of horses galloping was thunderous. The heavy cavalry were lowering their lances as the line of muckrons stood ready. The

muckrons were armed with an assortment of spears, war hammers, maces, and some carried battle-axes. Some of the muckrons wore makeshift armour and others wore nothing at all. Their hideous hairy pig faces snarled and growled.

The front line of cavalry struck the line of muckrons with a mighty clash of steel. A moment later Eben was upon them. He swung his blade and watched a muckron fall. Swiftwing crashed through the enemy front line. There were howls and cries all about; the scene was wild. Eben was surrounded by monsters. He thrust his sword out again and again. His visual field was full of foul pig faces, some with tusks, and others with protruding fangs and drooling mouths. Swiftwing pushed through the field of muckrons, knocking the monsters down as he charged on.

Eben looked back and could see Stella and Red about forty feet away, side by side, fighting several muckrons together. Further away he could see waves of blue flames and swirling columns of blue fire blasting from Meara's hands. The monsters howled and ran from her. The cavalymen were all around fiercely battling the monsters. Eben swung, stabbed, and slashed as the beasts shrieked and howled at him. The scene turned into a mad blur. The Ortarian infantry then entered the fray. The intensity of the battle increased. Eben parried and struck out again and again. His heart thumped like a drum. Swiftwing reared up on his hind legs and kicked a muckron away as Eben stabbed another.

'Eben!' cried Stella's voice from far off.

Eben turned Swiftwing about and looked to see the wyvern descending on Cassiel about a hundred feet away. The wyvern's red scales glimmered in the daylight; a menacing howl echoed out as the beast swooped downward. Cassiel held his hands up, creating a shield, but the wyvern crashed through the barrier and struck the young wizard, sending him flying through the air. The wyvern leapt after him.

Eben turned Swiftwing about and galloped across the field toward Cassiel, but Red arrived first and stood in the wyvern's path. Red swung his blade. The wyvern simply struck out, and Red's sword flew from his hand. Red stumbled back and looked up at the large fangs of the beast, his eyes full of shock. A moment later the wyvern grabbed Red around his chest and lifted him up, squeezing him tightly. Red moaned in pain as the claws buckled his armour. Stella cried out and ran to save him, but the wyvern leapt into the air and beat its wings.

A moment later Eben charged into the scene as the beast flew upward. Eben leapt from Swiftwing and grabbed onto one of the wyvern's horns. The enraged face and red eyes sneered. The beast whipped its head about, trying to shake Eben off. Eben hewed down at the creature's arm which was holding Red; the severed arm fell away, and Red landed in the mud below. The wyvern gave a bloodcurdling scream and crashed into the field. Eben rolled away from the fierce beast and quickly got to his feet, holding up the Sword of Light.

The wyvern moaned in pain and roared in defiance. Eben dashed forward as the wyvern leapt at him. He brought his blade down and cut through its scales; a moment later the beast dropped, writhed on the ground, and then fell still.

The muckrons backed away as Eben lifted his sword high above his head, the daylight seemed to collect around the blade. The muckrons stumbled back further and moaned in fear. The soldiers and cavalymen cheered for Eben. The remaining muckrons started to run, and several riders chased them down. Further out there were some small skirmishes, but the area directly around them was clearing of muckrons as the monsters were running for their lives.

Stella went quickly to Red's side. He was dazed and disoriented. Cassiel limped over a few moments later; the left side of Cassiel's face was covered in blood from a gash above his eyebrow.

'Red, are you all right?' asked Stella. 'Please, Red, say something!'

'Stella...I think I have some broken ribs,' muttered Red as he opened his eyes. Stella held him close and was thankful he was speaking.

Moments later Meara walked over. 'The muckron army is retreating,' she said as she looked out across the plain.

Eben sheathed his sword and helped Stella to sit Red up. Meara walked over and put her hand on Red's shoulder. A gentle blue light emanated from her hands, and Red suddenly looked brighter and happier.

'You have three broken ribs,' said Meara. 'This spell will reduce the pain and help to heal you more quickly, but just because the pain is mostly gone doesn't mean you are free from an injury. You should take care.'

'Red, I thought I was finished. You saved me from the wyvern.' said Cassiel.

'Anytime,' said Red as he stood up.

**

Eben sat in the command tent. Red, Stella, Baftel, King Ignis, and General Hugo were seated around the table. Meara and Cassiel walked in to join them, followed by two knights.

'Sadly we lost two thousand men, and about a thousand are severely injured,' said General Hugo. 'Our riders say about a thousand muckrons escaped north and are continuing to move away from us. Several smaller groups of the monsters have been hunted down by our cavalry.'

King Ignis nodded. 'We will give all our fallen the full burial rights and honours that they deserve. They showed courage and gave the ultimate sacrifice. We shall always remember the victory we had here over the muckron horde. We will never forget those who fell in the battle.'

'The heavy cavalry did the most damage to the muckrons...and Eben.' said General Hugo.

'The men are calling you the Dragon Slayer,' said King Ignis, looking to Eben with a proud smile. 'I watched you riding through the lines of muckrons. You were alone and ahead of everyone else. They scattered at your feet. I have not seen anything like that in all the battles I have fought.'

'Such things haven't been seen since the Forgotten Age,' said Meara.

Eben looked down at the Sword of Light at his side. He knew that much of his ability came from the sword he carried.

'We will have to turn south soon,' said General Hugo. 'The Imposter in Ancora ordered us to invade Scaldonia with only enough food and supplies for three weeks from Galdir. We should make haste to return to Galdir.'

'Galdir? No, the Zyranians will expect us to come back that way,' said King Ignis. 'We will ride through the Northern Pass and make directly for Ancora.'

'The draug is gone, but it would prove very difficult to take wagons and catapults up the Sky Steps,' said Meara.

'Yes, what you say is true,' agreed King Ignis. 'Baftel, can you see where the muckron army is in Ortaria?' asked the King, looking across at the frail wizard.

'There is a dark shadow near Ancora, perhaps the muckron army is there. It is difficult for me to know for sure. I have been looking south, and I can see the Skatheans are planning something. They have moved from the Iron Gate Pass and away from Galdir. They are heading eastward back toward Ancora.'

The King scratched his beard; for a few moments he was deep in thought. 'It would take us about eight days to ride back to Ancora if we took the Northern Pass. If we went through the Iron Gate Pass it would take us an extra week.'

'By now the Imposter and the Zyranians would be aware that you have taken control of the army,' said General Hugo. 'He would be preparing for you to come south; that's probably why the Skatheans have gone east. They may also know that you killed the draug, so he may expect us to come back through the Northern Pass. If we go through the Iron Gate Pass, we can restock at Galdir, and clear the villages and towns along the highway of all the tyrants and bandits who rule them. We can sweep across Ortaria and return victoriously to Ancora knowing that our enemies have all been destroyed.'

'It's a good plan,' agreed King Ignis. 'We shall vanquish the evil in Ortaria from west to east. We will head for Galdir.'

**

By the evening the army had started to prepare to move south. Meara and Cassiel were working with the injured, healing as many as they could with their skills. Eben, Red, and Stella worked with them assisting with bandaging. By nightfall Meara was exhausted. They sat around a small campfire discussing the journey south.

'If the muckrons are as they were here then we should do fine in Ortaria,' said Red.

'There were only seven thousand here,' said Meara. 'We greatly outnumbered them. I believe they were here waiting to attack the Ortarians after they had fought with the Scaldonians. They were waiting for the Ortarians and Scaldonians to destroy each other; their task was to finish off whoever was left. They never expected the Ortarians to help the Scaldonians. If we were to fight a larger muckron army I believe we would then learn what they are truly capable of.'

'We will likely get the opportunity soon,' said Cassiel. Meara nodded.

All of a sudden a small blackbird flew down and landed on Meara's shoulder. It sang a short sweet song and then leapt away. The bird was gone from sight a few moments later. Meara looked into the flames of the fire and for some time didn't say a word.

'That small bird was a messenger from the Irilian Order,' she said. 'I have been called to an urgent meeting in Dravania.' They fell silent and stared at her. 'I must go to the Iril Fortress in Dravania.'

Eben felt his heart sink at hearing these words. Meara was a great support to their group.

'Must you go, Meara?' asked Red.

'Yes,' she replied regretfully. 'Please excuse me; I will talk with King Ignis.' She stood up and walked away from the campfire in the direction of the command tent. Cassiel followed after her.

**

Later in the evening Eben was talking with Max, Marius, and some other soldiers. Word had spread about Eben's bravery and skill in the battle.

'Eben, can we talk?' asked Cassiel as he approached.

'Of course,' replied Eben. They walked back toward the campfire.

'I have some good news; Meara has accepted me as her apprentice. I will finish my training and eventually become an Irilian,' said Cassiel gladly.

'I'm happy to hear it,' said Eben.

‘Baftel will be going west with Meara.’ There was a short silence. ‘Meara must go to Dravania; she has no choice in the matter. A great war is raging in the kingdoms of Iarthar and Dravania. The Irilians face a large threat, and Meara is one of the strongest Irilians. The Irilian Order needs her now.’

‘So what are you going to do, Cassiel?’

‘I have decided to stay with you, Red, and Stella. I want to stay here and finish what we started. Meara said that she will take me to the Iril Fortress in Dravania and begin my training after the war.’

‘I’m glad you’re going to stay,’ said Eben, feeling relieved.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The army set off early the following day. By midmorning they had reached the basin of Orelin. The company of friends rode at the front of the troops with King Ignis. They watched as Duke Egil rode out from the gates of Orelin on a mighty black warhorse; he was followed closely by ten of his knights. Their dark blue capes flew in the wind as they galloped across the field toward the Ortarian army.

‘I salute you, King Ignis,’ said Duke Egil as he drew near.

‘And I you, Duke Egil,’ said King Ignis.

‘My scouts have told me that you destroyed the army of muckrons and the wyvern. Consider our alliance reformed,’ said the Duke happily.

‘I am glad to hear it. We are now heading for the Iron Gate Pass to liberate Ortaria,’ said King Ignis.

‘I have eight thousand fighting men in Orelin,’ said Duke Egil. ‘Now we will ride north and attempt to clear our northern lands of the enemy.’

‘I wish you all the best,’ said King Ignis. ‘When I complete my campaign in Ortaria I will send reinforcements to you. We must also consider that the Zyranian Order is working against us. There may come a time when I ask for your help.’

‘And I will send you men if I can. I should also tell you that Garnock has sent word to the Fire Order to tell them the Zyranians have turned to evil ways. You should also form an alliance with Silvor, Ateria, and the Isles of Dawn. Perhaps they can help us deal with Zyran.’

‘Once I reclaim Ancora I will send word to the kings in the south, yet I fear that Zyran will already be influencing them.’

‘Perhaps the Irvarians in the west can help us,’ suggested Duke Egil.

Meara rode up to bring her horse beside King Ignis. ‘I am going to Irvaria. I will take word to King Edric of Irvaria and inform him of your troubles. I am the Irilian Meara. You should know the Irilians are also your allies.’

‘I’m happy to hear that,’ said Duke Egil. ‘The forces in Veredor are gathering their strength, and hopefully we are not too late. A great darkness is coming to our lands. We must be ready.’

‘It seems to me that the darkness has already arrived,’ said King Ignis, raising an eyebrow.

‘Garnock said what we have seen is only the beginning. He was sent by the Fire Order to watch the north. The Kaznor Empire has a new emperor; they simply call him “Master” and he is known by no other name. All the Skatheans and muckrons are loyal to him. I believe he is the force behind the evil we face, including what is happening in Zyran.’

‘I have heard of him,’ said King Ignis. ‘Azagord told me about him when I was imprisoned in Zyran. He is mysterious and powerful. Azagord told me that he is a

powerful sorcerer, greater than the Northern Sorcerers. Azagord was forced to submit to his will. He had to fight for his mind against the forces of darkness; thankfully in the end Azagord redeemed himself.'

'I think this person we speak of is actually an Astarian,' said Duke Egil.

'Perhaps he is the Prince of Shadows,' suggested Red, recalling the earlier mention of the evil adversary from the Forgotten Age.

'I hope not,' said King Ignis nervously. 'I always thought those old stories were just legends and myths. Until recently I thought the same about wyverns. We are going to see many dark times ahead if the Prince of Shadows has returned to Veredor.'

'We will fight these enemies together, whoever they are,' said Duke Egil.

King Ignis was happy at hearing his confidence. 'Indeed, we will not allow the forces of darkness to take hold.'

**

They left the Orelin basin and journeyed south along the road toward the Iron Gate Pass for the rest of the afternoon. It was a fine day, and the clouds had mostly dispersed allowing the warmth of the sun to shine down. The soldiers were glad to be heading home. There was a growing sense of hope that they would soon see their families again and see an end to the evil reign in their homeland. All the men felt encouraged by their victory against the muckron horde.

That evening they made a camp beside a small river. Eben, Red, and Stella were sitting around a campfire. Max had joined them and was playing a wooden flute. The sound of the music was soothing to their tired minds.

'That tune was lovely. You play so well,' said Stella.

'I bring my flute everywhere with me. My father gave it to me before he died. I grew up in Ancora near the western gate. I haven't heard from my mother and sisters for nearly two years. I often wonder how they are.'

'You will see them again soon,' said Red as he took the wooden spoon from the pot and tasted the stew he had been preparing. He then brought out some wooden bowls from his leather bag. Eben had no idea where he had found his cooking equipment. He served the four of them some of his delicious mushroom stew.

'Very nice, Red,' said Eben.

'I was a cook for a little while when I was still living in Silvor,' said Red.

'You've done just about everything,' said Stella.

Red nodded and a big smile crossed his face. 'Twenty years old and seen it all,' he said proudly.

'Probably you should think about settling down,' suggested Eben.

'That's the plan,' said Red, his smile becoming even wider as he glanced across at Stella. Stella shyly looked away.

'What about you, Eben. After the war, what will you do?' asked Red.

'All I really want to do is find my parents.'

'Where will you go?' asked Stella.

'I plan to travel to the lands beyond the Endless Wall Mountains. I hope to find the remaining Fiorian Knights. King Ignis told me that my mother was once the leader of the Fiorian Order. They may be able to tell me what happened to my mother and father.'

'Your mother was a Fiorian; that's amazing,' said Stella, her eyes widening at the revelation.

'I hope she's still out there somewhere,' said Eben.

'If she is I'm sure you will find her,' said Red confidently.

'I have heard the Western Lands are beautiful. Especially Irvaria and Everdon,' said Stella. 'I hope you find your parents.'

'I will search until I do,' said Eben, feeling he would not rest until he knew what happened to his mother and father.

**

The following morning the army moved further south. The towering Endora Mountains covered the entire southern skyline. The landscape gradually flattened out and looked much like the plains they had ridden across when they had first come out of the Northern Pass. The army was marching quite quickly, mostly due to the enthusiasm of the men. The road curved gradually toward the southwest as they progressed. The Iron Gate Pass was set at the collision point of the Endora Mountains and the Endless Wall Mountains. The pass had always been the only road to Vastoria from Ortaria and Scaldonia; this fact had caused it to be the focal point of numerous wars throughout the ages.

Eben had heard that the land of Vastoria beyond the pass was a harsh and inhospitable desert. The Vastorians were mostly a tribal and nomadic people. They lived in the wastelands and made a living from the unforgiving environment. This gave Vastorians a reputation as a rough and ruthless people. Further west, beyond the borders of Vastoria, was the famed Kingdom of Irvaria. Irvaria was said to be a land of grand castles, lush rolling hills, beautiful lakes, enchanting forests, and noble people. Eben wondered how far he would have to go to find the answers he sought.

'Eben, if I was to ever get married would you be my best man?' asked Red.

Eben looked over to Red who was riding beside him. He then looked back over his shoulder and saw that Stella was riding quite a long way back with Meara and Baftel.

'Of course,' he replied.

'Good. Great,' said Red, nodding and smiling. Red slowed his horse and waited for Stella to catch up. Eben continued to ride at the front of the army with King Ignis.

'He's an interesting young man, that Red,' said King Ignis. 'He never takes anything seriously, yet he is always there when you need his help; such a strange combination.'

'He's my best friend,' said Eben as he looked over his shoulder at Red and Stella riding further back.

'I'll have to make him into a knight for his service to Ortaria, even though he was born in Silvor,' said King Ignis. 'Keep this a secret; I'll make it a surprise for him on our return to Ancora.'

'I won't say a word.' Eben felt happy about what King Ignis had said. He knew Red would be overjoyed at being offered a knighthood.

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Late in the morning on the following day the Ortarian army was approaching the meeting place of the two mountain ranges in the southwest corner of Scaldonia. The land grew hilly the further they proceeded south. Ahead of them were two great mountains and a deep valley. They moved along the well maintained road that cut into the hillsides and led up through the great valley between the two snow-capped mountains. After midday King Ignis halted the army on a hilltop, and from their position they had a wide view of the mountains.

'The Iron Gate Pass,' said King Ignis. 'In two days we will be in Galdir.'

The King led the way along the road as it curved up through the mountains. The road led them through deep valleys and was often carved into mountainsides. Often there were sheer cliffs that descended into deep and craggy valleys below. There was always enough room for at least two wagons side by side.

When evening arrived they set up camp at the base of a valley high in the mountains. The army had prepared for the cold by bringing firewood from the wooded lands below, and before long hundreds of fires lit up the valley in the early evening. Meara, Red, Stella, Baftel, and Cassiel were sitting with Eben around a blazing campfire.

‘Tomorrow we will part ways,’ said Meara. ‘Before long I will return to Ortaria. There will be a great need for the Irilians in these lands. I hope to bring many wizards to assist the people of the Eastern Lands.’

‘Do you think the Zyranians can be stopped?’ asked Red.

‘Yes, I do. I also believe there are still some good Zyranians; however, the High Commander and the Gatekeeper have certainly turned to evil ways. I am convinced they are in the service of the evil Master in the north. I hope to bring about a revolution within the Zyranian Order. Magic was always intended to be used for good. In ancient times men had no magic. The Astarian Lumen instructed men in the ways of Astarian magic to help men defend Veredor. Those first few wizards formed the Fire Order. They built the Tower of Fire in the Old Guardian Mountains; the Fire Order has lived there ever since. From the Fire Order came the Irilians and the Zyranians. The primary intention always remained the same: to use magic for the good of all and to protect Veredor from evil. Therefore I believe the way to overcome the Zyranian Order is to call on the good Zyranians who still hold to the true ways of old.’

‘When Baltac became the High Commander all those who were good were pushed down or out of the Zyranian Order.’ said Baftel. ‘The good wizards who remained have been given the lowliest positions in the order, and there are several others like myself, outcasts.’

‘Soon we will gather the outcasts and help them to retake control of Zyran,’ said Meara.

**

The next morning the army moved onward through the Iron Gate Pass. The road continued to take them higher into the icy mountains. By early afternoon the way opened out onto a wide flat area situated between three enormous snow covered peaks. They had come to the crossroads of the pass. Three roads led away from the area. Each way had ancient stone gateways set into towering walls, but the old gates were long since gone. The flattened area between the gates was about the size of a large farmer’s field, about four hundred yards across. Each gateway opened the way to the three respective countries. West led to Vastoria, north to Scaldonia, and east to Ortaria.

‘This place is called the Edius Plateau,’ said King Ignis as his eyes scanned the empty area. ‘Many wars have been fought between these three gates.’

The army stopped on the plateau as it was the place where Meara and Baftel would be leaving them. The two wizards rode to the front of the lines of soldiers.

‘King Ignis, I will return as quickly as possible,’ said Meara. ‘I wish you the best for the trials that are ahead of you.’

‘I look forward to your return to Ancora,’ said King Ignis warmly. Meara then turned to Eben.

‘Eben, remember what I told you about crossing the bridge. I’m sure you will do amazing things. We will meet again soon. Be brave and strong.’

‘I will,’ said Eben.

She then looked to Cassiel. ‘You are now my apprentice and a wizard of the Irilian Order. Represent us with honour in Ortaria. I will send word to you, and we will meet again soon. Serve King Ignis loyally.’

‘I will be true to the Irilian Order and serve King Ignis,’ said Cassiel, bowing to Meara.

‘Goodbye my friends,’ she said, turning her horse toward the gate that led to Vastoria.

Baftel raised his hand and waved to the company as they departed. ‘I will see you all again,’ said the old wizard. Meara was leading Baftel’s horse behind her own horse. They rode away slowly, and before long they were out of sight.

‘Let’s continue,’ said King Ignis. The army moved away from the Edius Plateau and through the eastern gateway toward Ortaria. As the evening arrived the army came to a wide valley with a waterfall which fell down from the heights above to a fast flowing stream that rushed through the base of the valley. They set up camp again beside the waterfall.

Later in the evening Eben sat by the stream with Red and Stella.

‘It’s going to be different with Meara and Baftel gone,’ said Stella, a hint of sadness in her voice.

‘We will be fine,’ said Red. ‘Meara said she’ll return to Ortaria as soon as possible, and she’ll bring with her more wizards to teach those Zyranians a thing or two.’

‘You’re right, Red. She won’t be gone for long.’

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The following day they came out of the mountains and into the foothills on the Ortarian side of the range. The air was clear, and the sun was shining brightly down on them. From a high hill Eben could see the Kingdom of Ortaria stretching out into the distance. He could see the hills below and emerald green plains that faded into the distant horizon. His eyes were drawn to a hill about three miles away. A mighty fortress was set at the height of the hill. A small town covered the steep hillsides surrounding the tower.

‘Galdir!’ cried King Ignis excitedly.

The general mood in the army was hopeful; Eben could feel the excitement in the air. They continued to move forward toward the fortress, and within two hours they were rounding the last hill.

A group of riders rode out from the fortress to meet them; their leader was wearing bright armour in the manner of a knight, but without a helm. A large moustache dominated his face, and he was mostly bald with hair growing out only above his ears. The other riders were Ortarian cavalrymen.

‘Hail! General Hugo!’ shouted the leading rider. ‘I expect to hear good news. Has Orelin fallen?’

‘Baron Doriak, there is much we must discuss,’ replied General Hugo. Baron Doriak’s posture stiffened; he took a quick breath as he stared in shock at King Ignis. A few moments passed in complete silence.

'I don't see how this can be,' said the Baron, visibly shaking. 'I received word from King Ignis in Ancora only yesterday, and yet, here I see that King Ignis rides with the army. Surely there is something wrong.'

'I am King Ignis. The message you received was from an imposter,' said the King firmly.

'I don't know if this can possibly be true,' said Baron Doriak, his eyes narrowing.

'It is true,' said General Hugo. 'We have been the victims of grave treachery. King Ignis has been imprisoned in the Dungeons of Zyran for three years. An imposter has been ruling our lands. Now that King Ignis has returned we will make all things right in Ortaria.'

'I trust you, General Hugo; however, this news is difficult for me to understand. I must say that I am shocked. Let me lead you to the fortress. We will discuss this matter further in private. Follow me, Your Highness,' said Baron Doriak as he turned his horse.

The army marched onward toward the fortress. The towering fortress was a thin structure made of dark bluestone and looked to be as old as the mountains themselves. The tower was about fifty yards across at the base and about a hundred and fifty yards in height. The fortress only had narrow vertical windows set high above the ground. On top of the fortress three flags of Ortaria blew gently in the wind; the flags depicted the golden lion of Ortaria set against a red background. A defensive wall, standing about forty feet in height, encircled the town at the base of the hill. Several small towers were set at intervals along the wall. The army marched up to the main gate.

King Ignis turned to General Hugo. 'Hugo, tell the men to set up camp here. Allow them to enter the town if they wish, but tell them to be respectful toward the townsfolk. Have your commanders organise supplies for the journey to Ancora. I want to leave at first light.'

'It will be done,' said General Hugo with a curt nod.

The King then turned to Eben. 'Eben, come with me up to the fortress. I'm not yet sure this place is completely safe, so keep your eyes open.' A few moments later General Hugo returned. Baron Doriak led King Ignis and Eben up toward the fortress. General Hugo, Cassiel, Red, and Stella followed after them. The town was depressed and desolate; however, it was in a far better state than Ancora or Lantern Hill. The people stared as they rode by. Eben could hear the surprised shouts as the people of the town saw King Ignis riding with the Baron.

They arrived at the top of the hill. At the base of the fortress was a great iron door set above several stone steps. There were many depictions carved into the surface of the great door. Two guardsmen stood on each side of the entrance. They all dismounted and tied up their horses. A few moments later they walked through the doorway into a hall. Mighty pillars lined the walls, rising about eighty feet to the ceiling above, and the floor was covered with grey slate. On the far side of the hall was an empty bronze throne. To their left and right stone stairways led up to the higher level. Several doorways led off from the main hall on both sides.

'The Hall of Galdir, it has been too many years since I was last here,' said King Ignis as he walked toward the bronze throne.

'I would not sit there if I was you,' said Baron Doriak as the iron door slammed shut. The doors lining the walls burst open, and groups of armed Ortarian guardsmen charged into the hall. About forty guardsmen surrounded the group as

Baron Doriak walked toward the throne and sat down, relaxing back with a smug grin on his face.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ shouted King Ignis, his hand going to the hilt of his sword.

‘The real King Ignis has instructed me, by royal decree, to capture the pretender and to remove General Hugo’s rank. I will take control of the army.’

‘This is madness!’ cried General Hugo. ‘The army will never allow it!’

‘Yes they will. Because I am the highest ranked man in Galdir, now that you, Hugo, have had your rank and nobility taken from you. This pretender will be put in chains and taken back to Ancora. You will be punished for trying to masquerade as the King of Ortaria.’ King Ignis looked across at Eben who was standing at his side.

Cassiel began to lift his hands; Baron Doriak’s snorted and then glared at him. ‘Ah, yes, the young Zyranian. My reports say you are an impatient fool and that your skills are feeble at best. Do you think using your magic now will save you or your friends?’ Several of the guardsmen pointed their spears at Cassiel. Cassiel lowered his hands and looked across at King Ignis for direction. The King turned to Eben.

‘Eben,’ whispered King Ignis. ‘These guardsmen are Ortarians; they don’t deserve to die for following the orders of this mad fool. I saw you slay a hundred muckrons and a wyvern.’

‘What are you plotting?’ shouted the Baron, clenching his fists.

Eben glanced around at the guardsmen and drew his sword. He nodded back to King Ignis confidently. A moment later Eben stepped forward toward Baron Doriak.

‘You cannot take the King,’ said Eben boldly.

‘Do you want to die, boy? Your group is outnumbered at least five to one!’ shouted Baron Doriak, his lips curling in anger. Eben continued walking toward Baron Doriak. ‘Kill him!’ cried the Baron.

The guardsmen charged at Eben. Eben easily parried several attacks and sliced a spear in two as he kicked a guardsman back. He parried and threw another to the ground as he continued walking toward Baron Doriak. More guardsmen charged at him and again he parried and threw a man down as he tripped another up and knocked the man’s sword away. A moment later he held his sword inches from the Baron’s chest. Baron Doriak stared up at Eben in shock.

‘Tell them to drop their weapons!’ said Eben in a low voice.

The Baron shrunk back in fear. He looked to the guardsmen who had been knocked to the ground and the others who were stumbling away; none of them were seriously hurt, but they had all been completely outmatched.

‘Drop your weapons,’ he muttered, trembling in fear as he stared up at Eben. ‘Who are you?’

‘He’s a loyal Ortarian,’ said King Ignis, stepping forward to stand beside Eben. ‘Now get off my throne, Doriak! You will never sit in my place again!’ Doriak stood up and cautiously stepped away from the throne. ‘Hugo, have the town secured. I want to make sure there are no other traps or traitors. Also have the entire fortress searched.’

‘Yes, Sire,’ said General Hugo as he went to the iron door and pushed it open. He took from his belt a horn and blew it three times.

King Ignis then walked over toward the group of guardsmen. ‘You men are Ortarians. You have seen the evil growing in our lands. Your families have faced

hardships. I am King Ignis, rightful ruler of Ortaria. I am a true descendent of the Ecorian Arbiters of the Ecorian Empire. I have been imprisoned for three years by people who plan to make you into slaves. Now I have returned, and I intend to free our lands of evil and bring back freedom and happiness to Ortaria. If you serve the Kingdom of Ortaria you should take up your weapons and fight for what is good and true. I give you this opportunity, an amnesty; pick up your swords and pledge your allegiance to Ortaria.'

They looked bewildered and some of them hung their heads in shame. One of the guardsmen stepped forward.

'We serve you, Your Highness. Baron Doriak told us you were a pretender. We see now that you are the real King of Ortaria.' He then fell on one knee and pledged his allegiance, and the others followed his example.

General Hugo walked over from the iron doors. 'The army is coming up the hill through the town.'

'Good,' said King Ignis, turning back to look at Baron Doriak.

'Doriak, I have always trusted you; now I see my mistake.'

The Baron looked up at King Ignis with a smug grin. 'King Ignis, you have no idea what you are facing. You think that you can retake Ortaria. Only days ago there were dozens of Skatheans here; they knew you were coming, and they have prepared for you. Soon Ortaria will be a land of muckrons.'

The King stared at Baron Doriak. A few moments of harsh silence passed.

'Put him in the dungeon,' commanded King Ignis. 'I remove your rank and nobility, Doriak. You shall answer for your crimes, your dishonour, and your treason.'

'When the army of muckrons arrives here they will free me, and you will learn the hard truth, King Ignis. I look forward to seeing what they do to you when you are captured. The days of the Ecorian Arbiters are at an end. The Master in the north will utterly destroy you and the fools who choose to stand by your side.'

'Take him away!' commanded King Ignis.

Several of the guardsmen took Doriak by his arms and led him away through one of the side doors. Moments later about twenty soldiers from the army burst in through the iron doors, all of them ready for a fight, having just run up the hill at Hugo's call. King Ignis walked over and sat down on the bronze throne.

'We must prepare.'

**

In the upper level of the fortress was a large chamber with a long oak table and a great fireplace. A fire burned brightly and kept the entire room warm. King Ignis sat at the table looking through piles of parchment that had been sent between the Imposter and Baron Doriak. Eben sat across the table whilst Stella and Red sat by the fireplace. General Hugo stood near the King.

'Doriak was working with the Imposter for years,' said King Ignis. 'He knew I was imprisoned in Zyran. They were initially planning to use the army to invade Vastoria; they then planned to march across into Irvania. After I was freed they made a desperate move as they knew the army would be a threat to them if I could regain control. It seems that several nobles have been in on the Zyranian plan. Earl Zalmar and Baron Ardok were working with Baron Doriak. This explains a lot; Baron Ardok had a meeting with me the afternoon I was taken away to the Dungeons of Zyran. I'm sure he infused my wine with a potion that put me to sleep. He must have been working with the Zyranians all along.'

'I'm surprised that Earl Zalmar is a turncoat. I always thought he was a good man,' said General Hugo.

'We will question him on our return to Ancora,' said King Ignis. 'This last note sent to Doriak worries me the most. He was told to attempt to capture us and take control of the army. The note then goes on to say that they are making preparations in the east. They say they will come west and crush the Ortarian army if he fails to take control of it. This would refer to the muckron army Doriak was talking about. Perhaps they plan to meet us on the road.'

'We should send scouts across the plains in the morning,' said Hugo.

'Yes, we should. The fact they think they can match us is what concerns me the most. They're aware of our numbers, and they're confident enough to come west to meet us.'

'Perhaps we should remain in Galdir and wait for them,' suggested Hugo. 'We have walls and the fortress here.'

The King gave it some thought before answering. 'No, Hugo, I want to go east and recapture Ancora as soon as possible. They could starve us out by laying siege to Galdir, and our cavalry would give us no advantage here. We know the cavalry helped us a lot on the battlefield in Scaldonia. It's an advantage I don't want to give up.'

'So we will ride out in the morning as planned?' asked General Hugo.

'Yes, we must. I also want you to choose a loyal knight from the army. I will place him in charge of Galdir.'

'I believe Sir Victar would be the best knight to govern Galdir,' replied General Hugo. It was agreed that Sir Victar would be given control of the fortress.

**

Eben slept that night in one of the upper chambers of the fortress. He woke as the sun rose in the east and cast long beams of light through his chamber window. The town below was already bustling as the army was preparing to march onward. He drew the sword and looked at the light reflecting off the blade. The steel seemed to collect the light. The Sword of Light didn't glow, but it was as if the light of the sun curved toward the blade making it seem slightly brighter than it should be. The Ecorian Sword, an ancient and powerful weapon used to protect Veredor from the powers of darkness. The thought that his mother had left the sword with him still caused many questions to flow through his mind. He knew that only the Fiorians would have the answers he sought.

He walked out of his room and down a stone stairwell to the command chamber. King Ignis was talking with some of his knights and General Hugo.

'We sent eight scouts east at first light. They will check the highway and report back. The army will be ready to move within an hour,' said Sir Rocco, a burly and dark haired knight.

'Well done, Sir Rocco. We will head for Riverside.'

A guardsman came walking into the chamber carrying a small piece of paper. 'This arrived by carrier pigeon several minutes ago.' General Hugo took the note and handed it to King Ignis. He unfolded the note and read it to himself.

'A message from our enemy,' said King Ignis with a disdainful grimace. 'The Imposter has asked us to surrender. He says there is no need for a war and that we should know our place as slaves to the Lord of Veredor.'

King Ignis cast the note in the fire. He then turned to face the company of knights. 'We are men of honour and freed from bondage because of our service to the truth. Chains, prisons, and even death; all these things cannot possibly enslave

those who have freedom in their hearts. We will fight these enslavers, and they will see freedom by our example.'

**

The army marched away from Galdir as the sun rose higher in the eastern sky. Eben rode with the King and Cassiel at the front of the army. Red and Stella were riding further back among the troops. They slowly came out of the foothills and into a land of lush green plains. There were very few trees, but occasionally a huge tree would rise up from the flat land.

'These are the Golden Plains,' said King Ignis. 'These plains are home to several nomadic clans. I expect we will see some shepherds before we cross the plain and reach the western edge of Altus Forest; although with all the Skatheans and bandits around they will have probably moved far away from the main highway.'

They rode on throughout the day. Clouds were rolling across the sky from the east; by the late afternoon a light rain was falling. As the evening arrived they set up camp beside the highway. Red was trying to get a fire started with some wood he had gathered along the roadside.

'Do you need some help with that?' asked Cassiel.

Red looked up and nodded. 'Sure, if you could use your magic it might help.' Cassiel pointed his hand at the wood and a flame shot forth. The fire instantly started blazing.

'You'll have to teach me that trick one day,' said Red with his usual cheeky grin. Cassiel smiled and nodded as he sat down beside Red.

'It would take about five years to teach you. It's not just about making a flame appear; it's about understanding the nature of things around you and learning to bring about a change in that nature. You would have to learn to focus like a wizard.'

'Five years! Ha, I think I'll keep using my flint rocks,' said Red, warming his hands by the fire. 'I know a few simple coin and card tricks; that's as far as I want to take it. After the war is over I want to focus on my swordsmanship.'

'You're already a great swordsman,' said Stella.

Red shook his head at Stella's comment. 'You saw that wyvern knock the sword out of my hand so easily. I don't want that to happen again. I want to learn to fight like you, Eben.'

Eben knew it was the Sword of Light and not so much his skill that was making him a good swordsman. 'This sword gives me a great advantage.'

'No, it's more than the sword; you're brave. I couldn't believe what I was seeing when I saw you jump from your horse and grab the wyvern by the horns; that was truly amazing. Then I saw you fight those guardsmen in Galdir. What you have is a lot more than an old sword.'

Eben nodded and wasn't sure if he agreed. Erako had taught him to use a sword, and he knew he was a proficient swordsman, but his skills with the Sword of Light were far beyond any skill level he had previously possessed.

**

The next day was spent marching eastward. The open grass plains appeared to go on endlessly. There were no other travellers on the highway. Occasionally they caught sight of a stranded cow or goat. That night they set up camp again and slept well.

The following day the army set out early. By the midmorning Eben could see a horseman in the distance galloping along the road in their direction. As the rider came closer it was clear he was injured and struggling to stay on his horse. He was

one of the scouts they had sent out on the first day. Several of the front riders rode out to meet him and helped him down from his horse. King Ignis dismounted and walked over to meet the scout as two soldiers helped him to stand. Eben, General Hugo, and Cassiel walked with the King.

‘Sire... I bring... bad news,’ he said in a stammering voice.

‘What news?’ asked King Ignis.

‘We rode out across the Golden Plains... to the edge of Altus Forest. There is an army of muckrons waiting for us camped just outside the forest... I was the only one to escape. We were firstly set upon by a group of Skatheans, but their warhorses couldn’t keep pace with our scouting horses... Then the enemy wizards rained fire down on us from above... Four of my companions were killed. The four of us who survived the attack rode on as quickly as our horses would gallop. That’s when we were set upon by three wyverns... Only I escaped. My injuries aren’t bad; I think I can still fight.’

‘Three wyverns,’ repeated King Ignis gravely, nervously scratching his beard.

‘Yes, Sire.’

‘And how many muckrons did you see?’

‘Many more than we fought in Scaldonia. It’s difficult to say how many; I think about twenty thousand.’ King Ignis looked disturbed at hearing the number.

‘You have done well and shown much courage. I will reward you when we return to Ancora for your bravery. What is your name?’

‘Tullis,’ answered the scout.

‘Well done, Tullis,’ said King Ignis. He then turned to Eben and Hugo.

‘Three wyverns, Skatheans, and Zyranians; we are in for a fight this time.’

‘We are still two days march to the forest’s edge,’ said General Hugo.

‘You killed a wyvern, Eben; how about three?’

‘I can try.’

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

‘Three wyverns!’ exclaimed Red, shaking his head in disbelief.

‘That’s what the scout said,’ said Eben.

‘You’re going to have quite a task,’ said Red, laughing nervously. They were sitting around the fire with Cassiel and Stella in the early evening.

‘I’ll do my best,’ said Eben.

‘I think King Ignis is very troubled by this news,’ said Cassiel. ‘We beat the small army of muckrons in Scaldonia without too much trouble. This one is much larger, and they have Skatheans and the Zyranian Enforcers with them.’

‘Most of the men are very confident. They think we will win and return home soon,’ said Stella.

‘They are fighting for their homeland, so they will fight bravely,’ said Cassiel.

They slept in their tents and woke early. The feeling of anticipation was growing among the troops. Rumours about the enemy army were circulating throughout the camp; however, the men kept up their confidence as they knew they were fighting for their families and homeland and that there was simply no option to fail.

The army set out about an hour after sunrise and moved quickly. The men seemed restless to get to the battle; they all knew it was the last task before a triumphant return home to Ancora. Eben rode in full armour at the front of the

army with King Ignis. He felt ready for battle. He could feel his fingers tingling from the anticipation.

'It's going to be quite a fight, Eben. They have assembled an army of Skatheans, wyverns, and wizards. We only have soldiers, archers, and cavalry' said King Ignis.

'We will fight bravely. The men are ready,' said Eben.

They continued marching across the plain. By mid-afternoon they could see a distant line of trees of the Altus Forest. Smoke rose in a thick column forming a dark cloud directly ahead. As they marched closer they could see the smoke was rising from an area between two small hills.

'We are not far from them now,' said King Ignis.

Another hour passed as they marched onward. They could see the encampment of the enemy in the distance just outside the forest at the beginning of the plain. General Hugo rode up beside King Ignis and Eben.

'We will use our cavalry again,' said King Ignis as his eyes scanned the distance.

Eben could see the muckron army was marshalling itself into long lines parallel to the forest. It was instantly clear that the enemy army was massive.

'How many muckrons are there, Hugo?' asked the King.

'Twenty thousand at least,' said General Hugo stoically. They could see the dark shapes of three wyverns rising up from the ground into the sky above the muckron horde; two of them were red and one was green. Their scales glimmered in the sunlight.

'What do you think, Hugo?'

'We face a difficult fight,' said General Hugo. The King turned to Eben. 'And you, Eben?'

'We can either fight or retreat, but if we retreat we'll have to fight them again at Galdir anyway.'

'You're right, Eben. We must fight them either way. Hugo, assemble the cavalry. Tell the men to be ready'

General Hugo rode off and began shouting commands to the army. The army began to move into an attack formation. The cavalry moved to the front with the heavy cavalry making up the first line with five lines of light cavalry behind. The infantry formed about ten lines behind the cavalry, and the archers stood not far behind the infantry.

Red and Stella rode up toward Eben. Stella had acquired a knight's shield, which was flat on the top edge and curved downward to a point at the bottom edge. The shield was dark red with a golden lion painted across it. She also carried a new sword at her side instead of the two short swords she had carried into the previous battle. Eben noticed that she had a rope coiled with a grappling hook. Red wore shining new armour and an open-faced helm.

'What's the rope and grappling hook for?' asked Eben.

'For catching wyverns and pulling them out of the sky,' replied Stella with a confident smile.

'Stay near me. This is going to be much bigger than the last battle,' said Eben.

'We won't let you get away from us,' said Stella.

They looked toward the enemy lines and could see two riders crossing the field, one of them carrying a blue banner.

'It's the banner of terms. They want to negotiate,' said General Hugo.

'Eben, follow me. Let's ride to meet them,' said King Ignis. The King rode out across the field. Eben turned Swiftwing about and charged after the King. A

minute later they were nearing the two riders. One was a Skathean, revealed by his deathly pale skin and cold piercing eyes. He carried a long sword and no other weapon, and he wore the dark attire and a black cloak. The other rider was also wearing a long dark cloak. As the King and Eben approached they both recognised the familiar face of Falsig.

King Ignis halted about thirty feet from the two enemy riders, and Eben came up to be beside him. Sweat was dripping from Falsig's swollen and ugly face. His eyes were red and bloodshot.

'What terms do you bring?' asked King Ignis firmly.

'We ask you to surrender!' answered the Skathean, his voice cold and harsh. 'If you surrender you will be disarmed and allowed to return to your homes after taking an oath of allegiance to the Lord of Veredor.'

'We will never surrender. Your evil army will die today unless you leave our lands and return to where you came from! We will never serve your master,' shouted King Ignis, his voice deep and strong.

The Skathean slowly moved his horse forward. 'Is this the son of Elons? Did you know your father, boy?' asked the Skathean with a sly grin. Eben felt his heart drop and was astonished that this Skathean knew his father's name. He was speechless. The Skathean looked back to the King. 'His father couldn't save himself. Do you think the son of Elons will save you, King Ignis?'

'What do you know of my father?' asked Eben. The Skathean simply grinned evilly and said nothing.

'Even if we die today we will die with our honour,' said King Ignis firmly.

The Skathean scoffed and sneered. 'Honour! Your honour is nothing but a lie; it is your greatest mistake,' said the Skathean, sneering at King Ignis with contempt. 'You hope to hide yourself from the real truth: there is always a price on a man's honour. And freedom, we Skatheans are free from the burden of your foolish morality. We possess real freedom.'

King Ignis held his head high and stared directly into the eyes of the Skathean. 'You are completely enslaved by your evil desire; freedom has no place in you.' The King's voice was clear and strong. 'Today you will see our honour in all its glory, and you will see that these good Ortarian men are prepared to sacrifice themselves for the good of all people. What I speak of is real freedom. Freedom is the choice not to be ruled by fear, pain, and desire. Such freedom has no place in you, Skathean. Today you will see real courage, and you will realise that you are mistaken. You have taken the dark path because you believe you will gain something for yourself, but nothing is ever truly gained that isn't given.'

The Skathean backed away and stared at King Ignis in silence. He then looked from the King to Eben.

'I look forward to taking possession of the Sword of Light.' He sneered contemptuously and then turned his horse back toward the enemy lines. Falsig waited a moment before turning his horse and following after the Skathean. King Ignis and Eben then rode back to the waiting company.

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King Ignis and General Hugo were riding at the front of the army. The lines had slowly advanced to be within a thousand yards of the enemy ranks. Eben rode with Red, Cassiel, and Stella. They looked across the plain toward their enemies. The army of muckrons was waiting in the flat area between the two small hills. Smoke rose above the monstrous army, creating a thick dark cloud that hovered low. The

three wyverns circled in the smoky sky as the sound of deep booming drums echoed across the plain.

‘They are using the hills and forest as a natural shield to stop our cavalry flanking them,’ said General Hugo.

‘We will ride directly at them and smash through their front lines like we did in Scaldonia,’ said King Ignis. ‘Eben, I’ve told my knights to challenge the Skatheans. I’m hoping that you, Red, Stella, and Cassiel can focus your strength on the wyverns.’

‘We will,’ said Red proudly. King Ignis nodded and then turned to General Hugo.

‘Hugo, tell the archers to position themselves on the two hills and to shoot at the muckrons below. Tell them to hold those hills.’

King Ignis then looked back at his army. The army was eager to make a move. Hugo rode through the ranks of the men and shouted orders. The King rode over to be beside Eben.

‘This will be a mighty battle. If we are overwhelmed I will blow a horn four times to tell the army to retreat.’

General Hugo returned from giving the orders a moment later. ‘We are ready to advance,’ he said. King Ignis rode in front of his army.

‘Today we are called to rise up and fight for our freedom!’ he cried. ‘We will show our enemies that this is our land! Ortaria is our country! We will live free from oppression, now and always! Let courage and bravery be your weapon! Be strong! Be true! Fight for your family! Fight for all that is good!’ A loud cheer rose from the lines of troops.

The men were ready to advance. King Ignis turned to face the enemy. He drew his sword and pointed the blade at the muckron horde. A moment later the first line of heavy cavalry started moving forward.

Swiftwing leapt after them and the pace rapidly increased. Red, Stella, and Cassiel followed closely behind. The light cavalry followed further back. King Ignis rode ahead with the knights toward the left of the advance. Eben stared ahead at the front line of muckrons. They had crossed five hundred yards. The smoke cloud above them was darkening. Several moments later the cloud above began to swirl.

‘For Ortaria!’ cried King Ignis. The knights brought their horses to a gallop.

The swirling dark cloud began to glow red. Eben could see wizards standing on both the small hills with their hands held high above their heads. The sound of a mighty boom echoed across the plain; a moment later fire began raining down on them from above.

Massive flaming blasts exploded around them. Cavalrymen were being thrown from their horses as the rapid charge continued. Eben felt the heat of an explosion beside him; Swiftwing leapt over burning ground and charged onward through the heat and smoke. Eben drew his sword. The muckron lines were fast approaching. The knights and heavy cavalry crashed through the front lines, and a moment later Eben was among them. He hewed down a muckron as he rode forward into the enemy ranks. Red and Stella were beside him, both of them swinging their swords wildly. Cassiel was throwing bright flames to the left and right as he rode a little back from them. Eben continuously cut and stabbed in all directions. The muckrons scattered before him. Swiftwing pushed forward through the throng of monsters.

Twenty feet away a wyvern swooped down and dragged a knight from his horse, casting him to the ground. Eben turned Swiftwing and saw Red struggling

with a muckron and Stella backing away as two muckrons attacked her. He charged forward and cut down one of the muckrons that was attacking Stella. Meanwhile Red cut down the muckron he was fighting.

'We have to kill that wyvern!' shouted Eben above the calamity of the battle. Cassiel rode over. His hands were glowing brightly.

'You lead the way!' shouted Red.

'Follow me!' cried Eben.

Swiftwing dashed forward through the battlefield toward the red wyvern. The four of them smashed their way through the horde of hideous pig headed muckrons. Directly ahead the wyvern was causing havoc among the Ortarian cavalry. The beast was leaping from rider to rider, ripping them from their horses. Eben charged onward. The wyvern turned itself around and howled. It then jumped at him ferociously. Eben stabbed out with the Sword of Light, but the wyvern parried the blade with the edge of its scaled arm. The beast then pounced forward and knocked Swiftwing over. Eben fell to the ground and rolled away. Stella swung her rope, and the grappling hook caught on the wyvern's horns. The creature howled ferociously and whipped its head, dragging Stella off her horse. She leapt through the air and flipped backwards in a feat of acrobatic mastery. Eben had lost sight of Swiftwing in the heat of the battle.

Eben, now on foot, ran at the fierce beast. He propelled himself at the howling wyvern, stabbing out with the Sword of Light. A flash of red light struck him in the same moment, sending him tumbling back. He fell in the grass and for a moment felt breathless. Zarceler appeared and was standing near the wyvern with two Skatheans beside him. His hands were surrounded by a bright red glow.

Eben quickly regained his feet. An instant later one of the Skatheans charged. He parried the incoming strikes and counterattacked with several cuts and stabs, but the Skathean blocked his counterattacks. The other Skathean came into view.

'Hand over the Sword of Light!' hissed the Skathean, leaping at Eben. Eben deflected the first cut and the second. He then struck back, knocking the Skathean off balance.

He felt the claw of the wyvern grab him around the chest from behind. The beast lifted him off his feet and squeezed him tightly as it beat its wings and flew skyward. Eben turned himself in the wyvern's grip and drove his blade deep into the beast's scaly neck. The wyvern shrieked in pain and released him. The ground approached rapidly, and a moment later Eben slammed into the field, dropping his sword. The dragon simultaneously plummeted into the ground and heaved around for a moment before it lay lifeless. Eben, in a daze, struggled to get up and looked around for his sword. It had fallen a little way off and he scrambled across the field toward his weapon.

The shadow of a Skathean moved between Eben and the Sword of Light. Eben stopped in his tracks. The Skathean grinned as he approached Eben. Stella quietly picked up the Sword of Light from the ground behind the Skathean. The dark knight, catching sight of her, turned and sneered, and an instant later he charged at Stella. Stella struck out with the Sword of Light. The Skathean parried and counterattacked, but Stella was quick to defend and deflected the stab. Again the Skathean struck out, and again she parried. She thrust the Skathean's sword to the ground as she kicked out, knocking him off his feet. The Skathean rolled backward and lay stunned on the muddy ground.

In that moment a great horn sounded, ringing out across the battlefield. It blew again and again, and then a fourth time. Eben looked back and could see the

Ortarian army was retreating and being forced back by the horde of monsters. Clearly the army of men were being completely overwhelmed. The Skathean regained his feet as Stella handed the Sword of Light back to Eben. A moment later Red came into view. The muckrons were crowding the battlefield around them.

‘The army is leaving!’ shouted Red.

The Skathean laughed evilly as he stood up. ‘Your army is finished!’ he said in a heckling voice. ‘Ortaria is ours!’

Eben looked about and could only see muckrons and Skatheans; the main Ortarian lines had fallen back about fifty yards and were being pursued by thousands of muckrons. Stella and Red looked at Eben, worry etched into their faces. They were trapped with enemies all around. Eben could see the situation was becoming hopeless as packs of muckrons approached from all sides.

A moment later a great howl echoed out across the battlefield and every eye turned to see its origin. A massive black wolf stood on top of the hill to the north.

‘Kiarn!’ shouted Eben, feeling his heart leap in his chest.

They all watched as hundreds of wolves, bears, jackals, and other creatures emerged from the edge of the forest, flanking the muckron army. The wild animals charged into the monstrous horde. The Skathean’s face became deathly pale as he stared at the army of forest creatures tearing into the muckron ranks. The evil knight dashed away at great speed toward the rear of the battlefield and was gone from sight moments later.

The horn sounded again, ringing out just once, which was the call to attack. The Ortarians cried out as they pressed forward against the lines of muckrons.

Cassiel rode over a moment later. ‘The creatures of Altus; they’ve come to save us!’ he shouted as he looked across the battlefield in wonder.

‘Let’s help them!’ cried Eben, rushing forward with his friends following closely.

The muckrons howled in horror, and in a short time the tide of the battle had turned. The muckron army was being pushed toward the southern side of the battlefield. The wolves and bears attacked them with savage ferocity, and the Ortarians grew in confidence at seeing the monsters in retreat and knowing they had such powerful allies fighting with them.

Eben fought his way through the horde. He looked ahead and could see a giant bear pick up a muckron and cast it at another pig headed monster. Packs of wolves were circling the muckrons and forcing them to back away toward the southern side of the battlefield. To his right Stella and Red were pursuing a small group of muckrons that were trying to escape to the south of the battlefield.

Eben caught sight of Zarceler. The evil wizard was blasting the wild animals and Ortarian soldiers with his magic. Eben rushed toward Zarceler.

‘Have you come for more pain?’ screamed Zarceler, lifting his glowing hands. A bright beam of red light shot across the distance at Eben. Eben held his sword up. The energetic blast of light was deflected and struck the ground. Zarceler sneered and again raised his hands and flames burst forth through the air. Again Eben used the Sword of Light to shield himself from the fire. Eben advanced as Zarceler turned and started to run. Moments later Eben was at his heels. Zarceler fell to the ground and looked up at Eben with terror in his eyes. Eben raised his sword and was ready to strike.

Zarceler cowered on the ground, covering his face with his hands. ‘No! Don’t!’ he cried, begging for his life.

Eben delayed for a moment. 'You deserve to die!'

Cassiel appeared beside Eben a moment later. They looked down at Zarceler. 'Let me live. I can change,' begged Zarceler. 'I was following orders. I'm not evil. It's the Master, not me...'

Cassiel considered the situation for a moment. 'We can tie his hands behind his back; his magic would be much reduced,' said Cassiel. 'We could take him as a prisoner back to Ancora.'

'Stand up!' said Eben firmly, pointing his sword at Zarceler. The wizard stood up.

'Hands behind your back!' ordered Cassiel. Zarceler complied. Cassiel went to tie his hands. Suddenly Zarceler turned and grabbed Cassiel. He held a small knife up against Cassiel's throat.

'Drop your sword or Cassiel dies!' hissed Zarceler.

Cassiel stood completely still. He looked across at Eben and shook his head. Eben stared into Zarceler's mad eyes and could see he would surely kill Cassiel.

'Drop it!' screamed Zarceler wrathfully.

Eben reluctantly dropped his sword. Zarceler grinned as he looked down at the sword on the ground.

'Now step back!' cried Zarceler. Eben took several steps back from the wizard. Zarceler threw Cassiel aside and then picked up the sword. 'Now the Sword of Light is mine!' he said, cruel glee filling his eyes.

A great cluster of Ortarian troops were nearing them as the muckrons were in full retreat and were rushing up and over the slopes of the southern hill. Zarceler laughed like a madman and waved his hand; a shockwave of glowing red energy struck Eben. Eben felt the heavy impact as he flew back several feet and crashed into the ground. He was dazed and shaken and looked up at Zarceler. The wizard slowly walked toward him and was grinning evilly. He cast another red burst of painful energy at Eben. Eben felt his body cramp and shake. He could hardly take a breath. Cassiel began to get up. Zarceler knocked him back down again with a spell and smirked.

'I knew it would come to this. Now you will both die for causing this foolish revolt,' said Zarceler. He lifted his hands once again.

Eben caught the rapid movement of something dark out of the corner of his eye. A moment later Kiarn leapt from left field. The dark shape of the wolf throttled the wizard. The Sword of Light fell from the Zarceler's hand as he cried out in horror. In an instant Kiarn's mighty jaws ended the life of the evil wizard. Zarceler's body lay still and lifeless. Kiarn's golden eyes glanced across at Eben for a moment. An instant later the wolf ran off after the retreating muckron army.

Eben pulled himself up off the ground. His body was aching all over. He walked over to Cassiel and helped him to stand up. He then picked up the Sword of Light, and together they looked southward at the fleeing muckrons.

'It is done,' said Cassiel.

Red and Stella walked over and were completely exhausted. The four friends hugged and embraced.

**

The army set up camp beside the forest. Eben sat in a command tent with King Ignis, Red, Stella, Cassiel, several knights, and field commanders. King Ignis had his face bandaged. He looked very weary.

'I am sad to say that we lost many good men. Brave General Hugo also died in the battle,' said King Ignis. Eben felt the sadness in the room at the news of the

death of General Hugo ‘We have completely destroyed the muckron army. The archers on the southern hill stopped most of them from escaping; only a few muckrons breached their lines. Two of the wyverns escaped, and another was found dead on the battlefield. We have also captured several Zyranians. General Hugo and all the men who died here today will be remembered forever. We will ride to Ancora and free our people from tyranny. Today we have brought light back to Ortaria. We will take that light to every corner of our land.’

They heard the strength in his voice. There was a sense of hope growing in their hearts.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

They rode eastward over the days that followed and arrived at the gates of Ancora. The day was bright and sunny and spring flowers covered the fields surrounding the city. The city gates were open and King Ignis led the army through the western gate. Word had already reached Ancora of the victory in the west over the muckrons, Skatheans, and Zyranians.

The Imposter had fled Ancora before the arrival of the army. The story of the King’s imprisonment in the Dungeons of Zyran was known by all, and the people were overjoyed at the homecoming of their true king. The people shouted and cheered as King Ignis led the army through the town toward the palace. A great crowd had gathered in the large town square outside the palace; celebrations and cries of joy could be heard in all directions. The shroud of gloom had completely left the city and a sense of joy permeated Ancora.

Eben rode Swiftwing along beside King Ignis. Red, Stella, and Cassiel followed closely behind. The King led them through the crowd to the steps of his palace. A group of Ortarian guardsmen were waiting at the palace gate. They had been sent ahead to secure the city. King Ignis dismounted as the crowds continued cheering. He walked up the steps and turned to face the crowds of people and his army. The multitude became silent and looked to the King.

‘Today we have brought justice and peace back to Ancora. No longer will you live under an evil shadow. Today every Ortarian is free. We will remember every man who died fighting for our freedom. We will remember every sacrifice that was given. They fought for the good of all Ortarians and all people everywhere. Together we will rebuild Ortaria. Today peace has returned to our land!’

With this the people cheered. King Ignis bowed to his people before turning and walking through his palace gate. Eben, Red, Stella, and Cassiel followed the King into the palace.

**

‘Sir Redding,’ said Red, a wide smile crossing his face. ‘Can you believe it?’

Eben was happy for his friend. They were sitting in a beautiful chamber in the palace with large arched windows, marble floors, and a great oak table. The large chamber was adorned with all manner of royal luxury. There were paintings on the walls, crystal chandeliers, and marble pillars that rose up to a white ceiling above. The room was the royal guest chamber.

‘And you, Eben; Champion of Ortaria,’ said Red. Eben nodded and smiled across at Red. King Ignis had declared that Eben was the Champion of Ortaria. King Ignis had also declared that he would grant Eben any wish, if it was in his power to grant. Eben had told him that he only really wanted to go west to find his parents,

and the King had said he would do whatever he could to help Eben complete his quest.

Red looked across at Stella with a smile. 'I like the sound of Lady Stella.' Stella smiled happily. 'We have something to announce,' added Red cheerfully. Eben could easily guess what it was. 'We're going to be married.'

**

Two weeks later Eben stood beside Red in the great hall of the royal palace of Ancora. Red shuffled nervously. He was clothed in fine linen and had his hair combed back and his beard had been neatly styled. An Ortarian guard of honour created two lines, and a crowd of notable citizens of Ancora had gathered for the wedding. King Ignis sat on his golden throne and watched the proceedings. Cassiel, Max, and some of the other soldiers who they had come to know stood a little way away. Eben could also see the old librarian in the audience. He had a great big smile on his face.

Trumpets sounded and a moment later Stella entered the great hall through the massive entrance doorway. Sweet music filled the great hall. She walked toward them across the marble floor in a long flowing white dress. She looked ever so beautiful, and everyone in the hall stared at her, amazed by her loveliness.

'She's so incredible,' whispered Red in awe of his bride. She was being followed by two bridesmaids; both had been performers in the circus. She slowly approached Red, looking into his eyes with immense happiness.

King Ignis stood up and stepped down toward them. He took from a small table two candles and handed one to Red and the other to Stella. It was the custom of marriage in Veredor that two candles should be lit from a single flame and that both the bride and groom would then declare their love and commitment to each other in their own words, both swearing an oath to always be true.

A candle stood on a stand and burned brightly. Stella took her candle and lit it from the larger candle, and Red followed her example, and they stood together holding their candles. It was also the custom in Veredor that the man should declare his love first. Red looked to Stella with great love and tenderness.

'Stella, from this day onward I will be your husband. I promise to always be true to you, and I will always love you. I will always stand by your side, defend your honour, and protect you. You are and will forever be my one true love.'

Stella smiled at Red lovingly. 'Red, my love; I will be your wife. I will love you truly and forever. I will honour you and be true to you always. I will hold you in my heart and together we shall build our life together.'

They embraced and kissed and then turned to the people who all applauded and cheered. King Ignis then walked over and stood beside them. 'I present to you, Sir Redding and Lady Stella, husband and wife,' he announced. The people clapped and cheered again. Red and Stella kissed again and held each other close in a joyful embrace.

**

For two weeks the four friends had been staying in the palace. Eben was sitting in the royal guest chamber reading a book about the history of Ortaria and the other Eastern Lands of Veredor. Cassiel entered the room and was holding a letter in his hand. He handed the letter to Eben.

'This message came from Meara this morning.'

Dear Cassiel and Eben,

I write to you from Dravania. I have attended a meeting with the Irilian High Council and told them of the troubles in Ortaria. I hope this message reaches you in time. I write to inform you that a council will be held in the Irvarian city of Faircastle on the first day of summer. This council is being arranged by King Edric of Irvaria at the request of the last remaining Fiorian Knights. They have requested representatives from all of the magic orders, the major orders of knights, and the southern monarchs of Veredor.

I will be travelling to Irvaria to be the Irilian representative. I hope to meet you there.

Your friend,

Meara of the Irilian Order.

‘We must go,’ said Eben, feeling excited that the Fiorians would be at the council.

‘We will go together,’ said Cassiel. ‘We should leave soon because summer is not far off.’

‘We can head for the Iron Gate Pass and cross into Vastoria,’ suggested Eben.

‘I will start to prepare for the journey today,’ said Cassiel. Eben could feel they were on the verge of a new adventure.

**

Later in the day Eben was packing his backpack and making preparations to leave Ancora. Red and Stella entered his chamber without knocking.

‘There is no way you and Cassiel are going to Irvaria without us,’ declared Red.

‘Wouldn’t you rather stay in Ancora?’

‘No way,’ said Stella firmly. ‘We’re going west with you.’

Eben felt happy that his friends were so keen to join him on the journey west. ‘It will be a long and dangerous adventure.’

Red and Stella both smiled.

TO BE CONTINUED...

The Journey West

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