

# Old Man's Glass

Fires at the edge of oblivion Part 1

A Novella

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## Chapter 1

The gentle breeze picked up the leaves on the trees and made the canopy above sway quietly back and forth. The first slivers of sun came piercing through the gaps as the leaves fluttered, back and forth over and over. The wind was coming from the west, across the sea and in to the forest, bringing with it a bitter chill. A sudden gust came and the leaves began dance, creating a loud rustle. The dead foliage on the forest floor whipped up and was thrown across the ground, and just as suddenly as it came, the wind was gone, leaving once again the soft breeze.

As the wind died down, the ranger took a long deep breath and made a silent step forward, being careful not to tread on and twigs that might give away his location. He was crouched low to the ground, making no sound at all - at least not audible to the human ear. Another gust came and the noise it created allowed him to move quickly and take cover behind a large tree trunk. He peered around it to get a look at what

stood before him, to make sure it hadn't made him. All was well, he was still concealed behind his tree. His prey was facing away from the rangers direction, looking east through the trees, the ranger had made sure he was upwind so his scent would not be a problem. That is not to say the ranger had a distinct smell - no more than any other man anyways, but it afforded him the comfort of only needing to worry about staying out of sight and keeping as quiet as could be when one is moving through a forest. The ground on which the ranger stood was unfortunately going to be his biggest hindrance. He has the skill to breathe and move silently but he could not account for the dead branches and leaves that had fallen from the trees in the early weeks of autumn. He could only do his best to wait for a strong gust to cover the sound of his movement, but the wind was strangely calm today making his job more of an effort.

He was getting close now, moving slowly and with great care, his prey was almost within reach when out of nowhere there was a loud crack above him, and the rustling of leaves. He looked up to see a large branch falling to the ground. He jumped up out of the way to avoid being hit by it and it came crashing down with a deep thud.

He turned back to see his prey, but it was gone. Without thinking he ran after it, making quick glances at the ground to make sure he was still on its trail. He ran hard and fast

dodging tress and jumping over the small shrubs that grew from the forest floor, until he caught glimpse of what he pursued. It was slowing and it had not heard the ranger yet. He dropped low to the ground once again to make himself harder to spot. This was it, this was the moment, if he failed now it would be all over. To his left he could see a small outcrop of rocks about three feet tall. Swiftly he moved toward them, his luck was with him, the outcrop stretched for about twenty five feet and once he had slowly crept along the length of the rocks, he reached down for a long dagger that hung from his belt. Gripping the smooth, ornately carved wooden handle tightly in his right hand he drew it slowly from its sheath and positioned himself for the strike. No sooner was the blade clear, he leapt forward violently letting out a shriek as he did so. The prey was stunned by this but no sooner could it think about running, the ranger was on top of it. He buried the knife deep into its neck, letting the blood spill out on to his hand and run down his arm. The beast let out its last breath and its legs gave way underneath. The ranger supported its weight as best he could and assisted the carcass to the ground. He pulled the knife from its neck and a stream blood followed it, seeping through the wound and pooling in the leaves beneath. He pulled a rough piece of cloth from his belt and ran it down the length of the blade cleaning off the beast's blood before returning the knife to its sheath above his right hip.

As he stood above the body, he inspected it quickly, "a good strong stag" he said to himself, "this will fetch a nice price in town...and a fine stew it will make too". He reached into a small pouch on the back of his belt and pulled out two loops of twine. Kneeling beside the stag he bound both of its legs together and dragged it behind the rocks to conceal it from anyone who may pass by. Common courtesy should ensure that no one would take the beast even if anyone was to happen by it. They would see that its legs had already been bound and know that it belongs to someone who had probably gone to fetch a means of transporting it. This is exactly what the ranger, Haldor was doing. He made sure the stag was well hidden as one can never be too careful and then set about following his own trail back to his horse which had a small cart in tow. It took Haldor a good ten minutes to work his way back to the horse which stood just as he left her. As Haldor appeared in the horses view, the mare gave a small grunt and dipped her head slightly as if to greet him. He approached and patted her neck, "Good girl" he said softly as he clambered up in to the saddle. He urged the horse forward and slowly worked his way back down to where the stag lay, following the trail he left behind.

Being one of the Rangers of Altamar, Haldor was a skilled huntsman, with tracking capabilities far and beyond anyone outside of the order. Their skill was such that they could

track a man a day ahead of them in a fierce blizzard. Just by looking down from atop the mare he could distinguish exactly which foot he had placed were and how softly he had tread. It took him another ten minutes to reach the rocks where he had hidden the stag. He dismounted and tied the reins around a branch to stop the horse from wandering as he loaded the cart.

A further twenty minutes passed and the stag was loaded and secured ready for transport. Untying the reins Haldor stepped up in to the saddle again and turned the horse around to the south. "let's go and check the snares girl" he said and the horse started to walk, pulling the cart along with them.

Haldor had been a ranger since he was old enough to make the trip to the camps in the far north. When he was a young boy, he had seen rangers coming and going through town, trading wares with the merchants and hearing tales of how they fought off attacks from bandits that had come down from the mountains in the west. He knew then that he wanted to be a ranger, and having no parents to care for him, no one would miss him if he left town in the middle of the night. At the age of thirteen, he began his long journey through the Andrien forest, keeping to the old north road as best he could. After two weeks of travel and many cold night spent shivering at the feet of the great oaks in the northern forests, the first watch tower came into view. Approaching it, he was ordered to stop. Two men wearing ark emerald cloaks approached him from

the base of the tower, he knew from their garb who they were. He had found the rangers. They took him inside, fed and watered him and gave him a bed for the night. The next morning one of them escorted him the remaining few miles to the camps where he would start his new life.

\* \* \*

Haldor had been riding south for more than three hours now and the sun was high up in the sky, almost at its peak. Autumn was beginning to take hold and sun was no longer giving the same heat as it had just a few weeks before. He found himself feeling cold, *should have brought my cloak*. The trees in this part of the forest where well spread out, they offered very little cover to someone stalking prey, but the ground was much softer here. There was not enough strength in it to support the larger trees that one can find in the far north, but it made excellent habitat for small mammals. Haldor had a number of snares set up all over this part of the forest and he would usually find at least two or three rabbit caught whenever he came by. He spotted two of his snares ahead of him and quickly stepped down from the saddle, leaving the mare to graze as she pleased. She was a loyal friend to Haldor and they had been together for many years. He could leave her almost anywhere and return hours later to find that she had moved no more than a few metres, usually toward a small patch of grass that she would almost certainly be feeding on.

Approaching the snares, he made out the shape of a rabbit lying on the foliage. Turning to the other trap, he saw another rabbit. Luck certainly was with him today. He took the rabbits out of the snared and hurriedly set them up again, ready for the next passing creature. He wandered off through the forest to check for more and to his surprise he had caught a further two which he tied together with more of the twine from his belt and slung the four critters over his shoulder, turning back and returning to his horse. As he came near, she looked around, acknowledging him and went back to a patch of flowers she was nibbling on. Haldor tossed the rabbits onto the cart and jumped up on to the mare. From here they turned west and headed for home.

It was several hours before Haldor caught the faint whiff of smoke drifting through the trees. *The fire is still burning, a least it will be warm when we get back,* he thought to himself. As they rode on, the smell got stronger and Haldor began to think of the warm cabin and the smell of the rabbits cooking over the fire. He had only eaten some berries that he found along the way home and his stomach was now grumbling almost at a constant. A few more minutes ride and the trees broke away, opening in to a small clearing. Haldor's hut stood to at the far side with gentle wisps of grey smoke emanating from the stone chimney. Before the hut there was a chopping block, with a long axe buried in its top, piles of cut logs

all around it. To the left side of his home there was a small fenced area which the mare could wander around in when they were not out hunting and attached to the rear of the house was a small wooden stable that provided the horse with shelter through the night. It was a peaceful little plot that Haldor inhabited. It was once a simple lodge that wandering rangers would use for a night or two at a time while they were out on patrol through the forest. After almost three decades spent living in the ranger camps however, Haldor decided to move south and become one of the protectors of the forest. He found the hut and decided to move in, building the stable and paddock himself. He has lived here now for almost five years, protecting the people of Altamar and living a happy life as their guardian.

He is well respected in the surrounding towns, especially Fogdell, where he does most of his trading and has several good friends. He would visit there once every other week, to trade for supplies and update the mayor with any news. He also has a son there who he had fathered with a woman he had once been close to. They spent many years in each other's love, seeing one another only whenever Haldor was passing through on patrol. They would spend two or three days in the town and then carry on their journey, not returning for months at a time. His lover, Anna, announced to him one day, five years ago, that she was with child and he was to be a father.

Unfortunately, it was not to be a time of rejoice. Anna died during child birth, and unable to look after the boy, Haldor's close friend, a carpenter from the village agreed to raise the child with his wife. Haldor took his decision to leave the camps and move south to be close to the boy, so he could see him frequently and so he could protect him.

\* \* \*

Haldor stopped the horse in front of the hut and dismounted. He untied the ropes from the rear of the saddle and lowered the front of the cart to rest it gently on the ground. He unlatched the gate to the paddock and the mare wandered through, as the gate fell shut behind her. Haldor wheeled the cart close to the door and propped up the front and rear with wooden supports to keep it steady, giving him a stable platform to butcher the stag.

As the sun began to dip behind the mountains in the west, Haldor scrubbed down the bed of the cart to remove what blood he could get off it. Hung from the canopy above him was the stag's fur and several haunches of meat ready for packing to take to Fogdell the next day for trade. From inside the lodge he could smell the freshly caught rabbits roasting on the spit, making his stomach growl. He put down the cloth and carried the meat inside, placing them on a large wooden table against the far wall. Reaching over to the spit, he checked on

the rabbits before sitting down in front of the fire, ready for his well-earned supper.

## Chapter 2

It was late, the sun had set several hours ago and Haldor sat before the fire puffing gently on his pipe, the clouds of tobacco smoke filling the roof space above him. He thought about the journey to Fogdell and the coming of the winter freeze. Being so close to the mountains, the snows often came early to the Andarien forest, bringing several months of bitter cold. This is the one thing the ranger is not so fond of, living in a cabin deep in the woods. He kept a fire going all hours though and his little home warms quickly once the flames start to roar.

As his pipe burned down to the last flakes in the bottom of the bowl, he took the stem in his hand and with a quick flick of the wrist, he propelled the ashes into the fire pit before him and returned the pipe to its small wooden stand on the mantle. Reaching into the woodpile that sat next to the pit, Haldor took out three large logs and tossed them into the

fire, covering the hot coals so the wood would burn slowly through the night. With any luck the embers would still be alight when he awoke in the morning.

Walking past the chair he stumbled over his boots, but managed to stay upright. *I need some sleep, got a long journey ahead of me tomorrow*, he thought as he untied his tunic and pulled it over his head. He pulled back the fur blanket and sheets from his bed and lay on the soft mattress. He began to make a mental list of the things he would need when he hit town. Eventually his mind began to drift and it wasn't long before sleep took him.

\* \* \* \*

The first glint of light began to shine through the window next to Haldor's bed, catching him right in the eyes. He was dreaming at that point. The heat of the sun on his skin transformed the experience and he dreamt of being trapped and burning. He shook himself awake and lay with eyes wide open, suddenly realising what had happened. After trying to dodge the light and get a few more minutes sleep, he decided to get up. He thought about getting out of bed and adjusting the curtains, but thought it best to make a start at packing up for the journey ahead.

Pulling a black iron poker from a hook on the wall next to the fire, he poked the remaining embers and was delighted

to see there were still some orange glints shining up through the ashes. He was still only wearing his under garments and the morning air gave him a chill. Lifting some logs out of the way from the bottom of the pile he gathered up a little bundle of dried bark and chippings and put them softly atop the embers. He leaned in and blew onto the coals. The bark caught light and the fire was burning once more. Adding some small logs to the flame, he hung a cast iron pot full of water over the pit to boil.

His bed was on the opposite side of the cabin to the fire. It would be a good few minutes before any heat made it this far, so he swung open a small cupboard next to the bed and pulled out a bundle of fresh clothes. He slipped on a clean undershirt and pulled on a fresh pair of trousers and a tunic.

At the foot of the bed lay an oak chest with its clasp undone. He wondered over, about to open it, but his eyes caught sight of steam rising from the pot over the fire. He raced over to the counter where there were several cupboards, each hiding spices and a variety of foods. From one, he pulled a jar of tea leaves and set about tipping some into a painted clay mug. The water had begun to bubble quite violently so he dashed over and unhooked it, setting it down on the stone side of the fire pit. Haldor poured a mug full onto his tea leaves and sat himself down in the chair to get warm.

He sat for a good ten minutes, sipping his tea and looking at the flames dancing in the pit. As he got to the bottom of the mug he set aside and rose from his chair, heading back to the chest at the foot of the bed. The ranger leaned down and lifted the worn lid with a soft creak. Inside lay his equipment; bracers, belt, chest piece and most importantly his bow and his sword.

He removed the bracers and belt delicately and strapped them on. The bracers were hard leather, given to him after his training as a ranger. They bore the rangers' oaken crest but were worn in places, making it hard to see the embossed work.

His belt, was a heavy piece, his knives still hung from it along with two full pouches of essential gear and a whetstone. Haldor lifted the sword from the chest and shut the lid, laying it down on the end of the bed along with belt. From the back of the cabin door he removed his leather overcoat which he put in before clipping on his belt. He was almost ready to leave, *just the horse to saddle and fix up the cart.*

In the far back corner of the hut was a small wooden door that led into the attached stable. It was only small, large enough to accommodate two horse should he need to, but he felt Emryn liked her space and wouldn't so much appreciate sharing it.

The horse's saddle was slung over a wooden divider. He grabbed it and threw it over the horse who was busy eating a hay bale. Haldor swung open the stable door and called her put into the yard. Begrudgingly she walked over to him, a fistful of hay hanging out of one side of her mouth as she chewed on it.

The cart was already loaded with deer and rabbit, so all he had to do was wheel it over and strap it to Emryn. She wasn't fond of having the cart fixed to her so it usually took several attempts, each time having to chase her a little further across the yard. This time, since it was already loaded, he decided he didn't fancy lugging it around for ten minutes, so he tied off the reins to a fence post and set to it.

Returning to the hut, he glanced around for other things he may need, He had already prepared his saddle bags with extra cloths and food, so he took them from the back of one of the chairs were he had left it, and threw it over his shoulder.

From the end of the bed he picked up the sword and headed back outside. Emryn had spotted some tasty looking flowers on the other side of the fence and was trying to get at them. The

reins were holding her back but the fence post began to creak and sway.

"Hey, leave them alone you gannet. You'll have the fence down in a minute".

Emryn raised her head and nickered as if in acknowledgement. Haldor approached and threw the bags over the saddle, adjusting them so they were balanced right. The sword he attached to the saddle also, so it would be within easy should anything happen.

Returning for one last time, he noticed his pipe sitting on the mantle. *Almost forgot you,* he thought to himself, *can't very well smoke tobacco without a pipe now can I.*

He tucked it into his belt and made for the door grabbing his emerald cloak off the hook as he pulled it shut. One of the pouches on his belt housed a small bunch of keys, one of which he thrust into the lock and bolted it shut with dull clink.

Stepping up into the saddle he pulled the pipe from his belt and stuffed it into the top of the saddle bag before he forgot.

Haldor pulled the reins free of the fence and gave Emryn a soft kick. She turned and began walking toward the worn path heading off into the forest. Haldor looked back to his home, seeing a faint wisp of smoke rise elegantly from the stone

chimney. He smiled to himself, he was proud of his little hut and what he had made out of what was an all but abandoned shack. His journey ahead of him would be long. Longer than he anticipated and although he didn't know it. That would be the last time the ranger ever saw his home.

## Chapter 3

The journey to Fogdell was a two day ride in good weather, and with any luck, the snows would hold off for a few more weeks. Without the cart, Haldor could gallop there in one day but there was no need to rush. The forest seemed empty as he rode through. He saw but one rabbit, hopping between holes and a pair of thrushes dancing from branch to branch looking for food. It wasn't until well after midday that he saw anything of worth - a stag foraging amongst the trees ahead of him. It was young but still big and blissfully unaware of Haldor's presence. He thought about taking it down but concluded that it would take too long to skin and he had no spare cloth to cover the meat to stop the flies getting at it.

He carried on down the path and it wasn't for another hundred feet or more that the stag noticed him and fled.

The sun was much warmer today and the thin canopy above allowed a good amount of heat through. Maybe the snows wouldn't be early this year after all. Taking the pipe from

his belt, he plunged an arm into one of the saddle bags, bringing out a small pouch filled to bursting with tobacco. He took a clump in between his fingers and stuffed in down into the pipe, pressing gently with his thumb so as not to pack it too tightly. From one of the pouches on his belt came a match which he struck on the saddle and hovered above the bowl of the pipe. Drawing lightly on the mouth piece the flame was sucked into the bowl and clouds of smoke began billowing from Haldor's mouth. He sat back in the saddle to enjoy his smoke and continued on towards his destination.

Something caught his eye to the north, as if something was moving through the forest. Haldor turned his head swiftly to see what it was, but he could see nothing. *Probably just that stag.* Turning back around, he gave Emryn a soft pat on the neck and went back to enjoying his pipe.

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As the late afternoon approached, the sun was hanging low in the sky, snatching away the daylight like a beggar taking your coin. Haldor looked around for a place to make camp for the night and spotted a hollow to the south side of the path. It was sheltered from the wind and would provide good cover for the two of them through the night. He led the mare off the track and brought her to a stop in the depression.

Dismounting the horse, he left her to graze at her own leisure and went off to scout the surrounding area, making sure there was nothing that could pose a threat. Some years ago he experienced first-hand the consequences of not checking the area. Whilst on a patrol through the northern forest, Haldor and two other rangers found what they thought was a safe spot to make camp for the night. What they soon found was that there was a wolf den not 100 metres from them hidden behind a small rise. One of their number were dragged away in the night. The body never found, save for a torn boot.

It is rare to find wolves so far south in this part of the continent, especially before the snows. West of the Etholas Mountains however, the wolves have grown to like the warmer climate and can be found north or south.

After a thorough check, Haldor decided the area was clear and set about gathering some wood for a fire. Emryn was chewing her way through another flower patch.

Before long, there was a fire going, complete with spit and kettle already filled ready for a mug of tea. Whilst it boiled Haldor skinned one of the rabbits and secured it to an iron rod which he took from the cart. Emryn was now working her way through a small shrub, hardly pausing for breath. Haldor looked up at her, *It's a surprise there is a forest left with all you eat you pig.*

Haldor sat late into the night, feasting on roasted rabbit and smoking his pipe, remembering some of the adventures he had whilst out on patrol for months at a time. He sat giggling to himself, occasionally coughing and choking on the tobacco smoke. He reached the bottom of the bowl and tipped the ashes into the fire. Reaching around he grabbed the bedroll from behind him and lay it out on the ground next to the fire. Glancing at Emryn, she was still eating. He didn't bother to tie her to a tree, he trusted her enough to not wander too far. Removing his belt and overcoat, he lay down on the bedroll and drifted away.

\* \* \*

Haldor opened his eyes just slightly, it was still dark. He thought nothing more and closed them. This time he heard the unmistakable sound of twigs snapping. *What's that horse up to?* Looking past the fire, he could see the mare a good 30 metres away. Suddenly his heart pounded, like it was about to burst. *Stay calm and see what unfolds. If they think im asleep i can take the upper hand.*

The sounds began again, twigs and leaves being disturbed. Listening intently, he could distinguish between the footfalls of two beings, although he hadn't decided what it was yet. The footsteps came again. *Humans! Not enough steps for a four legged creature, not at the rate it is moving.* Listening again

he guessed that they were about 10 feet away, making ready to kill him as he slept.

Haldor always kept his knives under his pillow and fortunately when he awoke, he already had a hand under it. Moving his fingers delicately, he wrapped a hand around the fighting blade and drew it ever so gently from the sheath. As the humans came closer he prepared to take action.

The footsteps where upon him now, one person either side of the bed roll. One of the humans he could hear, was drawing a blade and bending down to check if he was awake. As quiet as these humans tried to be, Haldor could still hear them breathing.

He opened his eyes and saw a man in front of him. Bald and with a dagger in hand, he jumped in shock of seeing Haldors eyes open and stare at him. Before they had chance to react, Haldor arced his arm around, knife still gripped in his palm and cut clean through the bald man's throat, sending a crimson shower of warm blood from the man's neck which coated Haldor's face and clothes.

In the same motion, he used the momentum of his arm to pull himself to his feet and turn to defend himself against the second attacker.

The other man was much younger, maybe in his late twenties. He wore dark clothes, and a black cloak. They looked

well worn and ripped in places, signature of a bandit. The man stood with a sword drawn, ready to strike. His stance was telling of his skill, he stood slightly crouched, with one arm out from his side and the other holding the sword, extended out towards Haldor. It may be good enough to scare common townsfolk into giving up their goods, but it would never fool someone as skilled as Haldor.

The second man made quick glances as if he was looking for an escape but it was obvious he realised it was pointless to run. Finding a ranger asleep in the woods, there are only two ways out. Either you kill him or he kills you.

The bandit made some quick stabs which Haldor parried with ease. Now knowing the man's knowledge of sword fighting, from the feeble attempts he just made, Haldor now knew the man posed little challenge to him.

The bandit tried a few more weak strikes, each time his blade being met with Haldor's. When the next strike came, Haldor put more weight behind his counter. Throwing the man's sword out from his side, breaking his defence. Haldor jumped forward before the man could bring his blade back down and sunk his knife deep in the bandit's gut. The man let out a cry of pain and tried to lash out at Haldor with his sword.

The ranger pulled the knife from the man's gut, swung it around to his right, catching the bandit's left wrist, forcing

him to drop the sword and let out another sharp cry. The bandit dropped to his knees, covering the wound in his gut with his right hand. Haldor took a step back, holding his dagger to the mans throat.

"you know the rules, bandit"

"please sir, it wasn't my idea, I didn't want to disturb you, I told him it would end badly. I could feel it" the bandit said almost breathless as he kneeled before the ranger. "I didn't want this. I told him I didn't want any part in it", he carried on, his voice weakening as the life drained away from him.

"Its pointless begging for mercy boy, you wont live another hour with that wound".

The bandit looked up at Haldor, his eyes wet with his sorrow "Please sir, don't think ill of me. The bandits, raided my village some months ago and forced me join them".

Haldor looked long into the dying man's eyes. He saw truth in his words.

"I believe you, and I am sorry that it has come to this." Haldor gave the man a look of compassion. "I will ease your suffering, should you wish".

The man gave a slow nod to Haldor and dropped his head down, losing the energy to support it. His cloths were now sodden in his blood and he slumped, about to keel over.

Haldor took hold of the man's shoulders to support him and brought his knife up to his neck. He tore the knife away, leaving a deep gash in the man's neck. He began to choke on his own blood. Haldor supported his head and lowered the man's torso slowly to the ground. "Easy now, be at peace boy."

A moment later, the choking sounds stopped and his eyes stared off endlessly into the sky.

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Haldor did not sleep the rest of the night. He lay on his back looking up at the stars as the bandits blood dried into his clothes. As dawn began to break, he arose and began digging two graves for the men he had just killed.

After several hours of digging, Haldor placed the bodies in the graves and said a prayer. Whilst laying on his bedroll in the night, he made a small talisman from the twigs and leaves, representing the nature of the forests, a symbol of peace. He placed it in the younger man's hands, covered the bodies over with dirt and placed some stones atop the mound to mark their graves.

He returned to his camp site and began tidying away his belongings. He noticed a patch of blood on the bedroll and gave a slight sigh as he rolled the up. Tying it together in a bundle he put he in the back of the cart instead attaching it to the horse's saddle. He trod on the fire ashes to make sure

it would not start a wildfire and whistled to Emryn who came trotting over from her feast.

She came right up to Haldor who stood with her saddle in arm and waited for him to throw it over her. He fastened the saddle straps and made sure the cart was firmly attached before climbing up and giving the mare a soft kick to start her walking.

The journey was just as uneventful as the first day, although Haldor was so lost in his thoughts that a wolf pack could have been tearing down an entire village and he wouldn't have noticed. The sun rose and fell as it does with every passing day and Haldor still rode onward. *How have two bandits managed to make it so deep into the forest? And what was the village the boy spoke of? I haven't heard of any raids since last winter and judging by the boy's lack of skill, he couldn't have been recruited more than a few months past.*

Haldor's thought was distracted by the smell of smoke. Looking ahead down the road, he could see the wooden roof of a guard tower coming into view over a crest in the road. *Fogdell at last.*

## Chapter 4

The sun was close to slipping beyond the horizon and moon was already visible in the sky. The gates of Fogdell are sealed after sundown and one must seek permission from the town guard to enter. Haldor and Emryn trotted up to the gate and a guard yelled down to him.

"Stop there traveller. Identify yourself."

"My name is Haldor, I am a ranger who requires refuge for the night", Haldor shouted back to the guard as he looked up at him from under the hood of his cloak.

"What is your business other than rest, ranger?" the guard replied back.

"I wish to trade goods with the merchants in town and be on my way".

"Very well. Please wait there".

Haldor looked back down from the wooden guard tower and gave Emryn a rub on the neck. She seemed to like it and pushed her neck into his hand as if he was satisfying an itch.

*Why so many questions, and before the sun is eve--*, the sound of wood creaking under strain interrupted Haldor's thought. There was another creak and the sound of wood hitting the ground. He presumed it was one of the gate bars being lifted out of its fixings. The left hand gate began to open slowly and Emryn started to walk towards it. As he approached the gate, he saw a familiar face, Taigan, one of the city guard captain's.

"Haldor my old friend" he exclaimed with a wide grin. "Sorry about that, the boy is new but making a fine job of it none the less."

"Taigan", Haldor returning the big grin, "The boy is only doing his job, but why so many questions?"

"Can't be too careful at the moment friend. One of the northern villages was raided not a week ago by bandits".

"Funny you should mention bandits. I encountered two on my way here".

Taigan suddenly saw the dark colouration on Haldor's tunic and without looking back to Haldor's face, "By 'encounter' I presume you mean killed?"

"Unfortunately yes. Come let us discuss it more at the inn. I need some warmth" Haldor shivered slightly as he pulled his cloak around him.

"I will meet you there soon, I have to finish a patrol of the wall and I will be right there. You take that mare to the stable and get yourself warm."

\* \* \*

The stable was located just next to the inn, presumably on purpose so that it would be the first thing a weary traveller sees after putting his horse to rest. It was a good size for a town like this, not cramped like most in the Andarien. It was not as tall as the inn next door but it was much longer. There was enough room for twenty horses at least, with room to spare - not that there would ever be twenty horses there at once.

As they approached it, the light cast by the two torches fixed either side of the door made Haldor feel a little warmer as the orange flame danced and flickered against the wooden sides of the building.

Emryn seemed to speed up a little as if she caught sight of the stable and knew there was a fresh bale of hay waiting for her. Haldor brought her to a stop in front of the wide doorway and wrapped on it with his knuckle. A moment later, a small square hatch in the doors face cracked open and the face

of an old man appeared. His brow was wrinkled as if he spent too much time frowning, as he was now.

"Good evening Ren, may we come in?"

The old mans eyes widened as he realised who it was. "Of course of course master Haldor."

The hatch banged shut and Haldor could hear the man hastily unlocking the bolts on the other side. The door swung open and Ren gestured them inside. "Good evening master Haldor, safe journey I trust?"

"Had a run in with some bandit's, but nothing we couldn't handle ay old girl?" he said as he rubbed the side of Emryn's face.

"Staying the night I take it? Got a lovely room all ready for the girl just over here. Nice fresh hay and wonderfully spacious as always". He liked to describe the stables as more of an Inn for horses. Hence calling it a room for the horse.

Ren walked off down the centre of the stable. There were two horses already stabled, one either side of them. The old man stopped at Emryn's 'room' and opened the gate for her to enter. Haldor led her by the reigns walking just in front of her. She walked up to the gate and Haldor stopped her. "Just a minute girls, let me get the cart off you. He fished around inside the cart and presented a block which he placed under the front to stop it tipping when he unhooked it. With the

support in place, Haldor unfastened the saddle straps from underneath Emryn's belly and lifted it off her, placing it on the top of the cart.

"Leave that there master Haldor is you wish. Don't expect we will getting many more in tonight, it won't be in any ones way".

"Very kind of you Ren, thank you". Haldor took some silver coins from his pocket and handed them to Ren. "Many thanks sir" he said with a big smile and a sight bow. "Rest assured she will be safe and well fed before you return".

Haldor led her through the gate, giving her a good pat as he turned back to leave. She didn't seem as interested with him this time, she was too busy munching her way through the hay, pausing only to drink from the trough next to her.

"Have a good night Ren".

"And you master Haldor", returned Ren.

The ranger made his way back to the wide door at the front of the stables and headed for the inn.

\* \* \* \*

The inn was a large imposing structure. The upper floors seemed to hang over the top of the ground floor as if the building were going to topple over at any minute. It was timber framed with grey stone walls like many of the buildings

in town, although this was one of the biggest. The building looked as though it had been built as a simple structure and added too in later years as its popularity grew. The main portion of the building was square with a narrower entranceway stretching towards the street, its roof tapering to a point and looming over anyone who stood before it. Off to the left hand side was an extra wing that must be a later addition which contained many of the lodgings. Through the small windows, Haldor could see the warm orange glow of the hearth. It suddenly made him feel the cold outside and he hurried on towards the door.

Inside was a narrow passage which lead to the common area. There was one dim lantern in the hall way, making it feel dull and dreary. Making his way down the passage, Haldor reached for the door handle at the end, and as he pulled it open, he immediately felt the warmth emanating from the fire. He shook off the chill and untied his cloak from around his neck. Lifting it onto the coat stand to his left he wandered towards the counter ahead of him.

To his left and right where tables and stools, many of which filled by townsfolk and passing strangers. Those he recognised gave him a nod or a wave to welcome him back to town.

Just as haldor was about to ring the bell sitting atop the counter, the owner stepped out from a door on the far

right hand side of the bar, flagon in hand, spinning as he wiped it down with a cloth.

"Haldor" he proclaimed excitedly, holding his arms out as if ready to give him a big hug.

"Good eve Master Brennan, I trust you are well?". Haldor presented his arm and the two shook hands over the bar.

"I am well my friend, very well thank you." He returned the flagon to a shelf below the counter. "Are you well also, master Ranger?"

"As well as can be Brennan." Haldor turned his back to the counter and leant back on it, casting his eyes to the many tables that stood before him. "Lots of unfamiliar faces tonight."

"Best we not speak of that so loudly Haldor, folk's are rather sensitive at the moment."

"Sensitive to what?" haldor said as he turned quickly back around with a look of intrigue on his face.

"You haven't heard?" returned Brennan, looking slightly stunned.

"I haven't, but perhaps you could fill me in?"

"Take that seat over there at the back near the fire. I'll bring you something to drink in a second."

Brennan loved to gossip, as many inn keepers did. He turned around looking smug with himself, ready to tell his tale to what must be at least the hundredth person Haldor reckoned, if he knew the man at all. Brennan trotted off back through the door at the far end of the bar as Haldor made his way across the common room to the hearth. He stood before it, warming his hands. Glancing back over his shoulder he saw Brennan return from the back room with a flagon of mead so he took his seat.

"Here you go", Brennan said as he placed the tin flagon on the table in front of Haldor, who thanked him.

"Now what is this news you have?"

Brennan made a quick glance over to the rest of the room to make sure no one was listening to them. "Taigan told me not to go around telling folk, but I figure your one of the guardian of the forest, you might as well know".

Haldor knew full well that he was not the first person to be told, not by a long way. The inn keeper continued. "There have been a number of raids on the smaller villages to the north of town. Folk have been pouring in day after day looking for shelter and warmth. Captain Taigan asked me to take them in and the treasury would pay me their lodgings, but he also said not to breath a word of it to the local. Something about causing a panic I think he said."

Haldor interrupted, "Who would raid these viallges? The bandits would not dare to move so far east."

"That's just it though. The bandits have been moving through the northern forest, looting and burning as they go".

"But how?" Haldor replied rather loudly, he looked to the other patrons to make sure he hadn't attracted any attention before stooping back over his mead to hear the rest of Brennan's tale.

"Captain Taigan says there's something giving them strength and the courage to push down from the mountains. He doesn't know what it is, but he is worried, I can see it in him."

Just as Brennan finished his sentence, Taigan came through the door into the common room, looking around for Haldor. The ranger looked up to Taigan and the captain spotted him in the corner.

"Good evening Master Brennan, Master Haldor." Taigan said as he approached the table.

"Good evening Captain Taigan", the two of them replied back to him almost in unison.

The captain sat down on a stool with his back to the room, fluttering his cape behind him so as not to sit on it.

"I trust master Brennan has been filling you in on the happenings of late?"

"He has", Haldor replied "most troubling it seems."

Taigan turned to Brennan, "Would you fetch me some ale my friend, I'm parched?"

"Of course, sir", the inn keeper replied as he hurried to his feet.

As Brennan made his way back to the bar, Taigan followed him with his eyes until he was out of ear shot. "I Fear there is something is coming Haldor", he said as he brought his head back around to meet the ranger's. "Something is driving the Bandits from the Mountain's and I am worried that whatever it is, may be strong enough to push them through the entire forest Haldor. We simply do not have the men to hold back a full scale attack. The walls are strong yes, but once they break through, and they will break through, the town will fall."

Haldor sat in silence for a moment, staring at the Captain.

"Can we not send for the rangers?" he eventually replied, "They will come to our aid".

"We sent riders out a week ago to bring them". Taigan looked down into his hands, "Today his horse came back to town without him".

Haldor sat back in his seat and looked up to the ceiling as he thought about the situation.

Taigan looked up at him again. "The scout party was due more than a week ago now from the north road and they have not yet arrived."

Haldor looked him in the eyes with fear visible in his face. "Scout parties are never late". The ranger's eyes darted all around the room, and he continued, "A few bandits could not kill an entire party of rangers".

Taigan also looked fearful now. "This is what troubles me my friend".

"Maybe they found the bandits and returned to the camps in the north following a fight. They would have to take any wounded back depending on how far they made it down the north road" haldor said, looking much happier.

"Let us hope. For the sake of all these people, let us hope", said the captain, his expression unchanged.

Haldor looked over to the bar where Brannan was now returning from the back room with a serving girl. He motioned his arm as if telling the girl to watch the bar while he chatted away. In his arms were three flagons and haldor could tell the inn keeper was ready to tell a few of his tales.

Their spirits lifted as Brennan returned and the three of them sat for several hours sharing stories of adventure from years past. As the hours passed, the inn slowly emptied of its

patron's, some leaving, but many heading for the rooms in the long wing off to the side of the common room.

The serving girl approached the table and began to pick up the many empty flagons, "Are you going to sit and chat all night, Master Brennan?" the girl said as she struggled to juggle the flagons. She was young, perhaps in her early twenties with long brown hair tied up to keep it out of her way as she worked. She was very pretty and spoke softly, her voice gave Haldor a sense of calm.

"The girl is right, I let my mouth run wild I do". Brennan got to his feet and pushed the stool under the table as he rose. "I bid you gentlemen a good night. I trust you will be staying Master Haldor?"

"I will, if you have have room for me that is."

"Of course we do. Got your usual room all ready for you upstairs".

"Thank you Brennan, you are too kind" said the haldor before gulping down the last of his mead.

"Nonsense Haldor. Always have room for friends we do". Brennan began to walk back to the bar, pushing stools back to their place and collecting flagons from the empty tables as he went. "Settle it with me tomorrow my friend. Sleep well." He vanished into the back room behind the bar and closed the door. The serving girl was wiping down the counter, she threw

Haldor look as if to check if he were ready to leave and gave him a faint smile.

"I will retire I think Taigan. Think not about the bandits, I'm sure the scouts will come soon. When I leave tomorrow I will take my wares home and then ride north to the ranger camps. If the scouts have not returned by the time I make it there, I will come back to you, and I will bring the rangers with me". Haldor stood and started to make his way over to the serving girl who was now cleaning the tables close to the bar. From behind him he heard Taigan.

"Thank you, Haldor. I am sure you are right, the scouts will come". Taigan now rose, leaving his empty flagon on the table. "Good night Haldor, If I don't see you tomorrow, have a safe journey my friend".

Haldor gave a slight nod, "Thank you, I will".

The captain lingered for a minute, lost in thought. He nodded back to Haldor and left the inn, closing the doors quietly behind him.

"Can I take that for you sir?" the serving girl said from behind Haldor. He turned to look at her. "Thank you my lady, most kind".

"You do not need to call me lady sir, I am just a serving girl, please, call me Shana".

"No one is *just* anything", Haldor said, putting emphasis on the word. "An inn would be nothing without people to tend to the patrons".

Shana smiled at him, "I guess you are right sir, thank you". Haldor smiled in return.

"Goodnight Shana, sleep well."

Haldor, made his way to a door on the far left of the bar which led to the stairway. He closed the door behind him and made his way up to his room. At the top of the stairs was a small landing with corridors leading off either side and straight ahead. Haldor's 'usual room' was the last room on the left—straight ahead. The key was in the door waiting for him. Turning it gently he opened it into a small yet cosy little room. There was a bed against the left hand wall with a small wooden table by the side, a candle sit on top of it. He took a match from the pouch on his belt, struck it on the stone window ledge and held it next to the wick.

With the room lit he began to remove his equipment and clothing before laying on the bed. He thought about smoking his pipe before he went to sleep but decided he needed the rest if he was to journey to the ranger camps. Wriggling lower into the bed, he blew out the candle and settled his head into the pillow.

## Chapter 5

Haldor woke the next morning to the sound of a rooster crowing out in the street below. He opened his eyes a little, it was only just dawn. The first light of the sun creeping through the town.

He closed his eyes, looking for a few more minutes of sleep. Just as he felt sleep about to take him, the rooster sounded again. And again.

Opening his eyes once more, he let out a sigh and sat up in the bed, stretching his arms out toward the ceiling. His eyes were still heavy with sleep—still trying to shut themselves—he fought to keep them open.

Standing up now, he stretched again, this time, peering through the opening between the two curtains. His room was front facing so he could see the street and watch the people going about their daily business. Looking now he could see the market traders setting up their stales, emptying the carts drawn by their horses and displaying their wares accordingly.

The inn was situated at the head of the trade district, being the tallest and grandest of the buildings in the area. Before it, there was a square with a fountain at its centre, leading on to a wide street—the widest in town. Shops and residences lined either side, with market stalls scattered all along its length. Many of the stores have counters and open fronts to display their wares on, also allowing passing folk to watch as the goods are made and prepared inside.

Haldor made a quick change of clothes and sat on a wooden chair, continuing to watch the people in the street as he tied up the front of his tunic and slipped on his boots.

Standing up, he applied the rest of his gear—his belt, bracers, knives and sword, picked up his saddle bags and headed for the door, unhooking his coat and cloak from the back of it as he did so.

The common room was quiet, although several tables were occupied with patrons eating breakfast.

"Haldor," came a voice from the opposite side of the room, it was Brennan. "Can I get you breakfast?"

"Yes, thank you, Brennan. And some hot tea if you would be so kind."

"Take a seat, I will bring it right out."

Haldor sat in the same seat as he had the previous night, it was much quieter on this side of the room, and thought it best if Brennan had some more sensitive tales to tell.

Haldor sat content by the fire, puffing on his pipe as Shana appeared from the back room behind the bar. She approached Haldor with a mug in hand.

"Nice hot tea as requested. Brennan will be out with your breakfast shortly."

Haldor, took the pipe from his mouth, "Thank you Shana."

"I trust you slept well master Haldor?" she asked as she placed the mug in front of the ranger.

"Very well. Very well indeed," said Haldor, smiling as he returned the pipe to his mouth.

Shana turned and headed back towards the bar, "let me know if you need anything else," she said as he walked away.

Not two minutes later, Brennan appeared from the back room carrying a tin plate, heaped with all manner of breakfast meats, eggs and some bread. "There you are my friend. Sausages, bacon, a bit of liver and freshly laid eggs from the chickens out back."

Haldor's eyes widened as he took in the sight of the steaming plate being thrust before him. "Smells delicious Brennan. You sure know how to cook a breakfast."

"Best in town, you can count on that," said the inn keeper, chuckling to himself.

Haldor took a deep breath and a sip of tea and began to tackle the breakfast mountain. After a good twenty minutes, there was nothing left, but a few bread crumbs scattered across the plate. He gulped down the last of tea and sat back, feeling stuffed, but ready to take on the day.

After letting the breakfast settle he headed over to the bar. Brennan's head popped up behind—narrowly missing banging it on the edge as he stood to greet Haldor.

"I'll be off now my friend. Breakfast was excellent as always." Haldor reached into one of the saddle bags he had slung over his shoulder and took out his coin purse. "Usual fee is it?" is he asked as he tipped some silver coins into his hand.

"Aye, that'll do nicely." Said Brennan.

Haldor handed the coin over to Brennan and gave a bow. "I bid you farewell Brennan," he rose, to see Brennan bowing also, "Until next time, my friend."

Brennan rose also, "Be careful Haldor, you don't know what might be watching you in them woods out there. Make sure you keep that sword handy, and sleep with an eye open. I hope you find your rangers safe and unharmed."

"Thank you, I will. Im sure they are fine. I will see you in a fortnight, friend."

They both exchanged a look of concern, before the ranger left. Haldor knew something was wrong, he could feel it, but he didn't want to say it and panic everyone. *The inn keeper is right. The scouts are never this late, and even if they did turn back, they would still send someone to town to inform the guard.* He tried to clear his mind of worry as he pulled the heavy front door open and stepped out into the now bustling thoroughfare.

\* \* \* \*

Haldor made his way over to the stables where Emryn was waiting eagerly for his return. The mare greeted him with a bow as he entered and he quickly set about getting putting her saddle back on ready to make a quick trip to the markets. Ren was barely awake when Haldor came banging at the front door—his eyes were unable to take in the light and he opened the hatch with a hand over his face to shield them from the sun.

As Haldor prepared the horse, Ren was busy getting dressed and putting some tea on in his quarters. By the time Haldor was done and ready to leave, the old man was only just dressed. He stepped out of from a door at the far end of the stables, tightening up his belt and putting the collar of his tunic straight.

"Ready to go so soon Haldor? The sun is barely up yet," Ren asked with a croaky voice, as if he had a cold.

"I have an urgent errand to run unfortunately my friend. I must make haste and head out as soon as possible."

Ren cleared his throat but still sounded groggy, "Well you rangers have important business to attend, im sure. The mare is well rested as promised. She's been fed and watered and ready to carry you all the way to Nemus by the looks of her. She is in fine health that one."

Haldor made sure all the straps were done up tight before taking the reins to lead the horse out. "She would carry me to the ends of the earth if I asked her too, Ren. But for now, she has to get this meat to the butcher."

He led the mare the mare to the end of the stalls and pushed open the stable door. Ren followed behind the cart. "Safe travels ranger. See you in a few weeks I expect?" He said as he gave Emryn a fair pat on the rump.

Outside Haldor continued to the lead the horse by the reins, walking down towards the trade strip. The butchers shop was on the left had side of the street. It wasn't open fronted like many of the others, but had a large windowed front instead, displaying fine game and cattle, freshly caught and cut, ready to make a good meal of. Haldor did not take the mare to the shop front however. Instead they went down a

narrow alleyway leading to the rear of the shop. The butchers had a large wooden storage shed behind it, full of meat ready for cutting. He backed the mare up to the rear door of the shop—which was already open. And just as he began to uncover the cart, the butcher, Jed, appeared from within, cleaning off his hands with a bloodied rag as a soldier would clean his after a battle.

“Looks like you have quite the haul there Haldor,” the butcher said as he stepped through the wooden doorway.

“Three stag’s, Jed. Healthy and strong. Will make good eating I’m sure.”

“I’ll get them unloaded and into the shed if you have other errands to run in town, Haldor.”

“Most kind, Jed. I need to be away as quickly as I can today. If you can them unloaded while I go to the alchemist’s, I would be very grateful.”

“Not a problem,” he said, now fishing around on a bunch of keys to unlock the shed, “you watch that herbalist woman, she’s a screw loose somewhere, she has.”

Haldor gave a soft chuckle and made his way back down the alley and on to the wide street. The square was now busy with folk going about their day. Woman with children and wicker baskets full of bread and eggs. Men carrying timber to build new houses on the far side of town. The sound of the

blacksmith hammering steel echoed across the market place, and the traders fighting to be heard over the top of the hammer strokes.

The alchemist's shop was at the the far end of the street, away from the crowds. Many thought the owner, an old woman named Sonja, had taken too many of her own potions and they had made her somewhat slow in the thinking department. Maybe they were right. Haldor agreed there was something odd about her but not in the way others thought. He felt as if she somehow had knowledge far greater than anyone else, even though she didn't express it to most people, she had a way of talking about the world that made haldor feel as if she had actually seen some of the great and terrible events she describes. Of course, no one in this world except for the Terra sorcerers could have lived long enough to see any of it, and a sorcerer she certainly was not.

As Haldor approached the front of the shop, the smell of boiling potions began to seep into his nostrils. The shop was old, the wood dry and rotting and the glass cloudy with dirt as if it had not been cleaned in decades.

He opened the front door, and pushed it slowly inwards, the hinges screaming loudly in protest. Not many townsfolk visit Sonja's shop these days, mainly rangers, Magei and travelling merchants. As he closed the door behind him, the

smell had now become overpowering, burning his nostrils. *What in the world is she brewing in here?*

He crept slowly across to the dusty counter. "Hello?" he called, "Sonja? Its Haldor."

The sound of creaking floor boards and glass breaking came from behind the wooden shelves that stood crookedly behind the counter. After a few seconds, the head of an old woman popped out from behind one of the shelves, "Ranger! Thank the gods you have come."

Haldor looked at her puzzled. She looked exactly the same as she had when he last visited, as if she wore the same set of grey robes each day, and by the looks of them, every day for the last 20 years at least. They were grey to look at now, but Haldor supposed they had once been black, but over use had faded them. Her hair as wirey and stuck out in all directions—grey too like her robes. Haldor could almost imagine small clouds of dust being thrown from it as she moved.

"Ranger!" she said again, this time a little quieter, her eyes darting around the shop as if to check there was no one listening. "Dark times are coming, ranger, dark times indeed. Prepare yourself before its too late."

Haldor's look turned from puzzled to shock. "What do you mean? What is coming?"

"I have said too much, ranger. You must be ready." She slipped back behind the shelving, leaving Haldor alone once again.

"But wait, I need some herbs from you before I go, Sonja."

A voice came from the back of the shop, "It is that sword you and bow you will be needing, ranger. Not my herbs."

"What for, who will I be fighting?"

"I have said too much...too much I have said," the voice faded like she was moving away, but Haldor could hear no footsteps of creaking floor boards.

"But-," Haldor suddenly became aware of some excitement outside. He could hear raised voices and people began to walk briskly past the front of the shop, heading towards the southern gate.

He strode hurriedly to the door and flung it open, the hinges almost hissing at him this time. He stepped out into the street narrowly avoiding being hit by a passer-by and heard one of the guards calling to him from across the street.

"Haldor, scouts have arrived at the south gate, they have casualties."

Without thinking, Haldor set off running through the crowd, nearly knocking folk to the ground as he hurried by.

People shouted profanity at him as he nudged them out of his way but he wasn't listening, he had to get to the south gate.

## Chapter 6

As he rounded a corner, at the end of the trade strip, the gate came in to view—it was about to close—the rangers must all be inside he thought. He carried on running toward the gate and eventually he could see the cloaked heads of the scouts over the top of the crowd. They seemed to be hurrying toward the barracks—which stood on the right hand side of the street, not stopping to greet the citizens as they normally would.

Haldor weaved his way through the last of the town's folk and one of the rangers spotted him just as he was entering the barracks.

"Haldor! Come with me, we have much to discuss," the ranger said. He was younger than haldor by perhaps a decade, but just as skilled. He too had long hair, although not as long as Haldor, and the back was tied up in a pony tail. His beard was short, but looked unintentional—like they had been on the move for several days and had not time for shaving. The

cloak he wore had a tear along the rear right hand side and he had a bandage around his right thigh—perhaps the tear and the wound were from the same blow.

“What happened to you out there, friend?”

“We were ambushed in the night, come we will discuss it indoors. Don’t want the townsfolk to panic.”

Haldor followed the ranger inside the barracks. From inside he could hear the faint cries of one of the injured being tended to—louder and louder the cries became until they ceased completely.

They turned left and went down a narrow corridor heading for a door that stood at the end. Inside was one of the main quarters that the town guard would use—bunks lined either side of the room—many of them taken by rangers needed rest and some who were having wounds dressed by medics. As they walked past the bunks, Haldor saw who he presumed was making the racket as he was walking in—an unconscious ranger with two medic trying to stop the blood loss from a wound in his lower abdomen—a bloodied arrow lay broken on the floor beside the bunk.

Haldor kept following the ranger who led him through another door at the end of the sleeping quarters and into a small room. Inside was a wooden table with six chairs around it—to Haldor’s surprise, Taigan was sitting in one of them, waiting patiently for a report.

The room had no windows and was lit only by a torch that hung from the wall, and a lantern that was sat at the centre of the table.

"Please, come in, take a seat," Taigan said.

Haldor and the ranger sat opposite each other at the table, with Captain Taigan at the head.

"Captain Taigan, my name is Alahad, and these are my men. We are grateful for the help you and yours are giving to us."

"The rangers, look after and protect these lands, we are honoured to give you our assistance." Taigan, dropped his head slightly as a sign of respect, "You must tell me what has happened to your men, so we might defend the town from whatever foe opposes us."

"Fear not," Alahad cut in, "I feel the threat is gone for the time being."

"How so?" Taigan asked.

"We were attacked by bandits, two nights ago. They came in the moon light, slaughtering my men in their sleep. One of them managed to let out a warning cry before he was run through. We put up a fight and eventually we took the upper hand. They had strength I had never seen in bandits before—we lost many good men, but in the end, we cut them down. We even managed to take a prisoner, one of the bandit captains. It wasn't hard to make him talk. He said they had come down from

the mountains over a fortnight ago, making their way through many of the northern villages and sweeping south through the forest as to not be seen whilst making their way here. Fortunately they found us lying there that night. Had they not, I fear many innocent lives could have been lost."

"You have made a great sacrifice protecting this town," Taigan said, "We are truly grateful."

"That is why we are here, Captain—to protect the people of the forest however we can." He turned his head to look at Haldor, "Look after yourself out there in the forest by yourself Haldor, these bandits seem to be getting braver, and by the four, I do not know why. For now though the town is safe I feel," he turned back to Taigan, "I would recommend increasing your number on patrol, especially in the night. These scum are opportunists—they have no honour. They wait until night when everyone is asleep, and kill them while they stand no chance of defending themselves."

Taigan sat back in his chair, "Come now, let us make sure your men are receiving the help they need. I have some of the guards brining extra bedding and food from the keep. We can discuss this matter further in the morning."

"Thank you Captain, your help is most kind."

"Did anymore bandits come down from the mountains do you know?" Haldor spoke up.

"He did say that he had sent two men to approach the town from the west and look for weak points for when the rest of the band arrived. Where they are, I do not know."

"They must have been the men I met the night before last, one of them was a boy from a northern village, like you say. They came at me in the night much the same as you. Fortunately, they were not so good at keeping quiet and I managed to take them both down with relative ease."

"It is fortunate then that we were both in the right place at the right time. We may have saved this town a lot of hassle," Alahad said as he stood and placed his chair back under the table.

Haldor rose also, "It looks like the town should be safe now then, if all the bandits are dead."

"Aye Haldor, I think we can all rest easy tonight. They will not risk coming so far east after a defeat such as this."

Alahad walked with Haldor back out the entrance of the barrack. "Where do you head now, Alahad?"

"We will rest here for a day or so and then head north back to the camps."

"Something still troubles me though, Alahad. The northern patrol still hasn't made it to town. Do you think they ran in to those bandits as they headed south?"

"It is likely as you say, if they took casualties, they will have headed north, back to the camps. We will keep a look out for them as we carry on up the northern road. Do not worry yourself, Haldor."

"I bid you farewell then, Alahad. I will return to my business as usual."

The two rangers grabbed each other's fore arms and nodded to each other before Haldor left, heading back towards the market place. *This must be what the old woman spoke of, although I have no idea how she knew of it, she truly is strange,* Haldor thought to himself, *I had better get back Jed, Emryn I'm sure will be eating something of his by now.*

Haldor did indeed find the horse eating from a flower box in the yard. Luckily, Jed had left her to it and was completely unaware. He spent the next few hours visiting various shops in the market place, buying spices and materials for repairing his attire over the winter. Once the snows come, it will be difficult to make the journey to Fogdell, especially towing a cart behind.

After mid-day, the cart was full again with all the manor's equipment and food, ready to for storage when the cold hits. The final stop on his venture was the carpenter's shop, where Haldor usually spends the afternoon, chatting with Tomos

and his wife Ania, and playing with his son Addor, who was now 8 years old.

Tomos' shop was not on the main strip, instead it was situated on the street running parallel to the west it. It was much quieter on this street with many of the buildings being residential, with the exception of Tomos' house and the Farriers workshop which sat on the opposite from the carpenters.

As Haldor approached, he could see Tomos working on a wooden chair in the front yard. It looked to be part of a set along with a table which stood on its end, resting against the front of the building. The front yard was usually full of furniture and wooden decorations that he had been busy making for the townsfolk. Sometimes chairs, sometimes doors or cabinets and sometimes a sign that he was working on for one of the many shops or inns in the town.

Tomos was huddled over the chair—with a chisel in hand—carving the ornate decorations into one of the arm rests that he is famous for. Tomos was gifted in his trade and there is no one better in all of Altamar according to most folk. Anywhere you look in fogdell, you can usually see some of his handy work being used to decorate the buildings.

As he heard the horses trundling down the street, he looked up as he always did to greet whomever it may be. This

time, he did not greet, instead he let out a big smile, placing his chisel down on the chair and gripping his lower back as he stretched upwards. Haldor approached the front yard, leading Emryn by the reins.

"By back is getting too old to be bent down like this all day my friend," Tomos said as the two shook hands.

"Nonsense Tomos, you will be bent over carving furniture for the good townsfolk until you are wrinkled and grey im sure."

"Your probably right Haldor, I don't think these people would let me retire any time soon."

Tomos was in his late fifties, but all the hard work he did day in and day out, kept him looking younger than his years would have you believe.

"Come, Addor has been looking forward to seeing you, he is becoming quite the little carpenter himself."

Haldor lead Emryn into the front yard and tied her reins to one of fence posts, he didn't want her knocking over any of Tomos' craftsmanship if she started to wonder around looking for food.

Inside, the house was furnished with the most fanatically carved furniture. Everything from the dining chairs to the cupboards in the hallway was decorated with intricate designs, making the house look almost royal in appearance—not something

one would expect to see when walking into a tradesman's house in a forest town.

Haldor took off his cloak and overcoat and hung them on a cloak stand in the hallway. Going through into the living room, he spotted Addor playing with some wooden horses in front of the fire.

"Addor, look who is here," said Tomos.

Addor looked around quickly with an expression of wonder. "Papa!" he said as he got to his feet and ran into Haldor's arms, "I knew you would come soon. Are we going to see Brennad's seat?"

"Not this time my boy, I have to take my supplies back home to store before winter, but I will be back soon and we can go then, before the snows come," said Haldor, still with the boy in his arms.

Brennad's seat is large cliff which protrudes from the land, looking over the lower forest like a King would look over the kingdom from high up in his castle. The forest below stretches out before giving way to the plains in the south of Altamar. It was so named after King Brennad, the last great king of the Human Empire of N'umedár.

Addor looked up to Haldor with big sad eyes. "Don't be giving me that look, it only works on Ania."

Addor smiled, "well I tried." He held up his finger and signalled Haldor to come close so he could wisper something. Haldor bent down and gave Addor his ear. "She usually gives me cookies if I do that, but don't tell anyone."

"It will be our secret," Haldor said, standing back up straight.

Ania walked out from the kitchen to their left with a tray full of food. "Will you be joining us for some lunch Haldor?"

"I will thank you, Ania."

They all spent the next hour feasting on roasted chicken and freshly baked bread, discussing the matter of the Rangers that had arrived earlier that day and the trip to Brennad's seat. The past two years, Haldor had taken the boy to Brennah's seat just before winter when the skies were clear and they would sit for hours looking over the forest across Alatamar. They would camp under a large oak that grows close to the seat, hunting for small game and then roasting their catch by the camp fire whilst Haldor would tell stories of his adventures as a ranger.

Addor had grown very fond of the place and would sulk all the way back to Fogdell, only cheering up when Haldor would tell more stories as they rode.

After lunch, Addor helped Ania clear away the plates whilst Haldor and Tomos enjoyed a pipe in the living room before the fire.

It was just a few hours before sunset now, Haldor had spent longer than he planned with Tomos and Ania, but he had enjoyed every minute—as he usually did. They were all very good friends, and Haldor hated leaving the boy behind. In a few short years however, Addor would be ready to journey to the north and begin his life as a ranger, just like his father.

“I think it is time I headed west my friend,” said Haldor as he tipped the ashes from his pipe into the fire. “I should be able to make a good start before nightfall at least.”

Tomos dipped his little finger in to the bowl of his pipe, scraping the last of the charred tobacco from the bottom, “It is always nice to see you Haldor, I’m sure Addor will be looking forward to your return in a couple of weeks.”

“I’m sure he will,” Haldor replied, climbing to his feet from the low arm chair.

Addor came running over from the other side of the room and clung around his father’s waist. “I don’t want you to go papa, can you not stay a little while longer?”

“I’m sorry my boy, I must make some headway before night fall.” Haldor reached into a pouch on his belt and nealt down

next to Addor. He grabbed the boys hand and in it, he placed a silver coin. The boy's face lit up. "Go and get yourself something nice before the shops close."

"Thank you papa!" said the boy with wide eyes and I wide grin as he inspected the coin in his palm.

Haldor stood up, gave the boy another hug and before he had even released him, Addor had shot off up the hallway heading for the door.

Haldor walked down the hallway after the boy, although he was now long gone and probably lost for choice as to which store to visit first.

Tomos and Ania followed him to the door to bid him farewell. "You be careful out there Haldor, keep your eyes open and your sword close."

"I will Tomos, thank you."

As they stepped out into the front yard, Haldor caught sight of Emryn who had managed to reach he neck over the fence to eat next the neighbour's front lawn. "Can I not take you anywhere without you eating someone property girl?"

Tomos and ania laughed from the doorway. "Do not worry Haldor, im sure they won't mind," said Ania.

Haldor untied the reins and steered Emryn towards the thoroughfare before climbing into the saddle. Tomos walked

over to shake Haldors hand. With his free hand, Haldor produced a coin purse from one of the saddle bags which he presented to Tomos. "For the boy," he said.

"Haldor, there is no need, you do not need to give us your money," Tomos protested, looking confused.

"Please, take it. If anything should happen to me-," Haldor was interrupted.

"Nothing is going to happen to you. You said it yourself, the bandits have been defeated, they will not come down from the mountains after this."

"Even so, you must take it." Haldor let go of the purse and Tomos stood with it, his arm still out stretched.

"Very well my friend, thank you. May the forest watch over you and you over it."

Haldor looked to Ania who still stood in the door way and nodded to her. "Farewell Ania, and thank you again for the food." He gave Emryn a soft kick and she began to walk out into the street, Haldor looked back, "I will see you in a fortnight, Addor and I will make our trip to the seat then."

Tomos was walking back to meet Ania on the doorstep now, tying the coin purse to his belt. As he reached the end of the street, Haldor looked back again and gave a wave, before turning west and heading for the gate.

## Chapter 7

The sun was in full decent, there were perhaps two more hours of full light remaining before the sun would slip behind the Etholas.

Haldor and Emryn rode peacefully along the western track, watching the brown leaves tumble gracefully to the floor, the trees becoming more and more bare by the hour it seemed.

The first hour or so of the ride was uneventful—not a soul was seen wandering the forest—not even a rabbit foraging for food to store in its burrow. Many of the birds it seemed had now gone south ahead of the snows—maybe they know something Haldor doesn't.

The clouds looked somewhat threatening, but the rain stayed away—every now and then a cloud would pass before the sun and suddenly Haldor could feel the cold. *There's going to be a storm tonight, we need to get into the thick forest, the trees should give us more shelter there,* he thought to himself

as he packed leaf into his pipe, hoping it would stave off the cold.

He carried on for another hour, his cloak wrapped tightly around him and tendrils of sweet smoke curling up into the canopy as he rode. He reached down into the pouch of tobacco he had stashed at the top of one of the saddle bags—it was almost empty. He opened it up and looked inside, before putting it back in the bag, deciding he should probably save the last of it for when the night came.

He had his hood up now, the breeze through the trees was cold to his face, he gave Emryn a little encouragement and their pace quickened. The track was well worn here, close to the town, they could ride much quicker without having to worry about shaking the cart to pieces. It was the ground close to home—where no one but himself and the odd deer would walk, that he had to be wary of traveling to fast over.

As he puffed on his pipe and stared off through the trees, his thoughts turned to Addor, and Brennad's seat. He, just like the boy, was very fond of the trip. They would both ride through the trees, pretending they were on some secret mission for the king, laughing and joking as they went. At night, they would roast game by the fire, and Haldor would tell the boy about all the bandit plots they had foiled and the battles they had won when he was a young scout patrolling the western borders many years ago.

Last year, Haldor had spent a whole day teaching Addor how to use a bow. He had had one made to fit the boy's size by the Bowyer in Cled and presented it to him as they sat beneath the great oak that grew in the grove atop Brennad's Seat. The boy was overcome with joy, and with a few hours teaching from a ranger, could hit the centre of an upturned log from 15 metres—quite a feat for someone who has never fired an arrow before. The next day Addor made his first kill with that bow—which the two of them enjoyed for their supper.

The sun was now escaping behind the mountains, but Haldor was still lost in his memories, smiling to himself, not even realising his pipe had burned out more than a quarter of an hour ago.

By the time Haldor was done reminiscing about the past, it was almost dark. He scanned the forest around him to look for a place to camp, but saw nowhere suitable to provide shelter from the coming storm. Instead he decided to keep going, knowing that there are some small cave shelters just a little further down the track. The caves are not big—just big enough to fit a horse and a camp fire underneath to keep them from catching a death out in the rain. He had used them several times in the past when journeying to and from town—on one occasion they had probably saved his life when a fierce blizzard came, making it impossible to travel. He and Emryn

spent three days huddled by a little fire, hoping the snow would let up.

He carried on through the forest, it was completely dark now—save for the moonlight. Their pace was much slower now and more deliberate, making their way carefully through the trees. They passed a crooked willow, a huge tree it was, bent in all manner of directions. It is said to hold the spirit of one of the great protectors of the Andarien, ancient spirits that watch over the trees. Haldor looked up at the tree, its leaves glinting in the silver streaks of moonlight as they swayed in the night breeze. That was when Haldor saw something in the corner of his eye—it looked like a flash. He turned quickly to see what it was, but there was nothing there. He pulled back on the reins, the mare stopped and there was silence. He looked all around him, seeing only the trees but hearing nothing—not even the soft rustle of leaves. Everything was silent.

As he stared through the trees, the silence endured, nothing moving that he could see. He kicked gently and the mare began to walk slowly forwards. Haldor thought it must have been lightning—there is a storm coming after all. Then from ahead of him, another flash, brilliant it was, purple in colour, like no lightning he had ever seen. Again the flash came, and again, so bright he had to squint when it hit him. Haldor's heart began to beat faster—something was definitely

a-miss. Nothing he knew of beside a sorcerer could make that kind of light—the only sorcerer north of the plains lives far to the east, in a tower north of Fogdell—there is no way he would be all the way out here.

He took a deep breath and pulled one the knives from his belt. Turning his body around to the cart, he cut through the straps holding it to the saddle. The front of the cart crashed to the ground, giving Emryn a bit of a start. "Whoa girl, nothing to worry about," he said, patting her neck with one hand and sheathing the knife with the other.

Another flash hit him, taking him by surprise. He shook it off and gave the horse a kick. She started moving, breaking quickly into a gallop, heading toward the flashes. They were now becoming more frequent and more blinding, but they kept moving. After a minute, the trees broke and the land was open, only grass and wild flowers growing there. There where perhaps fifty metres of open ground there, somewhere he had not been before.

The flashes seem to have ceased now and he pulled the horse to a stop, looking around to catch the next glimpse of the purple light. Nothing. The forest still silent. Then he heard a rustle—not leaves though. It was the sound of something moving through grass. Haldor looked across the open ground and saw a figure walking through the darkness. The figure looked like a man—the sorcerer?

His right hand now rested on the hilt of his sword. "Stop there and identify yourself. I am a protector of this forest and I would know your name," Haldor shouted to the figure. No reply came, but whoever it was, kept on walking toward him.

Haldor wrapped the hand around the sword, ready to pull it from its scabbard should he need to, "Stop now and identify yourself or you will be cut down."

The figure walked out of the shadow and into the moonlight. It was a man, but it wasn't the sorcerer—at least not the one he knew. The man wore Magei robes, all in black, with elaborate embroidery around the cuffs of the wide sleeves and around the collar and the rim of the hood—their colour blood red. This was no ordinary sorcerer.

The man raised his hands above his head without saying a word. Haldor drew his sword, "I will kill you sorcerer. Identify yourself now!"

The sorcerer seemed to ignore him, as if Haldor wasn't even there. Instead Haldor took the bow that was slung around his back and nocked an arrow. He raised it and aimed at the man. "This is your final warning sorcerer. I will not ask you again."

The man continued to ignore him. Haldor loosed his fingers from the bow string which pulled itself forward, propelling the arrow at the man. It was flying true, straight

toward his torso, but as it reached within a few feet of him, there was a shimmer of light and the arrow ceased to exist.

Haldor nocked another arrow, ready for a second strike, but this time he heard a voice—not from the sorcerer, but in his head. *Fool, your mortal weapons will do you no good here. You will die now!*

No sooner had the voice uttered its last word, a great bolt of lightning struck a tree behind the sorcerer, throwing branches and leaves high into the night sky. Another bolt came crashing down, this time striking the sorcerer himself. Emryn reared in fear. The light shimmered around the man as it had when the arrow disappeared. The light grew until it was blinding. Haldor shielded his eyes and turned the horse away from it. There was a great crack as another bolt fell, then another and another.

The light began to fade and Haldor opened his eyes again. The tree behind the Sorcerer was now engulfed in flame and columns of white smoke rose lazily from burned patches in the grass.

The sorcerer was not alone anymore. From the shadows came another shape, its footsteps falling with a low thud. As it walked into the light beside the sorcerer Haldor let out a gasp. It must have been eight feet tall. Built like a blacksmith, bare chested and wielding a huge axe, the size of

which no man could handle. Its skin had a pale flesh tone to it, darkening towards the hands and feet. It had huge black eyes and horns like a bull, around its waist it wore a black sash, armoured with rough steel plate. It wore armoured boots and gauntlets but little else—Haldor supposed it wouldn't need to, his sword would do little damage to it in battle.

The voice in his head spoke up again, this time with laughter in its tone. *Now you die, ranger.*

At that moment, more shapes came into the light, the size of men this time, but they were no men he had seen outside of books and tales. They were—as far as he could tell—not men at all, but the dead. *This must be some sort of nightmare, the dead do not walk the earth, and that...beast.*

The *beast* began to run at Haldor, the voice in his head laughing now. He kicked the horse but she needed no encouragement. She broke into a gallop and headed into the trees. Haldor kept his body low in case a branch came at him out of the darkness and knocked him from the saddle. Looking back he saw what can only be described as shadow moving through the forest behind him carrying the beast and its soldiers along with it. Arrows began to sail past him and bury themselves in the trees around him, he kicked the mare again and she pounded on, giving it everything she had.

The arrows kept coming but kept missing. He looked back again, the shadows still chasing him—that was when he noticed the rain. It was beating down hard, the sound of it battering the canopy was almost deafening, flashes raced across the sky and claps of thunder shook the forest. He felt a twinge in his side but thought nothing of it. He kept looking back, the shadows getting closer with every stare. Emryn ran hard, bolting around trees and fallen branches, carrying her rider as fast as she could. The twinge grew into a sharp scratching pain, he looked down and brushed his cloak aside—a bloodied arrow head stuck out through his tunic.

All of a sudden the noise around him seemed to fade and the pain spread all through his abdomen. He felt his upper body getting weaker, soon he would be unable to support his weight. His breathing became heavy, it was the only sound he could hear now. His grip failed and the sword which he held in his right hand fell to the ground.

The silence was broken by the sound of his horse letting out a sickening cry. She stumbled over her own feet and Haldor was propelled from the saddle. He landed on his side and instantly began to role downhill. As he rolled, he felt the arrow shaft snap, sending a fresh wave of pain throughout his body. He tried to slow himself using his arms but he was too weak and the pain too great.

Below him he saw branches and rocks, protruding from the hillside as he tumbled down. The obstacles struck him hard all over his body, the pain was so great he no longer had control over his muscles—he was helpless at the mercy of gravity. At last he caught a glimpse of the bottom, it was littered with rocks. He carried on rolling but then his head felt cold..... Then he felt nothing at all.

## Chapter 8

The rain had stopped. The morning sun shone through the canopy, the bright shafts dancing around the swaying leaves. The ranger watched them with a strange fascination—like he had never seen sun shafts—or even leaves before. He lay on his back in the leaf litter—his arms by his side and his eyes looking up into the sky. His breathing was shallow and the breaths far apart—like those of an old man dying peacefully in his bed. Haldor was not old though, nor was he peaceful, but he certainly was dying.

The leaves around him were sodden, with rain water, with blood. Drops of water fell from the leaves as they weakened under the strain, falling on his face and all around him, the sound just the same as if it were pouring—but the sky was clear above. The storm had only just passed, the water still making its way down from the trees.

Haldor had blacked out when his head struck the rocks at the base of the hill. He lay there for several hours—in the

same position as he lay now. When he awoke, he did not move—only stare. He did not even seem to notice he was injured, not the blood running from the wound in his gut, not the pounding of his head. Just staring. Heavy drops of water struck his face, but he did not flinch—not even if they fell into his open eyes. He just blinked and carried on staring.

*Now you die, ranger.* The words kept going around in his head, over and over, like they were the only words he understood. *Now you die, ranger.* Again and again. Then suddenly his eyes widened, like he had just struck an idea. It was the voice, in his head.

*It seems you were not ready for death then. Fear not, it will come. You have been marked, your blood will be spilled.*

His eyes remained wide but now his mouth fell open as the shock set in. All at once his senses came back to him. First he felt the cold—he was soaked from head to toe. His feet ached, his head pounded, he could not feel his fingers and now he was shivering beyond control—the sun doing little to warm him.

He reached for the wound in his gut and grimaced as he felt it with his hand. The arrow head was still there—as was the searing pain. He tried to roll over on to his side to check for the rest of the shaft protruding from his back—he found nothing but a gaping hole. The wound was cold to the

touch—that was a good sign, he wasn't bleeding anymore. He rolled backward to, but too weak to support himself, it was more of an awkward fall. The pain shot through him again and he groaned loudly. Lying there in the mud he realised that the arrow needed to come out and the wounds needed dressing. The removal he could do and the dressing, if he still had the horse. The horse. *Emryn!*

Memories came flooding back to him. He played back the moment in his head when the horse fell—remembering the sound of her cry made him grimace. He raised his head and his eyes darted around the forest in the hope that he would see her grazing on some flowers. She wasn't there. He let his head fall.

*Emryn. His emotion turned from fear to sadness. You were my most loyal friend, and now you are gone.*

He no longer felt the pain of his wounds, but the pain of loss. Thoughts of Emryn lying in the rain, bleeding and in pain, shot through his mind. He saw the beast laughing as it feasted on her by a fire in the woods. A single tear trickled down his cheek. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and with all the might he could muster, he yanked upward on the arrow, dragging it through his torso. His yell was so loud, he was sure it could be heard a hundred leagues away. He dropped the arrow by his side and clutched the now weeping hole with his hands. Then he saw black again.

\* \* \* \*

When he came to once more, it was raining. The soft patter of droplets striking the forest floor filled the air, although to him, it seemed more like a pounding. Each drop echoed around his head, relentless and overpowering like someone banging a club against a tin shed. The endless noise was making him nauseous.

Trying to muster some strength, Haldor turned on to his side and dug an elbow into the soft dirt to support himself, letting out a grunt as the pain in his gut stabbed his senses. He had almost forgotten it was there. Not anymore though. The pain started to come in waves, emanating from the wound and making its way across his entire body.

Scanning his surroundings, he saw nothing but trees, rain and mud. It had not rained for several weeks but the large pools of thick mud all around, told the ranger that the rain storm must have been fierce. He tried to get to his feet, but the best he could do was to stand on all fours, looking around like a lost child, trying to regain his bearings. It was no easy task. His head was spinning, his vision blurred, cold, wet, in pain and unable to chain together any rational thoughts.

The more he thought about finding a way home, the harder it was to concentrate. *Think man, think! We were heading west when the flashes started. Then...then...*

The pounding in his head became almost unbearable. He held both hands up and pressed them against his temples. *If I track the sun, I can find north and intersect the north road.*

Looking around him, he saw nothing familiar. His vision transitioned between blurry and blank. One moment he could see the fuzzy outlines of trees and shrubs, the next only the dark void inside his head.

"North...the camps...the rangers must hear of it. The beast".

The sun was to his right and at this point meant nothing to him. It would be a good while before he could determine its movement. If it were night he could use the Celesti—the stars which provide the energy for sorcery. The Celesti have fixed positions in the sky which act as a handy tool for navigation. The sky for now however was as blue as the ocean, and the only star in sight was the one burning the rangers' eyes.

With no discernable way to gather his bearings, Haldor decided to make way none the less, maybe hoping to find something he could use—or better, something he recognised.

It soon became clear however, that walking would not be so easy. The closest he could manage was an awkward stumble—

like a drunk weaving his way through the streets after closing time at the inn.

Every few wobbly steps, he would trip and have to reach out for something to support himself—which mostly ended with him face down in the leaves. Progress was slow, but he seemed to be heading straight. Looking up, the sun had moved from overhead and was now just to his left. He couldn't be perfectly certain that it wasn't just his weaving and falling that had altered the sun's position, but it was the best he had.

With the sun moving left, it meant he was already moving north, and the last twenty minutes of trips and scrapes hadn't been in vane.

"The beast"

"How could something like that exist?"

"Maybe it was an illusion"

"Sorcery? That damned sorcerer, he was inside my head. Maybe he's still there, tormenting me, watching me suffer."

"Who are you talking to Haldor?"

"Myself, who el—"

He stopped and looked around, looking for whoever just spoke back to him. It wasn't the same voice he heard last night, yet it didn't seem like his own.

"Who are you looking for ranger?"

The voice didn't seem to be coming from any particular direction. It seemed to be coming from every direction.

"Show yourself damn you! Stop playing games."

"Im here."

The voice was overpowering. Haldor snapped his gaze to the left. The sudden move caused his vision to disappear momentarily—returning slowly like a room coming into view as the fresh flame on a candle takes hold. The blurry image revealed what he thought to be a man—or at least a person, standing between two great oaks. A combination of the distance at which the figure stood, and Haldor's failing sight meant that he could not distinguish whether it was male or female, or indeed anything from the colour of its shoes, to the length of its hair. The one thing he could make out was the flapping of some fabric in the breeze—a cloak or a long coat he thought it was.

"Who are you?"

"I will tell you soon enough. When the sky is grey and the ground is white. Then...then I will tell you my name", the figure said—in a calm and somewhat comforting voice—at least it seemed that way, given the current circumstances—before turning and walking away in to blur behind it.

Haldor tried desperately to follow, but as hard as he tried, he could feel some force holding him back, and with every step he tried, he tumbled to the floor. With figure now lost beyond a distance which the ranger could not see, he tried calling out.

"Wait! What does that mean, when the sky is grey and the ground is white?" He tried once again to follow—this time on his hands and knees. It was no good. His hands kept slipping on the muddy ground, and before long he looked like a pig, rolling in ecstasy in its sty.

Overhead meanwhile, the changing weather had gone unnoticed. The crystal blue sky was now streamed with dull cloud—dark and threatening—the storm was not over.

Lying on his back he still didn't see the cloud blancketing the sky. All he could do was think about the figure and who it was. At first he thought it was just a hallucination from the blood loss or the fever that he could now feel creeping up on him. *It seemed so real, it couldn't be in my mind. The sorcerer was in my mind, yet he was real. This is different, I could feel its energy holding me back like it didn't want to be followed. It was real, it had to be.*

He turned over with a shallow grunt and held a hand over his gut, using a tree trunk to help him to his feet. Glancing at the sky, he saw the cloud, but more importantly he saw the

sun. It was low in the sky, much lower than it should have been. *Did I pass out just now?* he asked as he gave the sun a confused glance.

He realised now that he must find help. If he was still out in the middle of the forest when the rain starts again, he would last very long. The least he needed was something to keep the rain off him—a cave or an old ranger way station. The way stations are small single room huts—not unlike the one he had adopted and turned into his home—that rangers would use on long journeys during the winter as an alternative to sleeping outdoors in the snow.

An hour or more passed by and there was no sign of any lifeline. Nothing even vaguely resembling shelter. If it got to sundown and he found nothing, he hoped he could at least start a fire and with any luck the canopy would keep enough rain away to stop it going out.

He kept going, slow, yet not so steady—covered in bruises and cuts from all the trips to the floor he made along the way.

It was fast approaching sun down and with the gathering cloud above, the light would disappear fast. Haldor however could only see the figure. It had affected him somehow—burned into his memory like candle wax burned into every crease and crevice of the table top beneath it.

Looking up now, he saw it, as clear as spring water, a figure standing between two trees in the distance. Haldor stopped dead, just staring, trying to confirm what he saw before his feverish mind blurred it out.

As he stood there, he suddenly felt the cold of the evening air and the light fading away. As much he wanted—needed to look at the figure before him, he transferred his gaze to the sky, seeing the thick black clouds blot out the last of the blue.

Looking back to the figure, it was gone.

“No! not again”, he cried, “come back. The sky is grey.”

Silence. Deadly silence.

“The ground is not white”.

The sound of rustling leaves and distant bird song returned. The ranger tried (although he expected to be held back) to head for the trees where the figure stood. The force that he felt resisting him the first time, was gone.

His stride was too strong and the weight of his damaged body became unbalanced. The outstretched leg hit the floor but was too weak to hold him. He tried to use his arms as a counter balance, much the same as he had seen carnival performers use long wooden poles to balance on a rope.

His effort was in vain and what seemed like slow motion when he was desperately hanging on the edge of balance, now sped into reality at a dizzying pace. Before his tired brain realised he was going to fall, he came crashing down to the littered ground, unable to use his arms to break the fall. He hit the ground like a man who had just caught an arrow in the eye—limp and heavy. Before coming to an abrupt halt though, his head caught the edge of a moss covered stump, coating its green fur in a warm red paste.

## Chapter 9

The air felt warm, like stepping out from the shade into the summer sun—it was a steep contrast from the cool air of the evening. The heat began to feel more intense—it wasn't letting up and there was no breeze to cool the skin.

The ranger lay on his back with his eyes closed—arms apart, with one leg bent underneath the other. His thoughts stirred—trying to piece together what was happening and why he was lying on the ground in such heat. Mayhap he thought he had passed out before finding camp, or that he had found somewhere safe to rest but couldn't remember it. He was feverish after all—that much he remembered. The next thought to enter his mind was that he had simply rolled to close to the fire and would soon be ablaze.

The sudden realization made him jump awake, like someone balancing their chair on two legs and passing beyond the point of safety.

He scanned around him, but there was no fire. There was in fact nothing there—nothing at all. The trees, the shrubs, the fallen branches, stumps, dead leaves all gone. Searching further out, there was still nothing to be seen. All the way out to the horizon, the only thing to be seen was the blurred haze of rising heat.

*The desert? But that's hundreds of leagues from here. How-* . His thought was broken by what he saw above him. It was nothing he had seen before and only added to the confusion. The sky had been replaced by a blanket of grey-black cloud travelling at a rate he had never seen cloud move. The air was still—not even a hint of a breeze—yet the thick and menacing looking sheet of cloud was moving as if carried by a hurricane—if hurricane's where in fact capable of moving at such speed.

The sun was completely lost—with not even the faintest glow presenting through the dull barrier, making it impossible to tell what time of day it was. The next oddity that struck the ranger was how light it was. With no sun light at all, it should have been dark, if not pitch black. He could find no sight of the sun trying to break through the cloud, yet it was light enough to see for tens of miles in every direction. *Why is it so hot?* He thought to himself, *there is no sun, yet it feels like high noon in the middle of the desert.*

He scrambled around trying to get an arm planted to support himself as he got up. *Maybe im dreaming, or hallucinating. As*

he clenched his core in an attempt to raise himself off the ground however, the searing pain returned like a swift kick to the head from an angry mule. *Maybe not, dreams usually take the pain away.*

His hand sat flat on the ground to provide support, but as he applied pressure, he felt it sink a little. It didn't feel like soft mud and his hand didn't slip—just sink. He looked down to find that he was no longer lying in mud, but sand. *Maybe this really is the desert. I must have been out of my mind to make it here without remembering it, he thought, but how could I have survived this long with such injuries untreated?*

*Injuries!* Memory of the hole in his gut flooded back and reached down to see how it had healed. As his hand met with the wound, he felt the warmth and wet of fresh blood. *Im still bleeding. This can't be the desert. None of this is real, I should try to keep moving, maybe that will rouse my mind.*

He struggled for almost a minute to get to his feet, where, once stood, he felt stable. There was no shaking or wobbling, his legs felt sturdy and his muscles strong. Feeling for the hole once more he could not locate it. Looking down in surprise it was no longer there—nor was there any blood, or even a tear in his tunic.

Confused the more, he decided the best course of action was to start walking. He concluded he would either wake up from

whatever state he had stumbled into or would eventually remember how he came to be here.

\* \* \* \*

Hours passed and the ranger kept walking—sometimes falling—but mostly walking. He never once felt tired or even felt any ache in his legs. After what he imagined was the first hour or so, the realisation of his wound disappearing seemed to be lost in his mind. He forgot all about his chase through the woods—his injuries and indeed the day he spent rolling through the mud on the forest floor in some desperate attempt to find safety.

The sky was still filled with black cloud—still moving at some ungodly rate. At first it had seemed strange to him—but much like the arrow wound in his gut, he forgot all about it. As much as he looked up at the sky during the first few hours, he no longer noticed it. Almost like his head was moving to check the surrounding, but his eyes had stopped sending the images to his brain.

The hours that past were, of course only figurative. With no way of actually telling the time, and no clue as to whether time was indeed still passing, his best guess was that it had been maybe four or five hours. The first two or so had been spent in wonderment and confusion of this new and mystical place. As his condition didn't improve however—by which he referred to

as being still stuck in an endless desert with no provisions and no sense of pain, thirst, hunger or eventually even fear. He concluded that he was probably dead and stuck in some middle ground between the living world and the spirit world.

The longer he kept going, the less aware he became. He felt like shell stuck in the endless cycle of putting one leg in front of the other and repeating. The occasional thought that passed through usually questioned his purpose—whether it be a test or whether it be punishment. He was never sure of the answer, but his solution was always to keep walking. *If it is a test, I should eventually find something. If its punishment...well then walking is better than sitting I guess.*

\* \* \* \*

The ranger was now in a new phase of his journey. As the hours and perhaps days continued to tick by (presuming of course that this place had any form of time) his body had began to wake up again. Like someone waking after a midday nap, his senses seemed to be returning slowly, one at a time. First is was hunger. Then thirst, then pain. His stomach felt like it was chewing on itself, his throat felt like it was closing up and his legs where and ready to drop off.

The one thing he still couldn't fell though, was his wound. Not that he couldn't feel it though, it simply wasn't there. It seemed that his senses returned to him, but the

hole—which he was still certain was there before he awoke in this place—seemed to have never existed.

He had by this point become sure he was being tested. That decision had come several hours ago—maybe even a day ago. Since then he had done little thinking, as it seemed to exacerbate his pains. He tried to focus on the horizon, which due to the nature of where he was, never seemed to change—apart from the occasional shape he saw for a brief second or so. They had come after the return of his senses however, so seemed likely that it was just his brain playing tricks on itself in the vain hope that there could be some freshly roasted deer, or a well, full of icy water waiting at the shape.

He lasted maybe an hour walking in the heat once he could feel his legs again. For the next hour, he crawled—the baking sand burning and blistering his hands. Every metre or so he had to stop and bury his hands into the cooler sand beneath. Progress was painful slow, but when there is no goal or destination, one doesn't seem to care very much.

Acceptance of death had come days ago, he now just wished it would hurry up and decide where to put him. The dark realm couldn't be any worse than this.

Hands now bleeding and full of sand, the pain was incredible, like he had buried his hands in the embers of a

raging fire and just left them there to cook. He lay down looking up at the dull sky, his hands across his chest, trembling in the pain. He yelled as loud as he could manage with his dry throat, hoping it would distract his mind from the pain. It didn't.

The yelling turned to weeping. His entire body was broken and so too was his spirit. As much as the pain of hunger or thirst grew, he never once felt like he could die—more like he it would keep growing until he went insane and no longer felt it.

He closed his eyes, releasing a stream of hot tears. He begged in his mind for it to end. *Take me! Take me to the dark realm if you must, just get me out of this place!*

When he opened his eyes, he saw something. Something real, for the first time—or so it seemed. He wiped his tears with the sleeve of his tunic and rolled over to get a better look at what it was.

As he saw however, and the realisation of its nature sunk in to what was left of his mind, his hope faded.

It was the figure in the long coat.

"welcome to the future my friend".

## Chapter 10

'Ranger, ranger can you hear me?'

An unfamiliar voice was cutting through the air around Haldor. It sounded old and somehow wise, yet calming and friendly. The voice of the man with the long coat had seemed calming to him, but this was a different voice. He glanced to the racing clouds. They seemed to be more grey than black now, as if they had spent their rain upon the land and where being banished by the warm sunlight behind them.

No such occurrence here though. They seemed lighter—which was not so difficult when their previous colouration was one shade above the endlessness of space—yet still angry looking and still with no hint of light behind.

'Ranger, can you hear me?'

That voice again, louder now and more sincere.

'Ranger!'

The world around started to seep away from him. The horizon was being squashed together to a single point and all around him it seemed the land was moving out from underneath him. He looked ahead to the man in the long coat—hoping he would offer some answers, but he too was sliding away. It seemed that the man didn't move from the spot at which he had come upon the ranger. The man stared back as he slipped away into the vanishing point. Haldor held out his arms trying, gesturing for him to come back.

'Ranger'.

Blackness followed. Then a dim light. His eyes where closed now—the light seeping through his lids.

'Ranger?'

The voice sounded now as if was directly above him. His lids shot open to catch whomever it was beckoning him.

He saw a man, not in a long coat, but in a robe—long it was, but a coat it most definitely was not.

In a panic, the ranger sat up and shuffled himself and put his back to the wall behind him.

"Who are you?" Haldor asked, "Were am I, and what happened to the man in the long coat?"

"Relax ranger, you have not reason be afraid. I am here to help you, although I know not of a man in a long coat", replied the robed man.

He looked old and had long white beard. His hair—also white—was escaping him and remained only around his temples. He had a hand outstretched toward the ranger. Its fingers were long and almost skeletal, coming to an end with long white nails.

"I found you crawling in the forest not far from the north road. Feverish you were and babbling nonsense. Half dead you were."

"In the forest?" asked he ranger, "I was in the desert, with a man in a long coat".

"Aye, I heard something about a man while you were lay here trembling in some night terror I wager. Come back, you say, for the sky is grey and the earth is white."

Haldor seemed to relax his body as the words sunk in, "the sky is grey and the earth is white".

The old man withdraw his outstretched hand and joined it to his other, beneath the long sleeves of his robe.

"where did you hear those words ranger?" he asked, with a slight hint of intrigue—or distress—in his tone. Haldor couldn't decide which it was, so he told it true.

"I saw a man in the forest whilst trying to find some shelter. He was wearing a long coat, though at first I thought it to be a robe. I tried to follow, but some force was holding me back, like some invisible arms pressing back on my shoulders, as if it didn't want to be followed".

The old man's eyes had drawn to a squint, making the ranger feel that the man had heard something of the likes before.

"Continue, ranger, did the man say anything to you?"

Haldor dropped his head and looked down blankly to bed on which he sat, trying muster his thoughts, trying to remember what happened next.

"I asked its name", the ranger said softly.

The old man's eyes widened in anticipation, "what did it say, did it tell you its name?"

Haldor looked the old man in the eyes. They were emerald green like the cloak the ranger wore, inviting yet worried looking.

"He said, 'when the sky is grey and the ground is dark, I will tell you my name'".

The old man looked down now—his expression still of intrigue, "what next?"

The ranger looked down again and opened his thoughts.

"As hard as I tried to move, I just fell over myself, time and again. Once the man was gone from my sight—which at that point was rather suffering—I felt the force let go. I tried to head in the same direction, tried to chase him. Eventually I could no longer walk. I fell to the ground, pain and exhaustion overcoming me", Haldor met the old man's gaze once more, "that's when I saw him again, stood—like he had when I first saw him—between two oaks. I glanced away just for a second, I didn't want to, but the force made me look to the sky which had gone grey. When it let go, he was gone again."

As the memories came flooding back to him like the ocean tide, his headache returned with them. Haldor, clutched his head between his hands, feeling the open gash on his right temple, he grimaced, and closed his eyes.

"After that I don't recall how I ended up in the desert, but I presume this injury to my head has something to do with it, do you not think?"

The old man continued to watch the floor, as if his old mind was still taking in what the ranger had now finished saying. He draw a shallow breath, "I found you lying next to a bloodied stump. I presume you struck your head on that and fell to unconsciousness. Perhaps this allowed the man into your mind, once you had lost your connection to the world. Some of my kind have the ability to enter other's minds as an

offensive tool in conflict. I would conclude that this 'man in the long coat', is probably a sorcerer of the high order".

"Terra", the ranger added.

"Yes", the old man answered, "though they are rare and all reside on Nemus so far as I am aware".

"If they are of your kind. That would make you a sorcerer as well?"

"That it does, though I possess not the power of the Terra, I am indeed the appointed high Kato of the northern realm".

"Then you must be the sorcerer who resides in the tower north of Fogdell?"

"Indeed I am", replied the old man, opening his arms to present himself, "and this is the very tower of which you speak".

"All the years I have protected this forest, I have not once set eyes on you. Many had believed you were not real at all", said the ranger, now smiling a little.

"Yet here I stand, before you now. My name is Garro, it is of the upmost pleasure to meet you ranger".

"And I you", the ranger tried to stand from the bad but was unable to. He set himself back down and held out a hand,

"my name is Haldor, ranger of Altamar and guardian of the forest."

The pair shook hands before returning to their previous positions.

"Tell me haldor, how was it you ended up so close to the maker. I would wager that this 'man in the long coat' did not penetrate your gut with an arrow?"

Haldor's eyes widened again, the flood gates of his mind swung open, "I had almost forgotten. Garro, now that my mind clears, I have grave news to report."

"Visions of that kind often result in a clouding of the memory. Do not fear, what came before will return to you".

Garro turned to face the fireplace on the opposite wall, his hands still clasped beneath the sleeves of his robe. "Come now, sit with me and we shall see if we cannot conjure some recollection". Reaching deeper into his robe he pulled out a long pipe and turned to the ranger. "Do you smoke Haldor?"

The ranger's face broke into a wide smile and he shuffled his way to the edge of the bed, "I do indeed my friend".

## Chapter 11

The calmness of the old man in the light of what the ranger had just said to him, *I fear we may be under an attack of some sorts*, felt odd to Haldor, but the man was old and perhaps he hadn't yet taken in this revelation. Like how a man winning the lottery might not seem affected until he awakes in the night with a huge grin, his head filled with possibilities.

The ranger thought the old man might have some sort of a reaction eventually, and so decided to sit with him and smoke as had been offered to him—if not simply because it had been so long since he last tasted the sweetness of burning pipe weed.

Haldor was making his way across the room whilst Garro was rummaging through a small wooden box on a table next to the fireplace. The old man produced another pipe and a leather pouch which Haldor presumed was full of tobacco.

"I am to take it you no longer have your own pipe", Garro asked.

"I do not im afraid. All my belongings are with my horse, wherever she may be. I expect in the hands of those who gave me this pain".

"It matters not", he turned and produced the pipe to the ranger, "here, take this one, I have not need for it anymore".

"My thanks Garro", replied the ranger.

Haldor took the pipe from the sorcerer and tried to take a seat before the fire. There were two large wooden chairs facing the flames, separated by a small round table. Garro, placed the leather pouch on the table.

"Take this also, may it get you through your journey home".

Hador lifted the pouch and began to untie the string holding it closed, "my thanks again. You have shown me great kindness".

Opening it, the ranger took inhaled deeply through his nose. The smell of fine tobacco is one of the smaller things in life that makes him smile. It smelled though like no other tobacco he had smelt before. It was sweet smelling, yes. But there was another odour underneath it—one he couldn't quite figure out. It was almost musty, like an old abandoned shack, earthy and rather displeasing to the nostrils. *What is the old*

*man smoking if he isn't smoking this? His pipe came out of his robe-*.

Just as the ranger finished his thought, Garro produced a smaller packet from within his robe—almost like he had anticipated Haldor's thinking. The old man untied it and began to stuff the contents into the long pipe that he still held in his right hand.

The ranger contemplated for a second before speaking, "why is it I have never seen you? I have lived in these wood my entire life, yet I have never laid eyes on even your tower here".

"The answer to that is a fairly simple one. A sorcerer is not always welcomed among the ordinary peoples of the world. Some look up to us, yes indeed. People like yourself ranger. Others look to us as strange and unkindly folk who wish them harm".

Garro had finished stuffing his pipe now and was making his way over to the chairs, one arm lost beneath the robe—presumably returning the pouch to its home.

He continued, "I was sent here by the council from Nemus many years ago, as an overseer to the people. Much like you, I am a protector of the lands, which I do from concealment, out of the interest of both myself and the people of the forest. The tower of which you question was here long before I was

sent. I belonged to another sorcerer, though he was not here of the councils wishes. The stone itself is imbued with energy, energy that even myself could not conjure. It has a way to move light across its surface, giving it the appearance of...of, well no appearance at all".

He paused for a moment, took a match from under his robe—which hit struck on one of the small round tables legs, before sinking It into his pipe. Puffing three or four times, clouds of smoke engulfed him. The old man waved a hand before his face to expel the smoke. He coughed gently, and continued.

"I would wager you have been here on many an occasion on your patrols and strolls through these woods. Although I cannot feel it, I am told that the stone emits a strange sound, inaudible to many, mainly that can hear it. Perhaps you have ridden through here and your horse has acted strangely?"

Haldor was perplexed. He couldn't believe such magic could make an entire building invisible to the eye.

"I can't say that I remember such an occurrence," the ranger finally answered, after several seconds of consideration, "how do you see it then, if it hidden by some powerful magic?"

In his bewilderment—and without realising it, the ranger was now stuffing small bundles of tobacco into his newly acquired pipe. Garro produced another match from under his

robe, which he once again struck on a table leg before presenting it to the ranger. Haldor bent forward as the old man poked the burning tip into the bowl and sucked gently on the stem, now losing his own head in the resulting cloud.

They both sat back in their chairs with pipes in hand, "being a sorcerer allows me to see such energies that ordinary folk would not", answered Garro, "now was there not something you wished to discuss?"

The ranger nodded to himself whilst gazing blankly at the floor, "yes, now you mention it".

There was a pause as Haldor tried to recollect his thoughts. He felt odd, like the memories were there but out of focus.

"Whilst I was making my way back home from the town, I encountered something in the forest. It was someone I had never seen before. There were flashes of light, like lightning, only they came from within the forest".

Haldor had his eyes clamped shut now, it seemed to be getting harder and harder to remember. He could picture his surroundings, but he couldn't picture his acquaintance.

"I...I followed the flashes and came to a clearing. The light seemed to stop, but only for a moment. There was a huge crack from above and one of the trees was ablaze. Out of the smoke there stood someone, someone I have never seen before.

He spoke to me...I think, I don't recall. He had others with him, more folk I have never met and one of them was a tall fellow, taller than you might have seen a man before".

He opened his eyes again and looked to the old man for his reaction. He sat there just as before, with a neutral expression and the end of the long pipe still planted in the corner of his mouth.

"You don't recall their faces Haldor, or their words?" asked the old man.

"No, their faces are fuzzy to me. I can hear a voice, but it's...like it's too far away for me to make out the words. All I remember from this point is fleeing through the forest, though I don't know what from. I suppose I was struck in my side and fell from the horse. Eventually ending up in the desert and then here".

The old man now had a slight smile growing across his mouth, "and thank the gods I found you, ranger, or you might be worm food by now".

Haldor grinned, still puffing on the pipe—which, to his surprise, tasted a whole lot better than its previous aroma.

"Perhaps these people were bandits, I hear they have been coming down from the mountains much more frequent. Perhaps they initiated an attack on you, and knowing their number was too many, you ran for help, or safety?"

The ranger had closed his eyes again to focus on the memories. They were now however, like the waves of smoke gathering in the roof space above them, hazy and fading. He could still picture the clearing and the flashes in the forest, but the image of the men (where they men?) he saw, had all but gone. Just the lazy outline of a figure remained.

"Do you now recall any more details of the 'man in the long coat'? Perhaps the hazing of these memories has cleared others", said the old man in the same calm voice.

"I...I do. I see his face more clearly now. He has dark hair, though of what colour I cannot be sure. It's swept back and flattened like he had been wearing some sort of hat or helmet. I see his eyes, but not the colour. He has a mark on the left side of his face".

At that instant, Garro's interest seemed to grow, "do you see what the mark is?" he asked.

"A scar maybe", replied Haldor.

Garro rose to his feet with a groan followed by several cracking sounds. They didn't seem to bother him though. Haldor supposed it would be normal in old age, sorcerer or no. The old man groped his long beard with his free hand, took several small puffs on the pipe and turned away.

"Does this mean anything to you Garro? Do you not recognise this man now?" Haldor asked, slightly shocked that old man now seemed so active.

Garro wandered over to the table where the wooden box from which he found Haldor's new pipe sat. "I am afraid I do not, young ranger. This man is as mystery to me as he be to you."

Haldor felt his slim hopes slip away as he resumed smoking this new tobacco which was fast becoming a favourite.

Garro it seemed had taken the last poof of his pipe and was now preparing to tip the ashes into the fire. "I think I will retire ranger. The hour is late, we have spoken much and with rest I am sure your memories will become clearer".

With a few quick flicks, little puffs of black powder were propelled into the flame. The old man stood straight—with another crack, "enjoy your pipe, Haldor. I will leave you to your thoughts, sleep well now".

With that, the old man made for the door, rummaging beneath his robe with one hand, presumably returning the pipe to its home.

Haldor did sit for a while longer, smoking down to the very depths of the bowl. *What a strange fellow*, he thought, *even with the mention of a threat he seemed so...calm and carefree*. Haldor paused for a moment to enjoy a few more

shallow puffs. *Perhaps he knows something of the 'man in the long coat', I will have to question him further in the morning.*

With the embers of his pipe now fizzling out, he too tipped the remains into the fire, which was now no more than a few gentle flames dancing over the glowing orange bed beneath.

His pain had subsided considerably, some sorcerer's magic or potion he thought. He spied a log pile in one corner of the room, from which he took several large logs and stacked them onto the fire. Still unable to see the face of the *thing* in the forest, he returned to the bed from which he had awoken. It hadn't seemed long since he heard the voice of the old man beckoning him from the desert, yet looking out through a small window behind bed head, it was indeed dark. *Was it not light when I awoke? We can't have been talking for more than an hour.* He was confused again, but it seemed to pass. *Maybe I was mistaken.*

One thing he was sure of though, was how tired he was. Out of bed only an hour or not, he felt like he'd been awake since dawn.

Stripping back the sheets, he climbed gently into the bed, being careful not to disturb the neatly dressed wound. Lying back he barely had chance to run a thought through his head. He was fast asleep.

## Chapter 12

When Haldor finally awoke, it was mid-morning, almost ten o'clock. The light was streaming in through the open window above him. He could hear distant bird song and the clashing of leaves in the wind. The fire had gone out completely and the room had fallen cold—goose bumps jumped up on his forearms as he pushed back the sheets. He was still wearing his breeches and under shirt so the cold didn't hit the rest of his body as forcefully as it did his arms, which he now folded and rubbed in an effort to get warm.

His head felt strange to him, almost like he'd spent the night at the inn, drinking with Brennan and Taigan well into the small hours. His pain was more prevalent now also, *the old man's tricks must be wearing off*, he thought.

Being careful as he had been getting into bed, he rose gently with one hand pressed against the aching wound. There was no noise coming from within the buildings walls—no footsteps or voices. He thought little of it.

Shuffling quietly at his own pace, he dressed himself in the clothes that he found folded on the bedside table. Within the neatly wrapped bundle he found his tunic—which was almost completely stained with his own blood, his coat and his belt, still with its pouches and sheathes attached—albeit one of the sheathes missing its knife.

His stomach grumbled loudly yet the thought of food still made him a little queasy. He made a quick scan around the room to check for anymore of his belongings—mainly his sword, hoping he had taken it from Emryn before they had separated and carried with him. He couldn't see it. He did however spot the small wooden box which Garro had kept the pipe and tobacco in which now resided in one of the pouches on Haldors belt.

Knowing that he shouldn't go looking, his curiosity got the better of him and he walked over to the box, hunched slightly so as not to aggravate his injury. He caressed the edges of the lid with his left hand before slipping his thumb under the rim and gently lifting the lid.

Inside there was a small piece of paper and nothing else. The paper was folded over roughly like it had been done in a hurry and stuffed in the box. Picking it up and opening it he saw that the underside was torn. It had two square sides and one long diagonal tear making it look like the old man had ripped the corner off of something. Inside there was a short note that made no sense to the ranger.

*The eastern light shimmers, its grey footing holds the  
key.*

Making no further sense of it, he returned it to the box and closed the lid. The chill had begun to seep through his clothes now and he noticed he had started to shiver. The fire was completely dead and he couldn't see any matches around the room. He fumbled around in the pouch on his belt that had contained his own, but alas they had gone missing along with the rest of its contents. One thing that did catch his eye was his cloak, which hung on the back of the wooden door. It, just like his tunic, was a mess. There was large dark patch on the right hand side with a hole right through the centre of it. The bottom was covered in dried mud and had become ripped and frayed on account of his day spent crawling and falling through the forest.

Still taking short and deliberate steps so as not to risk opening the wound—which for now was no longer bleeding, he made his way over to the cloak, which he hurriedly slung around his shoulders and wrapped tight across his chest. Now standing at the door, it seemed like a good idea to try and find the old man and thank him for his hospitality before he made his way home.

The door was unlocked and the hinged creaked loudly as he slowly opened it. Outside the room was a narrow passageway. At one end there was another door, at the other he could see steps. Opposite the door in which the ranger stood, there was a window, half covered by a rotting board. The other half Haldor thought, had probably rotted straight through and fallen off and there was a solitary weed growing out of the cracks in the stone which shook violently with each gust of icy wind.

"Garro?" the ranger called out along the corridor,  
"Garro are you there?"

No answer.

Haldor decided it best to just go and look for him. The man was old after all and probably couldn't hear his own footsteps, never mind someone calling him from another floor or another room.

He stepped out, still shivering and still with the cloak held tight to his body. Stepping quietly toward the closed door on far left hand side of the corridor, he heard a noise. It was quiet but unmistakably the noise of something living. At first it seemed like a groan, maybe the old man was snoring. Whatever it was, it seemed to come from upstairs. Haldor turned and felt a slight twinge in his torso, he

grimaced and placed a hand over the wound but carried on walking.

The stairs, like everything in this place where made of stone, but years of usage had worn them down and the centre of each step was well depressed, giving them a curved surface. They seemed to run around the outside wall of the tower with small windows every few metres or so. Thankfully this time, they were all still covered by their wooden boards—some of them however, well rotted with holes and moss growing on them.

When haldor reached the top, he was greeted by another wooden door. This one however was different. It looked much heavier and was wrapped with metal fixings, engraved and riveted all the way around it. This door was made both for something grand, and something worth keeping secure. *This must be his chambers*, Haldor thought. A hand parted the front of the cloak and rapped loudly on the door. No answer. He knocked again, "Garro, its Haldor. Are you in there?" the ranger called.

Still no answer.

The morning was only getting older and if Haldor was to make any significant progress he would need to get moving soon. He dicided then, to leave the old man in peace. Making his way back to the room which Garro had left him in, he had an idea. *The paper, I will leave him a note of thanks*, thought

the ranger. Entering the room he saw there was as a quill and a small ink well sticking out from behind the wooden box. The thought of there being no quill had never crossed his mind, but he was comforted all the same that he wouldn't have to worry about it.

Turning the ripped note over, he dipped the nib into the ink and began his thanks.

*Garro,*

*I tried to call you this morning but I presume you must be sleeping or otherwise busy with your duties. I am leaving you this note to thank you for your hospitality, for treating my wound and for the pipe and wonderful tobacco, it will surely help me on my journey home.*

*I have nothing to give to you in return except my deepest thanks. I do though hope we meet again one day. If you ever happen be in town, I will gladly buy you a drink and hot meal. If the season provides, I would also like to buy you some of the fine western tobacco that is a particular favourite of mine.*

*For now, my thanks, and goodbye,*

*Your friend,*

*Haldor.*

The ranger sat the quill back in the ink well and set the note on the table where the old man would see it. Making one last glance around the room, he made for the door and descended the tower.

At the bottom of the staircase he found another large room with a fireplace—also dead, a large table complete with wooden benches and some small wooden cupboards. Either side of wide stone fireplace hung herbs and vegetables, most of them dried and dead. There were however a couple of carrots and hung beneath them, some dried meat. Hoping the old man wouldn't mind, he took a carrot and a few strips of meat which he stuffed into one of the pouches on his belt. The air was still cold down here, but he had stopped shivering. He was stood more upright and his legs felt like they had plenty of strength in them. It was probably the thought of tucking in to Brennan's stew later that night that gave them false strength, but Haldor didn't mind. The thought of that stew was certainly making him feel warmer, and even produced a faint smile. Affixing his belt and wrapping his cloak close to him, he made for the exit—another large, metal wrapped door. He was surprised to find it unlocked, but then remembered what the old man had told him the night before about the tower being invisible. *If no one can see it, no point worrying about*

*locking your door*, he chuckled to himself as he stepped out into the sharp morning air, the door making a heavy clunking sound as it latched shut behind him.

The area he had stepped into was another large patch of open ground, covered in thick grasses and autumn flowers. It was not unlike the clearing he had encountered the sorcerer in, but this one was a little larger he thought, and the ground a lot wilder.

The sun was high in the sky, but it was still more than an hour until midday. It hung a little left of centre, meaning that heading directly forward should lead him on to the northern road, and then straight into Fogdell. His plan was to stay for a night or two in the town to recover some strength and hopefully lend a horse from Tomos to get him back home.

He set off walking but as he reached the edge of the clearing, some word rang out in his mind. *The eastern light shimmers, its grey footing holds the key*. He still had no idea what it meant, but he turned around to look back at the tower. To his surprise the front wall had disappeared. All he could see in its place were the trees at the far end of the clearing. Something caught his eye though, a glint of light to the far right. He began to walk along the edge of the tree line, making his way around to where he thought he saw it. As he walked, he thought his eyes were playing some trick. The glint grew into a bright shimmering wall of light. *The eastern*

*light shimmers*, he thought to himself again, *that must be the eastern wall of the tower.*

As he walked slowly toward it, it began to change. The swirling light subsided and gave way to a dull grey. The tower's wall was reappearing before him. He stood amazed, he had never seem magic this powerful and this impressive before. *What does the rest of it mean though?*

He scanned the length of the wall looking for a clue, *its grey foundation*, he repeating again, *maybe it's something at the base of the wall.* He shifted his gaze to look at the bottom where stone meets earth. About halfway along, he saw it, *its grey foundation.* A small pile of grey stone lay stacked against the cold stone. The ranger rushed over to it, forgetting about his injury. It cried out within him, as if making him aware of it presence. He let out a low groan and pressed a hand against it as he neared the *grey foundation.*

The pain had started to re-emerge and he had to brace himself against the wall to get to his knees. Taking his hand off the bandage he noticed it had slight red tinge to it. Haldor began to pick away the grey stones gently, one at a time, revealing something wooden. As he pulled away more of the rocks, the wooden something became a box, only about the size of a small jewellery box. It was beautiful though. Hand carved, dark rosewood with fine detailing. The hinges were made of polished brass and they too had been engraved,

probably by a master craftsman the ranger thought. *You don't see this kind of workmanship at your typical carpenters or locksmiths.*

The box had a small key hole in the front, but, as with the rest of the box, it was unlike any normal key hole. It had a central hole for the main arm of the key, but had diagonal cut-outs in a cross formation, rather than the typical cut-out at the six o'clock position. Haldor supposed it was some sort of sorcerers key, *probably has some sort of charm on it as well*, he thought.

He lifted it up and replaced the rocks to their original position. He knew he would never normally take something that didn't belong to him, but just like he had felt when he took the food from the old man's kitchen room, he felt like someone was telling him to take it. Someone telling him it was ok and that he needed to take it with him.

He stood up, once again using the wall to support him to his feet. The box fit perfectly into one into one of the deep pockets of his overcoat, and without another thought he walked out of the clearing, never once looking back at the tower.

## Chapter 13

Haldor was surprised to find that he did indeed recognise parts of the forest in which he now walked. Like the old man had said, he probably had walked right by the tower without even knowing it. As he walked, it kept the thought of Brennan's stew bubbling at the surface of his mind so he could pick at it whenever his legs decided they wanted to give up.

The midday sun rose high in the sky, and then began its slow descent towards the snow-capped mountains in the west. Haldor was still traversing the wilds of the forest floor, with no hint of a road in sight. The ground was rough and challenging here, thick with fallen trees and overgrown shrubs. The progress was much slower than he had hoped for and a trip that he knew was going to take him into the dark hours, could likely spill out in to the morning hours if the road didn't present its self soon.

His brilliant plan to think about food was starting to weaken. His legs were now genuinely tired and the state in

which the wound in his side had left the rest of his body was nothing to laugh at. Without proper rest, he would tire quickly. Soon after he would be unable to move himself and if that happened he would be back to square one. Rolling around, feverish, talking gibberish—so the old man had said, and without a hope. He doubted Garro would be around a second time to find him and give him shelter for a night or two.

As if by an act of the gods though, the brush lessened, opening out into clear forest. There were tracks here that he could clearly see and human tracks at that. *This area is well used*, he thought as he trundled through. Coming in to view to his right was camp fire, recently dowsed with a few delicate wisps still rising out of the ashes. Making his way over to it he saw that it was ringed with large stones, stones he recognised. This was a travellers rest and he had been here before. He glanced his head around to check for other familiar signs. Behind the camp fire, set between two trees was a tall outcropping of rock. His mind instantly recalled a night several years ago where himself and several other rangers were camped in this very spot. One of them told of how the outcropping was actually part of an ancient altar to the spirits of the forest. Most of them thought it was nonsense, it looked nothing like an altar. Haldor though, always thought there may be something to it. Spiritual significance in this place always comes in two's, most often, two grand trees

standing opposite each other. In this case, the outcropping stood directly in the middle of two trees—though they weren't exactly grand, they were of the same species. Maybe it was all just a coincidence that allowed for such stories to be made, but the thought of this being a spiritual place comforted Haldor and seemed to give him a little lift, maybe just the lift he needed to get him to safety.

With this in mind, Haldor figured it was best to rest for a few moments. He set himself down awkwardly on a fallen log that lay next to the camp. Now that he had stopped moving, his mind had stopped focusing on how he was going to climb over the next obstacle, and was instead focussing on pain. His lower body started to throb more and more the longer he stayed still. He reached into a pouch and pulled out a strip of meat, which he began to delicately chew on. It tasted good, slightly salted and with some spice mixed in. This drew his minds attention at least for a minute or two.

Knowing now where he was, he polished off the tasty treat and forced himself to his feet—the strain in his legs now showing. The wind was calm but as the day drew into early evening, the temperature would drop significantly. He wrapped himself tight in his cloak once more. He knew that just through the trees ahead would be the road he'd been wanting to see all day. He could almost smell the stew now.

\* \* \* \*

The walk down the road felt like a whole other world to him. After spending the last god knows how many days stuck in the undergrowth, crawling on all fours and traversing all manner of obstacles, walking down an actual road was like something he had never done before. It seemed so smooth and straight, he couldn't help but smile for the first league or so. In actuality it was just a worn dirt track through the woods, but all the same, it wasn't littered with dead trees prickling weeds and poison ivy.

As the jubilation of this new way of travelling wore off however, his mind turned to some more pressing matters such as, were is he going to sleep tonight. He thought Brennan would probably give him a room as they were good friends and Brennan trusted Haldor enough to know he would get his money back. There was always the chance the Inn would be full with all the fleeing Andarien's being given shelter there on the guards coin. He certainly knew that the other inns wouldn't provide him with shelter on credit.

When the mood takes, Haldor is quite the poker player. Many of the taverns hold open poker tables for anyone to join, which Haldor would do most nights he was in town. He seemed to have an unnatural talent for picking up tell's though and he would normally be the one clearing out all the other players at the end of the night. The only other person in town who provided a good challenge was Brennan. The two of them were so

competitive and skilled that the other inn keepers accused them of being cheats and thieves, in the game together to take everyone's money, and as a result, they were both banned. With nowhere else to play, Brennan opened his own inn in town and a friendship was formed.

Haldor found himself smiling again as he thought of the good times he and Brennan had taking everyone's money back in the old days. The hour was late now though, the light was starting to fade in to twilight and the wind was picking up. Looking up through the gap above the road, he could see clouds moving in fast. The darkness was coming quicker than he thought.

As the hours ticked by and the miles got increasing longer on account of a slowing pace, his body was slowly starting to shut down. His legs were hurting more than the hole in his gut, which now seemed to be draining the life out of him. It had left him severely weakened, and minus several pints of blood. His muscles weren't getting the oxygen they needed and his head was pounding. His walking wasn't even a walk anymore, his feet were dragging along the ground with every step and he had begun to weave left and right along the path. Above him, although he didn't really notice it, came the first crack of thunder ripping through the air with a hearty thud.

The first drops of rain began to strike to leaves above making the quiet evening come alive with noise. The ranger kept *walking*, not thinking about the forest around him but focussed solely on getting to the end of the road alive. His pain was now lost in a mind that was lost in itself. Nothing was consciously going around in there except the next tree, and then next tree on the horizon. How many more trees would it be to Fogdell?

Haldor hadn't detected it yet but something was moving in the forest off to the right side of the road. Slow moving, but perhaps more importantly moving in the ranger's direction. It was making no attempt to quieten its footsteps, moving closer and closer to the road. Maybe it years of sensory training that awakened something in Haldor's mind and he stopped, still looking straight ahead. The world came rushing back to him, the surge of adrenaline thankfully blocking out most of the pain though.

Dried leaves cracked and fallen twigs snapped underfoot of whatever was stalking him. He heard a loud rustle, knowing that whatever it was, was walking straight through a low shrub. If this was a person, they wouldn't make this much noise unless they were running from something. He knew it must be an animal, *wolves*? He thought as his left hand crept slowly down beneath his cloak towards his belt. *Even wolves would take more care in stalking prey, what the hell is it.* he

decided the best option was to turn and face it and if he could move quickly enough he might startle it. He shifted some weight onto his right leg ready to make the turn when he had another thought. *If it's an injured wolf, they won't care how quiet they are.* His left hand reached the grip of his one remaining weapon and then, with all the energy he could muster he shot around, yanking the knife from its sheath and holding it defensively before him.

It wasn't a wolf, but he did startle it. It stopped right in its tracks before stepping back. The ranger looked on in disbelief at what stood before him. A brown mare with a white tipped nose, saddled and without a rider. *Emryn.*

He broke out in laughter as he flicked back the cloak and rehomed his knife. The horse seemed confused at this, standing still and nickering at the deranged man. Haldor walked up to his horse, seemingly overcoming the fact that he could barely stand a few moments ago. As he approached she lowered her head as if provoking him to pet her. He obliged, rubbing the side of her face and neck still smiling.

He inspected her quickly, expecting to find some horrific wound. He was shocked though to find the extent of injuries included a small cut on her ribs and another on her rump—neither of which she seemed even remotely bothered about.

Approaching the saddle, his muscles seemed to sense what was coming. All of a sudden they tightened up and seemed to scream out at him. Doing his best to not aggravate anything, he placed a firm grip on the saddle horn and used a free hand to help his right leg into the stirrup. Gripping with both hands he dragged himself atop the horse with a full bodied grunt filled with both strain and horrible pain cutting through from his torso. He took some deep breaths to calm himself before he all but collapsed in the saddle. Emryn seemed to know what to do however and started walking in the direction of town with no encouragement from her master.

\* \* \* \*

Emryn trotted gracefully down the now widening road—the first sign that a settlement was nearing. The rain persisted and deep rips of thunder broke the monotony of the rainfall. Haldor was slumped forward in the saddle, resting against the back of Emryn's neck. He had passed out after only a few minute of riding. A good thing however, he would soon be needing what strength he had.

Figures started to appear on the road in the distance. All of them moving toward the ranger. They were a long ways off but making fast progress. A blinding flash and an ear shattering crack ripped through the forest, waking Haldor with a start. He looked up and immediately noticed the shapes moving toward him.

He shifted forward and squinted, trying desperately to work out who they were. He could see the unmistakable form of hood and cloak. The rangers.

He giggled Emryn, speeding her up to a gallop. They raced toward the ranger party, hopes of saviour returning. As they approached, a familiar voice broke out, "Halt, present yourself ranger". It was Alahad.

"Alahad, how good it is to hear your voice", the ranger replied.

"Haldor?" Alahad stepped out of line and walked toward Haldor, seeing the blood stained clothes and noticing the pain in his face. "What in the name of spirits happened to you?"

"It's a long story, but im glad to see you all back on the road to recovery".

"We lost a couple of men to their wounds and there are still three resting at the barracks. We have been gone for too long though, I thought we should head back to the camps and report", Alahad responded.

Haldor was about to speak but was interrupted by a ranger from the back of the group.

"BANDITS ON OUR FLANK!"

The rangers broke up, drawing their weapons and scanning the forest for threats. Haldor reached out for his sword

without thinking. Luckily the sword that his hand had expected to find, was still attached to the saddle. He drew it, seemingly with ease and stepped down from the horse, whispering softly to her, calming her.

Everything seemed silent in anticipation. Another great roar of thunder broke out just a brilliant blue streak reached out from the clouds like a hand of god, striking a tree somewhere ahead of them. Out of the noise came the bandits, shouting and hollering to scare the rangers—a tactic lost on them, as rangers were highly trained in combat.

They came from all around, spawning out of the darkness, running straight for them. Many of the ranger loosed their knocked arrows, felling several of the front runners. Haldor assumed a defensive posture, weight low, gripping the fine blade with both hands, feeling its delicate balance.

Two of the bandits rushed at him from the left. He parried a strike from the first and used his momentum to follow through a strike on the second. His strike was blocked but it threw the bandit off balance and left him unguarded, letting Haldor slip the sword through his belly. He pulled the sword back and turned to face his other foe. The bandit tried several swipes, all failing to hit the ranger. The next attack he blocked with a heavy sweep to the right. Haldor lowered his blade and sliced through the ligaments behind the bandits right knee. He fell ground screaming in pain before being cut

off by Haldor's blade being thrust through his back and out his chest.

Haldor kicked the corpse off his sword and flicked it to the side, showering streams of fresh blood on to the road beside him. He could hear the cries of men dying and the clinking of swords meeting. He felt faint all of a sudden, too much energy expended without proper rest. Another bandit made a break for him. As if pre-programmed in his mind, he parried with ease and ran the bandit through, leaving his limp body to flop to the ground.

He heard a shout, "Haldor!" it sounded like Alahad. With no thought for his condition, he ran in the direction of the shout, stopping only to prematurely end the fight of bandits in his way. The shout came again, "Haldor!" closer now it was, but all around were bandits and rangers fighting for their lives, dying and wailing. He stopped and looked around frantically until his eyes met their target. What he saw chilled him to the very core.

Suddenly all the memories of the night he met the sorcerer came racing back. The (men) he saw that he hadn't believed could exist. But they did exist. He watched helplessly as a dead man overpowered Alahad ahead of him. The leader of the group knelt on the ground clutching a stump where his right hand had been. The dead man raised his sword over his head and brought it down, removing Alahad's head with

ease. The head rolled for a moment before stopping, its former body slumping over behind it.

As Haldor looked on in terror, the dead man glared at him with solid white eyes. The flesh of his face darkened and rotting beneath a dented steel helm. Haldor raised his sword and prepared for what he knew was certain suicide.

From behind him he felt a sudden shock, his head felt cold but he felt something warm running through his hair and down the side of his face. His vision blurred and his legs collapsed from underneath him. As he looked up, he saw the dead man readying to claim his head as he had done with Alahad.

From all around came a faint fuzzing noise. He looked around him and from out of the darkness of the forest all around, came a growing light. Thunder claps came more intensely, lightning striking the canopy above them. He felt his ear drums go numb as the all sound faded, the light growing more and more intense. Ahead of him, the dead man stopped. And just as the light became unbearable he felt a shock wave sail through the trees, knocking him forward onto his face.

The numbness faded and the fuzzing returned to his ears. Rolling over onto his back he opened his eyes to find the light gone and through the gap above the road he saw a perfect

circle in the clouds. The circle broke straight through them, revealing the thick layer of grey extending upwards. At the very centre of the hole was the brilliant shining of a star, one of the celesti. *Socerery!* He thought as he lifted himself into a sitting position.

He could no longer hear the sounds of battle, in fact it had gone silent. Haldors eyes were caught by movement in the shadows outside of the ring of light cast by the hole. Out of it stepped a man, dressed in a long robe and sporting a long grey beard.

"Garro?" Haldor cried, "Thanks the gods".

Garro spoke back, "You must hurry Ranger, I do not have much time now. Use the key, open the box and cast the contents to the stars".

Haldor was confused, "I do not have the key--"

"The key is wherever you wish it to be" Garro broke in, "but be quick, the darkness will be upon you, it is already too late for me".

Another voice broke through the air, it was a voice Haldor thought he knew.

*FOOL OLD MAN, YOU COULD HAVE LIVED IF YOU HAD JUST STAYED IN YOUR DANK TOWER AND KEPT YOUR FUCKING MOUTH SHUT.*

Haldor looked around for the source of the booming voice, somehow though, he didn't expect to find one.

"Hurry ranger, you must go now!" Garro cried.

Haldor tried to get to his feet, but his head felt so heavy and his movements seemed over-exaggerated. The forest spun around him and he fell back to the ground. He glanced up at the old man who was now looking down at the floor. "Gods protect me in the next life", Garro said softly.

Fading in from the shadows above the old man came another figure. It was floating above the ground and was somehow strangely transparent. The shape lifted its arms in front of it, as if holding something. The voice returned.

*THE GODS CANNOT PROTECT YOU WERE YOU ARE GOING OLD MAN.*

The figure shifted its arms, there was a low cracking noise and Garro let out a faint whimper before his body fell to the ground.

*DO YOU REMEMBER ME KNOW RANGER, DO YOU REMEMBER MY FACE OR HAVE YOU BEEN AT THE OLD MAN TOBACCO ON YOUR TRAVELS?*

The figure began laughing maniacally. The image was still a little fuzzy in Haldor's mind, but he saw it now, the sorcerer in the forest, the voice in his head. "You're not from this world", Haldor said shakily. He fumbled around in the pockets of his jacket, desperately searching. Above him,

the clouds had started to seep into the hole, slowly dimming the star light.

*VERY GOOD RANGER. AT LEAST YOUR NOT AS STUPID AS YOU LOOK. I MUST ADMIT IT WAS FUN PLAYING WITH YOU BACK AT THE TOWER...BUT IT IS TIME FOR YOU TO GO NOW.*

Haldor suddenly realised the old man had been tricked or forced all along. *The note in the room, this box in pocket, he was trying to warn me,* Haldor thought as he gripped what he was looking for. A small metal tube, tipped with a jagged cross. He pulled it from his pocket along with the box. "The key is wherever you wish it to be", he said.

*WHAT ARE YOU BABLING YOU IDIOT-*

Haldor thought the sorcerer must have caught sight of the box in his hands. He rushed to get the key into the hole, missing the first few attempts as his vision lapsed.

*DECEATFUL FUCKING FOOL. IF YOU OPEN THAT BOX, YOUR LIFE WILL CHANGE FOREVER, YOU WILL BE HUNTED DOWN AND SLAUGHTERED LIKE THE SCUM YOU ARE*

"Better to live now and fight later", Haldor replied. He could feel something in his head, like someone scrabbling around in his thoughts. The key fell into place and he turned it, feeling a satisfying click as the lock released. A fierce pain shot through his head, he screamed uncontrollably.

His whole body seemed to tense up, his muscles contracting. The box slipped from his hand and fell to the ground, spilling its contents. The pain kept growing, it was like someone driving a nail through the top of his skull. He could somehow feel the frustration of the sorcerer, like their minds had fused.

Out of the box fell, what looked like a glass shard. Haldor could see a faint glowing inside it, shimmering with a strange beauty. Trying his best to fight through the pain that felt like it was tearing his brain in two, he collapsed to the floor and clutched the shard in his hands, shaking furiously as he did.

He could feel its energy pulsing through him as he held it. *Sky glass*. He let out one last cry. He forced himself to his knees and raised the shard up in front of him. He didn't know what was going to happen, but what did, seemed like a miracle.

The hole above that had now almost closed grew bright. The covering cloud was banished and he saw the celesti again. It shone brighter now than it had before. The pulsing grew quicker in his hands and the shard lit up. A beam of silvery light shot down from the sky to meet the glass. Haldor's eyes remained open but his mind turned white. He could see an endless reach of nothingness ahead of him. He had no idea what

was happening but he was scared, more scared than he had ever been before.

The shape of the sorcerer returned before him, although he knew now he could no longer feel him in his mind but he hear his final words.

*TODAY YOU HAVE WON, BUT ONLY IN LIVING. ALL YOU LOVE WILL DIE.*

Then it was all gone. The sorcerer. The light. The pain. He knelt there on the forest floor, breathing heavily. All around there no sound but the pattering of rain and leaves clashing. He opened his mouth to let out a sigh, feeling the now drying blood cracking on the side of his face. He placed a hand on the ground to help support him to his feet. No good. His legs wobbled a moment, but he knew what was coming. His vision finally blurred out completely he slumped to the floor once again.

## Chapter 14

Tomos, Ania and Addor where sitting down to a late supper when the bells rang. Ania had prepared a roast chicken with fresh vegetable soup and a crusty cob that Addor had helped bake earlier that day.

The three of them sat with their hands joined around the fine oak table, offering a prayer to the spirits of the forest and to the four. As their thanks ended, Tomos rose from his seat brandishing a worn carving knife, ready to cut into the juicy chicken. He picked up a fork with the other hand and stabbed into the chicken's side as support. Ania rose from the table next—ladle in hand—about the serve up the steaming hot soup. That's when they came.

The piercing sound of the bell hung above the town keep. The keep bell usually rang out to signal the passing of the hours, but it had last sounded not 30 minutes before. Something was about to happen, that much Tomos knew, but what it was that was about to happen rested on the next tone of the

bell. If it rang again with pauses in between, it was a calling to the guard, meaning that a threat could be coming. If it rang without pause, it would be followed by the watch bells in the towers above the town walls. This meant the town was under attack.

Tomos and Ania froze, still stood above the table. Addor sat, looking worriedly to his guardians. Ania looked back with soft eyes, comforting eyes, while Tomos stared across the room, waiting for the next bell.

It sounded again and then stopped. Tomos looked to his wife confused, "what's that supposed to signal?" he asked. Ania shook her head.

After a long pause it came again, but this time it didn't stop. It kept ringing, again and again. Soon after that, came what Tomos was dreading. The tower bells joined the choir.

Tomos dropped the knife on the table and almost flipped the whole thing over trying to get his chair out from underneath him. The chair fell backwards and Tomos ran across the warm room toward the hallway. He turned to one of the ornate cabinets he had made and reached above it. He pulled down a sword. It was resting in a brown leather bound scabbard, with engraved silver end pieces. Tomos looked over to Addor who was staring closely at the sword he now held. "You've seen this before haven't you Addor. It was your

fathers, he gave it to me a long time ago to keep you safe. It's a ranger's sword, forged in their camps way up north. He used this very sword to protect the people of this land for many years".

Addor looked up to Tomos confused, "does my father not need it, is he not going to protect the people now?" Addor might only be young be he knew what the town bells meant. He knew they were all in danger.

Tomos walked over to the boy and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, your father has another sword, but he gave me this one because the spirits give it strength. Strength to keep you safe. Now come one, we have to leave."

The boy nodded.

\* \* \* \*

Taigan was in the barracks looking over the injured rangers when the bells sounded. The barrack was almost empty at this time of night. Those who weren't on duty were likely at one of the many inns, drinking and gambling, or spending their wages on some brief companionship at the whore house. When the bells rang however, every guard was on duty, whether he was drunk and barely able to stand, or in the middle of the act with their hired 'friend', it didn't matter.

Taigan was sat on the edge of one of the beds, helping one of the physicians redress a wound. The first bell rang,

and neither of them took note. The second bell rang and they both looked up at each other. The pause only served to make them uneasy, it only meant that the person ringing the bell had been stopped.

"Why has it stopped, it's not the hour chime. Why doesn't it ring again?" Taigan said to the worried looking physician.

The ringing came again, and kept ringing. Taigan grasped the hilt of his sword, "stay here doctor and don't let anyone in who isn't me, you understand?" The doctor nodded in reply, presumably unable to muster any words. This after all, was the first time since he was born that the town had been under direct attack.

When Taigan got outside he spotted a patrol standing by the south gate. They all looked confused, the bells were ringing but they hadn't even seen so much as a passing rabbit outside the wall.

Taigan ran over to them, his hand still gripping the hilt. "We need to get to the keep. Did you hear the first bells, the bell man was stopped after the first two rings, which means they have already taken it."

"But-", one of the guards started.

"Go up through the markets and make sure to tell those who are fleeing to head for the south gate. I'll go around the

outside, through the houses and make sure the people heading south have a safe passage to the gate."

"Yes sir." The guard replied.

Taigan headed for the west end of the street. He was a veteran of the guard, but nothing like this had ever happened to the town before. The people didn't know how to respond in this situation and he knew it. The major residential areas were in the north, their first instinct would be to get out as quickly as possible, and that meant the north gate. The keep lies just north of the market district, but if that had already been taken, the people up there were probably dead already. He knew his first obligation was to try and protect the people, but he was smart, if they were being invaded by the same people who attacked the ranger party, then heading north would be suicide. His only option would be to get as many people from the southern quarter to the south gate.

As he rounded the corner to the streets west of the markets, he could see people running from their homes. Some of them heading toward him, some of them running north and some of them not knowing where to run. He began to run up the middle of the street, shouting to the residents, "GO TO THE SOUTH GATE AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN, LEAVE YOUR THINGS. GO NOW AND FOLLOW THE ROAD TO CLED." He kept repeating it until the people took notice. Mothers carrying children and fathers wielding anything they had to protect their families now began

to run south. Taigan however had another objective, he needed to get Addor to safety.

As the flocks of running people made their way down the street, he looked around at the frantically, trying to spot Tomos or Ania. They weren't there. As he moved further north he spotted the front yard of carpenters home, still with tools and logs stacked neatly on the ground. The front door was open a little and he could see the faint flickering of candle light escaping from inside.

He made his way warily toward the door, his sword half drawn. "Tomos? Ania? Are you in here?" there was no response. He pushed open the door with his right hand, his left gently prying the sword from its scabbard. He entered the hallway, the only sounds he could hear were the screams and running feet of the people outside. The door creaked gently behind him as it slowly swung back toward the frame, blocking some of the commotion coming from the street.

The house was still quiet, as he stepped into the sitting room he saw the table still set, and the steam still rising out of the iron soup pot. There was a chair resting on its back at one end of the table, *they've gone*, he thought to himself as he held the hilt of the sword up before him, his free hand holding the end of the scabbard.

Outside, people were still streaming down the street. The guards must have been doing their job right, as many of them were filtering around from the market square. Taigan stood in the front yard for a second, contemplating what he should do next. With Tomos, Ania and the boy gone, there was only one place left for him to go. He strolled out of the yard and turned north, *I guess we head to the keep then.*

\* \* \* \*

Tomos was making his way up a wide street. There were houses on either side of him, most of which had recently been abandoned by their scared inhabitants. A few yards behind him, Ania and Addor were crouched against the front of one of the houses, waiting for Tomos' signal to move on.

He scanned the street, checking all the nooks and crannies between the tightly packed housing, making sure nothing was waiting to ambush them. Satisfied that it was safe, he turned to the others and waved his hand. Ania and Addor got up and made their way toward him.

"Up ahead, the streets get very narrow and very confusing. I need you two to stay close to me once we get there ok?" Tomos said in a low voice. The pair nodded at him.

At the end of the street, the path splits off into two, one goes north along the back of the houses and the other cuts

through a place known as 'smugglers run'. It's so named because the buildings there are so tightly packed and convoluted, that the path becomes incredibly narrow and winding. It's known to the people in town to be a very dangerous place to be alone or without protection. Many of the town's gambling dens and other 'less than lawful' activities tend to occur in the 'smugglers run'. Tomos hoped though that the commotion had left it empty like the rest of the town and would work to their advantage, since the end of the run leads directly into the square at the west gate.

Tomos led them to end of the narrow alleyway, "stay close now, you hear." He had the ranger's sword that had once belonged to Haldor held out in front of him. His eyes were scanning the entire alleyway, looking for threats—which, down in the run, might not have come from those attacking the town, but from the residents. Pickpockets, drunks, thieves even hired killers all resided down here, Tomos would need to be on his toes if they were going to get out of there in one piece.

Tomos was no soldier, he had never been part of any armed force or indeed ever been in a fist fight—not a real one anyway. When Haldor gave Tomos the sword, they spent several days training together out in the woods. Haldor had told Tomos he was a natural, he picked up the basics of sword fighting with relative ease, and for a man who had never been in a

fight before he could certainly give Haldor a run for his money by the time their training was over.

Every shadow was suspect, every corner or doorway could have someone lurking behind it, just waiting for the opportune moment to strike. Fogdell was by no means the largest town in the country, but it was certainly the largest in the north. Towns up there are spread sparsely, so any major settlement has the same rungs on society's ladder as any city south of the forest borders, they are just packed into a smaller space.

Inching forward, with Ania and Addor close behind, Tomos kept the sword in front of him, keeping the balance that Haldor had taught him, making sure he wouldn't be caught off guard. The run seemed empty—just what Tomos had hoped for. He heard no voices, no music coming from the tavern, no screams of those being raped or murdered. For all he could tell, the run was empty. Maybe they had all fled with the townsfolk, maybe they had all gained some sense of honour and decided to fight for their town. Tomos thought both of these were unlikely, they were probably all holed up inside, waiting for the first bandits to break in so they could have a good fight, a bit of *fun*.

There was a creek, Tomos looked around, his heart pumping so hard he could hear it above the noise of the raid going on in the background. He looked up and caught a window shutter

coming to an abrupt close. "They're watching us, we have to go. Now!"

Ania looked terrified, she had a tight hold on Addor's hand who, surprisingly, looked somewhat calm. He was crouched next to Ania looking up at Tomos, not a hint of fear in his eyes. "you have steel nerves just like your father," said Tomos, "you keep a hold of them, and you keep a hold of Ania's hand because we're going to run in a second." He looked both of them in the eyes, he knew what was about to happen, just like Haldor said it would. In a few seconds, men would come out of the dilapidated, cramped buildings. They would surround them, they would be outnumbered and they would be robbed. Tomos knew he would likely be killed trying to protect his wife and his adopted child. He was prepared for it, but he would do what he could to escape their fate.

"When I turn back around, we are all going to run and we're not going to stop until we hit the square, understand?" Tomos said in his best effort at a calming voice. His hand was shaking slightly and his voice too.

"What's happening?" asked Ania.

"It doesn't matter, we're just going to run," replied Tomos, still trying to keep his low tone. Ania looked even worse though, her hands were shaking as well as her husband's. Tears were streaming down her face, Tomos thought she could

sense what he knew, but was keeping herself from admitting it for the sake of the boy.

Tomos gave both of them a nod, and turned around. They all stood back up and broke out into a run just like he had told them. Behind them Tomos could hear doors being slung open and he could hear men running. Glancing back he saw at least four or five, all wielding daggers, rough looking spindly men with dirty ripped clothes and skin that looked unwashed for months.

They kept going, Tomos could see the end of the run, he could see the square, and they were almost at the end. Behind them the spindly men were baring down, Ania lacked the stamina of the others and was lagging behind. Tomos knew she wouldn't make it to the end without help. He stopped and turned, "keep running the pair of you, and don't look back!" he shouted to them. He stood now with Haldor's sword, the men were stopping ahead of him, readying for a fight, trying to look threatening. Tomos knew they were untrained thieves, but they had all seen their fair share of fights-that is what they do after all. They don't fight by the rules, they fight dirty. He took a long gulp and tried to prepare himself mentally. He had to forget about his family and he had to forget about his fear. *See the whole fight*, Haldor had told him, *clear your mind of any troubles, because the only trouble that matters*

*right now is the wrong end of the sword pointed in your direction.*

The first man threw out a few broad strikes, trying to throw Tomos off guard. They were easily dodged, but there were four of them all looking to turn him into a corpse, one of them was bound to land a hit eventually. Another of them made a stab with his dagger which Tomos deflected with the sword. His stance was perfect, just as Haldor had taught him, light on his feet, always moving, always anticipating the next move. Putting it in practice in a real life of death situation is difficult, but he was doing his best.

Just then there came a new noise, it was closer than before, the same screams and panic he had heard coming from the north but now much closer. He heard a town guard shouting from the square behind him, telling the other soldiers to form rank. The attackers were almost upon them, and he had just sent his wife straight toward them. Something seemed to click in his brain, some switch, his fear was gone and his hand seemed no longer to tremble. He was focussed and calm. The first man tried again with his swipes but Tomos was done playing. He swung hard with the sword, catching the man's hand in mid-flight. The dagger went tumbling off into the distance as well as three of his fingers. He fell the ground clutching his deformed extremity, screaming and writhing in agony. One of the other men took a lunge, which was deflected again by

the now more than able swordsman. Another tried to get him from the side, but Tomos was one step ahead. *See the whole fight.* He came back around, deflecting the dagger, putting his whole weight behind the motion, the thief found himself impaled through the abdomen with blood rising up and spilling out of his mouth. Tomos pulled the sword free to keep his guard, but the other two men had seen enough. They turned and ran back to the wholes from which they surfaced.

His next objective would be to find his wife and the boy. He ran as fast as he could to end the narrow passage, eyes darting frantically, looking through the scared crowds. At the north end of the large square, guards were fighting and dying, trying to protect their posts. He saw now that the attackers were bandits, just like Haldor had mentioned when he came over for dinner a few nights before.

He made for the crowds of people, shouting their names, looking desperately for them. Above the noise he heard his named called back to him. It was Ania, and she still had the boy grasped firmly in her hand. As he pushed his way through the mayhem, he heard another of the guards call, "we cannot hold them!" He looked in the direction of the voice, and to his horror he saw a horde of bandits, cutting down the guard like they were cattle, marching relentlessly for the crowd. "you have to go now," he said to his wife, "you have to go with the boy and you have to find a way out of here. Don't

wait for me, just find a way out and make for Cled. I will meet you there."

Tomos kissed his wife for the last time and looked to Addor, "you look after her while im gone, she will tell me when we meet next." Addor nodded, now visibly fighting back his own tears. Tomos motioned them to move, as hard as it was for him to let them go. It was his duty though, his duty to protect them to his last breath.

From the behind came a small group of guard who had made their way up from the south gate. Five men against a horde of murderous cut throats. They each looked at Tomos, each giving him a distinctive look which said that they all knew it was the end for them. They would die with honour, defending the people they loved.

Tomos offered a small gesture to the gods as the horde made for them, he asked for their blessing and he asked for their strength. The guards patted one another on the shoulder, their way of saying goodbye. They each patted Tomos as well. He wasn't one of them by creed, but they all fought for the same reason. As the bandits got closer, the guards lifted their swords, Tomos following their motion. "We fight for the north, we fight for the people, we die for the people!" one of the guards yelled. With that the all followed in the bellowing and ran to their certain doom. Tomos, with sword in hand, and honour in his mind, followed them to their fates.

One of the guards was brought down by an arrow as they ran. His body rolled end over end and it hit the ground. The rest of them made it to the horde who had their weapons at the ready, already coated with the blood of the innocent. Tomos thrust his sword to catch the swing of one of the bandits. His blow fell and the sword plunged into the bandit's belly. He felt a sharp pain in his right leg and fell to his knees, letting out a cry of pain. He swung his sword again to deflect an incoming blow but felt another point land in his side. He screamed again, the pain overcoming for a moment as the bandits ripped the sword from his flesh. Tomos Collapsed to the ground, soaking up the gathering pool of his own blood. He felt someone grab his hair from behind and pull him up to his knees. In the distance he could see Ania and Addor running with the crowd, not looking back, just like he had said.

"Gods keep them safe."

He felt the point of a sword resting on the back of his neck, and that was the last thing he felt.

## Chapter 15

It was now well past nightfall. The distant calls of hunting owls echoed through the still trees above the rattle of the relentless rainfall. Haldor's consciousness was returning slowly. The calls of the owls were infecting his dreams, seeping through the blackness into his mind, slowly bringing him around. His eyes shot open to see the darkened canopy above him, the hole that showed him the Celesti had now gone completely, replaced only by rain clouds.

He realised he was still clutching the shard in his left hand and the memories of the evening's events came rushing back. The bandits, the dead man and the shaft of blinding light that ripped the sorcerer from his mind. He sat upright and looked around, still mulling over the events in his head. He saw the bodies of all those slaughtered just hours ago, the bodies of rangers, the bodies of their attackers. None of them

moved now, he felt somewhere within him that he had been unconscious for at least an hour or more. Any man who was alive long enough to witness the battle of the light and the wielding of the shard who have bled to death long ago.

He had heard tales of Magei having mysterious shards of glass that had some sort of power. A connection the stars like the Magei themselves, but unlike any other object on the planet. All things felt the force of the gods, but no inanimate object is able to connect with it. He put the shard back in the box which still lay at his side and locked it with the key that he had somehow summoned to his pocket. The thought of him using sorcery made the ranger shiver, but he knew what he would do with it. The safest option would be to take it to the Magei council on the isle of Nemus, off the south eastern coast of the continent. Magic this powerful was too dangerous to be kept by a simple ranger, it could be taken by anyone and, as a guardian of the forest, he knew it was best for everyone's safety if it was with the council, hundreds of miles away.

He scrambled to his feet, not feeling as much pain as he had before. The wound seemed less aggressive now and he could press his hand against it without wincing. On the ground before him he spotted his sword, the blood of countless bandits all but washed off by the rain. He bent down to pick it up and felt around at his belt for the scabbard, only then

realising that is was still attached to his horse. He looked all around again, hoping she was naving on some shrubs somewhere, but he couldn't spot her. It was dark after all. Haldor planted the sword in the soft earth and placed two fingers in his mouth. With a deep breath he let out a loud whistle with which he hoped Emryn would be still be able to hear. He stood silently for a few seconds, checking in all directions for the horse. Hearing nothing but the rain, he whistled again. A few more seconds passed with no change, then from the west came the unmistakable patter of hooves galloping through the underbrush.

Emryn appeared with all her grace from out of the shadows of the forest, coming to a stop before he master. He reached out and patted her wet face, reaching up to the saddle with his other hand to sheath his sword. She let out a small grunt of approval and bowed her head, presumably scanning the ground for food. Felling somehow refreshed, he slid the sword back into the mounted scabbard and climbed atop the horse once again—this time without so much as a grunt. He looked around again, offering some prayers in his mind to the souls of the lost that were now finding their way into the next life. With a soft kick, Emryn began to trot down the worn path towards the town. It wouldn't be long now, it was less than a league to Fogdell from here, were, Haldor thought he would be

enjoying some warm food and a comfortable bed. That would not be the case.

As the pair journeyed through the darkness of the night, Haldor became aware of a scent on the air, it was strange to him—not the smell, so much as why he could smell it here. It was unmistakably the smell of burning wood, yet the town was still well out of sight, no way could it have been the chimneys. He did not know of any houses on this stretch of the road, nor did he know of any overnight camps. The smell was becoming thicker, he could almost taste it now, heavy damp smoke. It was too dark to see it, but he was sure the whole area would be blanketed by it. This was no campfire or chimney, something big was burning. *A forest fire maybe?* He thought as they continued trotting down the road, *I don't see any trees burning, or animals fleeing, what is this?*

Up ahead he could just make out a crest in the road, from there it would dip down towards town, he knew exactly where he was now. A fear began to creep into his mind, he knew that below the crest lay Fogdell, he also knew something was burning and for all his hopes, it didn't seem to be the forest. Emryn neared the rise and the ranger looked down, straight into his own fears. The area below was well lit now, an eerie orange glow beneath a rolling blanket of smoke. *Flames on the mist*, he thought. Fogdell was ablaze, the flames roaring through the northern part of town. He could hear the

crackling of people's homes burning and the screams of frightened citizens fleeing. "Ador!" he screamed to himself, the horse's ears flickering as he once again took her by surprise with his outburst. He wasn't thinking of anything else now, not the shard in his pocket, not the warm stew, his only goal now to get into town and find his son. What kind of guardian was he if he couldn't even protect his own child, never mind the forest, he was thinking, asking himself. The thought of failure infected his mind, he wondered how this could have happened, how did he not see it coming. Then the face of the sorcerer returned. He remembered the encounter in the forest with the beast, he remembered Garro and his dilapidated tower, and then he remembered the pipe. It all hit him at once like a battle hammer to the chest. *I've been fooled! The night in the tower, the night where I forgot everything, that damn sorcerer used Garro to fool me into smoking that leaf. I knew it smelled wrong the moment I opened the pouch, gods damn me! No doubt some magical trickery to make me forget the whole thing and not get in the way, well it's coming now you bastard. I don't know what is so important up here in the forest, but you had better be prepared for me now.*

He pulled the sword once again from the scabbard and held it aloft. Emryn broke into a gallop, heading straight for the town. The rain did not let up, but he had stopped noticing it, stopped feeling all sense of cold or damp. He was angry, angry

that he let himself be fooled, angry that he had put all these people—and his own flesh and blood—in danger. He was changed now, and focussed, he had to get to his boy by any means. He never thought that something like this would happen, he never dreamed his boy would be in any real danger living happily in the town. The only comfort to him was that he'd trained Tomos, even if it was only for a couple of days, maybe that would have been enough. Anything that stood in the way of him now though was going to die. He was not a guardian of the forest anymore, he was a father.

As he and Emryn roared down the hill towards Fogdell, they broke through the thick barrier of smoke, almost choking him as he rode. His eyes stung and tears of pain began to roll down his cheeks. With one hand on the reins he used the other to wipe his cheeks and keep moving.

As they swung around to the west of the town, the smoke seemed to lift a little. The ground was more open, letting it rise up through the canopy a little more freely. The shouting and the screams were all but gone now, *maybe the west side is still intact, maybe my coming will go unnoticed.* He couldn't see above the tall wooden walls and the smoke that clung up there was masking the orange glow, making it hard to tell exactly where the fires were burning. Little did he know that the west side had already been ravaged, not by fire, but by the hordes of evil.

His hope soon faded as the western gateway came into view through the haze. Several guards lay dead around the gateway, one of them pinned to the gate a good foot or so off the ground with what looked like his own polearm, blood still dripping from the end.

He slowed and kept a firm grip of his sword, Emryn seemed tense, she wasn't fond of fire anymore, following an incident with a cookpot a few years previous. She stepped lightly and cautiously as if ready to bolt at a moment's notice. The gate was already open, allowing them to walk through unchallenged. What lay before them though, Haldor was not prepared for.

The square was littered with corpses, guards, bandits and civilians. Some whatever they could find to use as a weapon, some clearly cut down as they ran. Haldor dismounted carefully and took an astonished look around him. There was little noise, only the faint yells of scared people carried by the occasional gust of wind. The polished stonework of the square was tainted with deep red, being washed into the cracks between the blocks and filling in the chiselled patterns as the rain persisted.

Haldor grabbed the reins and pulled them over Emryn's head to lead her by foot. He turned her around and began walking her back out of the gate. Outside in the darkness, he whispered into her ear before giving her a slap on the rump. The horse took off into the trees like she had been stabbed with a

poker. Haldor quietly spoke to himself "go home now, if I don't return, the forest will look after you". He turned back to the gate and made for the square once again, his sword swinging in his right hand as he loosened the joints ready for a good fight. He made his way delicately through the sea of bodies, being careful not to stand on anyone. Looking at the as he passed he saw faces he recognised, people he had seen buying meat in the market place, people he had played cards with at the inn, innocent people, people that didn't deserve to die this way. There was one face though that caught his eye and didn't let it go. Haldor could barely believe what he saw, blinking as if to reset the image that his eyes were showing him. His delicate steps turned to impatient leaps, he could hardly step around them quickly enough now, almost tripping himself up on more than one occasion. When he arrived at this body though he just stood still, looking down solemnly in to the dead eyes of the man he trusted with his child.

Haldor knelt next to Tomos' corpse and gently closed his eyes, "rest easy. Let the spirits guide your soul to the next realm where you will live forever more in peace". He took the sword from Tomos' grasp and placed it back into the sheath that lay beside him, before standing and clipping back onto his own belt. "I hope you don't mind old friend, I may need it before the night is out", he said now with a tone of steely determination.

He turned to look at the dead crowd behind him, assessing the alignment of the bodies, "everyone was heading south, then south is where I must go".

With his sword still draw, he began his journey back across the square, once again stepping respectfully around the fallen, making his way to the street entrances to the south. His night was far from over.

## Chapter 16

As he made his way down the residential streets, he was greeted with complete emptiness. The odd body lying in the rain or propped up in a doorway, its hands clutching the open wound which—with the help of the persistent downpour—were like little crimson creeks, flowing across the sodden surface of what used to be a person, before joining the river that weaved its way through the cobbled street surface.

Buildings surrounded him on all sides, but the cries still found their way to him. They came, skulking over the rooftops and winding through the streets and alleyways, chasing him down like a thief pursuing his victim. The screams were quieter now, but no less piercing. Some were barely audible over the sound of his footsteps and heavy breathing, but they had the same effect as if the person making that haunting sound, were being butchered right before him. Some of them made him flinch, even after being carried several hundred

metres through the town, flashing images of innocent women and children being struck down with arrows and run through with rusting blades, all to satisfy the blood thirsty needs of bandits. They didn't care whose lives they ruined, or the scaring images they infused in the minds of children who were forced to see their parents mutilated in front of them.

Inside, Haldor knew the bandits were being provoked. Not by the thought of stealing a towns worth of gold and possessions, but by that sorcerer. He didn't know what the sorcerer would be getting out of this—maybe he just liked watching people suffer—but Haldor knew there would be something deeper than that at the end of it all. The lengths he went to, trying to trick Haldor into forgetting his face or the events leading up to his arrival in Garro's tower, just didn't seem to make sense if all he wanted was to murder hundreds of innocent forest folk.

For now, those thoughts were placed in the deep recesses of the ranger mind. His main focus was to find his son—alive—and get as far away as possible. The screams still followed him, no matter how much he focussed on his progress, checking every doorway and street corner, they were there, taunting him like a group of blood hungry citizens, shouting and howling at a man standing at the gallows in the town square, waiting for short drop.

His sword was clasped firmly in his right palm, the muscles in his hand aching under the strain, but he didn't feel it. His stomach had begun to turn as his mind began to feed him images of Ador lying in a pool of his own blood, face down in the street. As if by some omen from the gods, the emptiness of the street suddenly became what he thought was his worst nightmare. A woman with dark hair and a young boy lying lifeless atop the wet cobbles. He stopped in his tracks looking at the pair of them lying before him. His hands trembled now, but his feet began to move. He need to know if was them and without thinking he was walking towards the bodies, one hand outstretched to turn the boy over onto his back. *No, no, no, no it cant be. It cant be my boy.*

He leant forward as he approached, his entire body shaking, rain water and silent tears rolling off his face. Haldor placed a firm hand on the boys shoulder and took fistful of his shirt. He pulled the boy over onto his back and stepped back in astonishment. It wasn't Ador.

The greatest feeling of relief blew over him for a second, but once it was gone, the realisation that it was just one boy in a town full of murdered people hit him like that unexpected gust of wind that knocks you off balance when you think it has died down. The twisting knot in his stomach final stung open, he found himself stumbling over the side of the street, and with one hand propping him up against the side of

the building he vomited violently onto the rain sodden coddles.

As he regained his composure, the goal reclaimed his minds attention. With that, he strode off, leaving the bodies behind him.

\* \* \* \*

Haldor continued to make his way past the rows of houses that stood like giant grave markers for the souls who used to live there. Some houses looked untouched, standing just as one would expect to see on a normal rainy night in Fogdell. The only indication of something being wrong was that many of these homes had their front doors either left ajar, or hanging from their hinges, showing the first step of the horror that likely followed. The aftermath of which—although unseen from the street—is probably on full display inside.

As he continued his way down the horror stricken street, he began to hear new noises, noises coming from a different direction. These noises were in front of him, maybe in the next street, maybe he had caught up to the fleeing crowds and might have a chance to help someone before they ended up like the heaps of lifeless devastation he had spent so much of the night trying not to step on, as they lay discarded in the street like some sort of festival decoration.

Ahead of the houses began to thin out and the street became much wider. All of a sudden out of the darkness came a much greater structure looming over him, decorated with flickering oil lanterns. *The church.*

Haldor realised that the new noises he heard must be coming from the south square that lay on the other side of the church. *The guards must be holding them off at the barracks to allow the people safe passage to Cled,* he thought to himself as he picked up the pace from cautious to a full out sprint, *if Ador is still alive, this is where he will be.*

The square was bustling with activity. Small squads of guards were pushing back a group of the attackers, keeping them away from the gate—and most importantly—keeping them off the road. The barrack was partially burned out but it looked as if everyone inside had gotten out, as no one was making an effort to form a rescue. Haldor found himself wondering what might have happened to the injured rangers taking shelter in there, but quickly dismissed it, knowing the strength and skill of rangers, he concluded they were either out fighting or were being escorted down the road to Cled.

A voice suddenly broke in to his head, though it was a good few seconds before he took note of it, and a few more before he realised it was calling his name.

"Haldor", the voice persisted. The ranger stood looking around frantically for the source of the calls.

"Haldor!" it came again, this time closer. It was hard to pinpoint anybody in the crowd of fighting. The yells and screams of battle were very overpowering stood so close to it. He kept darting his vision across the square looking for someone out of the ordinary, someone perhaps waving or making their way towards him.

"HALDOR!" it came again, and again closer, yet the ranger still could not pick out the source. He started walking towards the battle, hoping the person, whoever it was, could approach him. Then the call came once more, this time he could pinpoint its direction. He looked right, to see a small band of guard fighting hard with a group of about half a dozen bandits. These bandits were tough, and well trained, which should seem strange, but Haldor knew what the others didn't. He knew about the sorcerer, he knew there was something he wanted, he knew the bandits were fighting for him.

He ran in the direction of the voice, though still not able to pinpoint exactly who it was through the rabble. He raised his sword to take one of the bandits by surprise. He had his back to haldor, trying to overpower one of the guards. The ranger made no noise as he moved, not even a war cry as he prepared to fight. He stepped quickly and with all the grace of a born fighter, despite the extreme fatigue his body was

experiencing. Shock, fear and adrenaline do a good job of shutting out pain in a situation like this, something which Haldor was thankful for. The last thing he needed right now was physical pain.

The tip of the blade pierced the bandit, who proceeded to let out an unearthly yell as the ranger twisted the blade inside the dying man before yanking it out. A stream of warm blood followed it and the man dropped, becoming one more body to adorn the street of the city. Haldor continued his campaign, skewering them while their backs were turned, something that an honourable man would never do even on battle. Haldor was past honour now though, verging on desperation, he didn't care for courtesies anymore. One by one the guards stepped back to catch their breath, looking on in horror as the ranger continued to mutilate the bandits without remorse.

As the last of them fell, Haldor turned expressionless to the remaining guards, one of them stood straight looking at the ranger in horror. Haldor looked back to the familiar face.

"Haldor, what happened to you", said Taigan, an unmistakable air of apprehension in his voice.

Haldor looked back, catching his own breath now, "it's a long story my friend, but one you need to hear". Haldors eyes changed now, a look of compassion. "If you stay here you will

all die, i must be honest with you. These are not bandits like you know them anymore. An evil carries them, I have seen it. I do not know its aim, but it is not of our world. You MUST leave, you must get the people safely to Cled you...", Taigan cut in.

"I know what you say is true Haldor, but this is my town, I can't just lea...".

"your town is gone, there is no more you can do Taigan. The entire northern section is in flames, soon the entire town will be burned to the ground. You can stay and fight, and even if you do survive somehow, you cannot stop the flames".

Taigan looked down at the floor. Raindrops bounced off the cobbles as the rivers of blood continued to flow through the cracks. "you are right, as always. We must leave, we must protect the people who may still have a chance". Taigans voice was soft, he was close to breaking down, his pride broken, his town in ruins, his people lying dead in the street.

"Do not take this responsibility my friend, it is not your fault, there is nothing more you could have done, you have fought bravely and your men have died with honour". Haldor stepped forward and grasped Taigan's shoulder firmly. "It is time let it go."

Taigan raised his head and met Haldor's eyes, "I went to Tomos' house, but they had already gone. I could see people

heading for the western gate with guardsman, so I came down here presuming they would be safe. If they made it out they should be on the road by now".

Haldor looked down now, "everyone in the western square is dead...i found Tomos' body lying a squad of guardsmen. I did not see Ania or Ador, I presumed they had come down here?"

Taigan shook his head slowly, "I am sorry friend, I should have gone after them".

Haldor tried to speak, clearly frustrated, but trying to stay calm. "No...the town is your responsibility, you needed to be here for your men, and your people. You cannot blame yourself for this aswell, you went to their home to find them, and for that I must be grateful, you did it out of your friendship to me and for that, you have not failed anyone. I am in your debt, and I will never forget it".

The pair of them looked each other in the eyes again, Taigan's red with sorrow. "I have not seen them come this way, your boy and Ania I mean. If they are still in the town, we must find them".

"No". Haldor exclaimed. "I will go, you must get on the road and protect your people".

Taigan nodded slowly. "Bandits were in the market district, looting the shops and burning them out. As we barricaded the south entrance I saw groups of people running

across at the top end of the street past Brennan's inn, heading east. Everything east of here is either swarmed with bandits or in flames, but if you climb the barricade and head through the markets, it should be empty by now, you can come up behind them and maybe slip through unseen".

Haldor let go of Taigan's shoulder and turned toward the market barricade. "Gods be with you Taigan, next we see each other, may it be under better circumstances", the ranger said, before breaking into a run.

"Thank you Haldor!" shouted Taigan, before he too turned away and motioned his men to follow him as they ran toward the city gates.

It wasn't until Haldor was clambering his way up the wooden blockade that the sound came. The sound of death itself. A deep, yell, angry and strong. Haldor knew what it was before turned, but he had to look to make sure. He turned his head slowly with the most crushing sense of dread he had ever felt. From out the smoke of the burning homes, the beast came, holding its mighty blood stained axe in one hand, and grasping the skull of a thrashing guard in the other. The guard was screaming at the top of his lungs, his feet almost a metre off the ground. Haldor saw Taigan stop with his men and turn toward the beast. The fear in their eyes he could see even from this distance.

The beast held the guard outstretched in his hand, the screams grew louder and more desperate as the grip tightened around the man's head until they stopped suddenly. Haldor could see blood pouring from inside the beast's hand. It let go of its grasp and the body dropped to the floor with a stomach turning thud.

The ranger looked back over to Taigan who was walking slowly toward the beast. He drew his sword, presumably knowing this would be his end. The guards were hesitant to follow, but they were loyal and Haldor could see them readying their swords, ready to follow their leader to their deaths. Taigan held up his hand however. The ranger couldn't hear what he was saying from this distance, but he could tell. The guards behind lowered their blades and headed for the gate. Taigan was to be bait, he was sacrificing himself, going down with his ship, dying with his pride restored. Foolish it may be, but the soul needs closure to pass on to the next world. This was his.

Haldor continued his ascent of the wooden structure, glancing back, seeing the beast getting ever closer to Taigan as they both walked together. Haldor's foot slipped as a plank of wood broke free and went clattering to the ground. He held firmly with his hands and pulled himself up, getting a firm footing back. He turned back around to be greeted by crushing fear. The beast was looking right at him having heard the

plank fall. It snarled loudly at him and turned back to Taigan who shouted at the ranger, "GO YOU FOOL. RUN!"

The beast began to run. Haldor climbed frantically, clawing his way up the barricade. He reached the top and straddled it, looking back one last time. The beast was no all but upon the helpless man stood proud before it. Taigan held up his sword bracing for impact. The beast raised its bloodied axe above its head and brought it down above Taigan's head. The sword was useless against such force, it split like in two like dead twig, the axe continued as holdor looked on in complete horror. It all but split the man in half, stopping in his midsection in a shower of blood. His legs were limp, held up only by the axe. The best pulled it free and kicked the corpse across the cobbles. Haldor felt sick, he had never witnessed such ferocity. The beast turned to him again, snarling and grunting, its axe returned to its side and it broke out in some demonic laughter, the likes of which made the ranger cold to his bones. He didn't believe anything could possess such evil. He wanted to run, get as far away as possible, but the image of Taigan turned into his son in his mind. As he swung his leg over the top, a foot slipped on the wet surface, unable to keep the strength in his trembling arms, he fell.

## Chapter 17

There was blackness. Haldor lay on the ground, arms outstretched, a small pool of fresh blood forming above his head, being slowly diluted and washed out by the rain.

As he slowly came around, groining and writhing in pain, he heard nothing. No screams, no shouting, not the sound of sword and armour clashing, just nothingness. For a moment he thought it had all been a dream, that he had fallen from his horse in the forest and imaged the entire nightmarish ordeal. Then then ringing started, so loud he could barely stand it. With his eyes still closed he brought up his hands to cover his ears, but the ringing continued. He was too afraid to open his eyes and find he was still in Fogdell, to afraid that he would have to get up and continue looking for his son, too afraid that this would probably be the last minutes of his life.

While he lay there clutching his head and rolling in pain, the ringing began to subside. It began to fade slowly,

but to his amazement, it wasn't being replaced by the sounds of war, there was just a dull reverberation like the muffling you would experience when underwater. He wanted to slowly open his eyes to see the trees above him and his horse grazing on some innocent wild flowers. Then the muffling stopped.

All at once, the sound hit him like a blacksmiths hammer on an anvil. The droning crash of rain, the distant cries, the painful yells of dying men, the thundering of the beast on the other side of the barricade. That last revelation made him open his eyes with a start. The beast was hitting the improvised wooden wall with all its might, ripping planks and throwing loose barrels across the cobbled square behind it.

His vision was blurry from the bump on the head, but he could see enough to keep moving. He almost jumped to his feet, letting out low cry as he tore apart the wound in his abdomen. He had almost forgotten it was there after waking up in the forest. He wouldn't be forgetting it now though as the cold sodden shirt started to feel warm against his stomach. As he straightned his back, the world began to spin, he went back to clutching his throbbing head, almost losing his balance completely and tumbling back to the ground.

He tried to block it all out, he knew his mission, and he had to put his boy before his headache. He breathed deeply for a few second, trying to get the blood pumping, and trying to calm his nerves. He stood straight, put his arms down and

looked up the market street, the beast ripping through all the while.

Haldor stood there for a moment, taking it in, trying to find the best way to get to the top without attracting attention. Many of the stores had been burned out, some of them still burning, the last lingering flames licking lazily up the remains of the wooden structure. Some still stood, like the homes he saw previously, looking untouched apart from a broken down door and the odd smashed window. He nodded and took a last deep breath before departing, only to realise he wasn't holding his sword anymore. The ranger stopped dead in his tracks, skidding on the slick surface and turned around. His vision was still slightly blurry but he could just make out the steel reflecting the orange glow of burning market stall on the other side of the wide street. He gently bent down, deliberately trying not to aggravate the wound that was now bled quite significantly.

The tang was wet, making the leather wrap feel slippery in his hands. He tried to shake it off and rub it in the palm of his hand using friction to burn it off, but the rain was too intense. He gave up and took as strong a grip as he could, not ideal, but it would have to do. He would be needing it again before long.

Haldor moved cautiously up the street, deliberately making soft steps and ducking behind the abandoned trading

carts and stalls trying to stay out of view of someone that may be watching from one of the buildings. There was little change as he made progress towards Brennan's inn, the distant screams continued, but that is what they were—distant. As he passed the herbalist store, he found himself peering through the window, which was one of the lucky few to still be intact. He couldn't see the old woman, Sonja, but the candles that sat around the store had been scattered and many of the pots that sat gathering dust behind the counter had been smashed.

Further up he caught glimpse of some movement. Two bandits came out of one of the stores towards the end of the street. They seemed to be holding something, though he couldn't quite make it out. They were arguing with one another, presumably about which one of them has the right to take the item—whatever it was—with them to sell on for a measly few coins to buy themselves some ale with. At least that would be the case if they made it out of the town alive, which at this point seemed very likely.

The ranger continued, ducking low behind the stalls, making sure he didn't knock anything off and attract their attention. Ahead, the bandits were joined by another. The third drew what Haldor presumed was a knife from his belt and preceeded to stab one of the squabbling bandits multiple times in the chest. He then, began speaking to the remaining man with a threatening stance but his words were inaudible over

the rain. The two of them went back inside, neither of them taking the loot inside, which lay on the ground next to the fresh corpse.

Pausing for a second to make sure they had gone, Haldor then began moving much quicker again, still staying out of view as best he could. He heard more commotion, but this time not from the bandits, at least not the same bandits. His gaze was drawn to Brennan's inn, a small explosion roared down the street at him, sending a fireball shooting through one of the upstairs windows and into the night sky. The front door of the inn burst open and out came two civilians, screaming in fear. As they made their way down the steps to the street, two new bandits appeared, both carrying bows, with arrows nocked. They drew, each aiming for one of the fleeing innocents. One was hit in the lower back, sending the arrow head piercing out of their stomach, the other was hit in the neck. Both of them hit the ground, the sound of which Haldor could hear from down the street.

Haldor could feel his heart pounding now. He just watched two people get murdered in front of him, unable to do anything to help them. He continued as the two bandits at the inn turned away from him and began talking amongst themselves.

To his right, one of the bandits he had seen before arguing in the street had come out of the store to see what was happening, Haldor quickly ducked behind a fruit stall so

as not to be spotted now that he was much closer to them. The bandit shouted toward the inn, "those rats givin' you trouble is they, ha ha". He continued chuckling to himself and went back indoors.

Haldor was now within throwing distance of the inn, but he had to work out some way of getting across the street without being seen. He couldn't cross here because the bandits outside the inn would make him, and he couldn't go back and sneak across further down out of view as he would need to pass the now inhabited store, something which he couldn't risk. Fate had other ideas though, as he sat mulling over his decision, it was made for him.

More noise came from the inn, it was more screaming and more shouting. It sounded like a woman. She was crying and screaming, yelling at the men, begging them to let go of her. Haldor could only imagine what they were doing to her, but he knew he couldn't help her. One of the men began shouting from inside, "Grab her!" At that, the woman burst through the doors, her dress torn, exposing one of her breasts. It was Ania.

Haldor gasped, almost audibly. He had to throw a hand over his mouth to stop himself from shouting to her. One of them followed her outside, a knife in one hand, a torn piece of her dress in the other. Ania's bare feet slipped on the wet ground and she fell to the ground hard. She let out a wimper

but almost immediately began scrambling to her feet. The bandit however, was on top of her by now, he grabbed her by her hair and ragged her to her feet waving the knife around threatening her. She kicked him in the groin and slapped him across the face with a loud crack in an attempt to break free.

"you filthy whore", the man managed to say, clearly in some pain, but maintaining his grip. "I'll show you some real pain in a minute, now get back in side".

At that moment another civilian emerged from the doors, this time, it was a child, slim with short brown hair. *Ador!*

Ador was followed by another bandit, this one wearing smart leather armour on his chest, armour he recognised, armour he had worn as a ranger. No doubt the bandit had lifted it from one of the dead after the ambush on the scouting party, days earlier. The man grabbed Ador by the back of his collar, pulling him back, almost throwing him to the ground. This time, Haldor could not stop himself reacting. He jumped up from behind his fruit stall and yelled, "Ador!" The bandits both turning and staring in shock.

Unbeknown to Haldor, the two men inhabiting the stall across the street had come back out to witness the commotion with Ania. One of them drew an arrow and let loose at Haldor as he sprinted toward the inn. It hit him in the right thigh, causing his legs to collapse from under him. He hit the ground

face first, ripping a nasty gash up the left side of his face, his sword being propelled from his hand, spinning across the cobbles out of reach.

"Papa!" Ador shouted from the steps of the inn, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"well looky here. Looks like we've found this little rat's father and that must be his big tittied whore", said the man holding Ador.

Ania shouted, "Help the boy Haldor, don't worry about me!" Then she kicked back as hard as she, catching her captor in the shin. He started to fall down and she tried to grab the knife off him. He kept his grip though and she was pulled down with him to her knees.

"Bitch! About time you need to learn some manners, tits or no".

He stood up, leaving her on her knees, still gripping her long hair. "say goodbye to yer whore, Haldor".

He stood behind her, brought the knife to her throat and slit right across her neck, sending a spray of arterial blood into the air. Ania fell forward on to the ground, twitching and gargling on her own blood.

Haldor felt sick again, he tried to get up, putting the fresh pain out of his mind, but one of the bandits from the

store approached him, arrow ready to loose. "no no, you stay right there".

Haldor let out a yell, not realising he was now crying. He ripped the arrow from his thigh and wrapped his legs around the man standing above him in one quick motion. The bandit had no time to react and fell like a sack of rocks. As he did so, Haldor thrust the arrow up under the bandits chin, sending it through his mouth and into his brain, killing him instantly.

The second bandit from the store, drew his sword and ran at Haldor. The ranger managed to get himself up and grab his sword just as the bandit reached him. The man swung it him too late, Haldor just managed to put his guard up and block him. The bandit stepped back and began his assault once more. Haldor defended well, but was in severe pain. After three ore strikes he slipped and the bandit's blade caught him on the left side, cutting a deep red groove across the top of his ribs. He winced, but tried not to stumble. The next blow he blocked and pushed against the blade, causing his opponent to loose balance. He knew that the bandit would try to strike quickly in order to not let himself become exposed, so Haldor swung also, catching the bandit's blade with his, throwing it wide and opening his front to attack. He drew the knife from his belt and thrust it in to his abdomen once, twice and three times, before falling to his knees, dropping his blades and clutching his leg.

The other bandits looked on in astonishment at what they just saw. They stood for at least thirty seconds before one of them said anything, it was to one wearing rangers armour, the one holding his son.

"Impressive. I'm guessing you're a ranger too from the way you fight, like the one I killed for this fine chest piece. Shame all that effort was in vain, isn't it now".

"What do you mea-", Haldor managed, gasping for breath through the pain.

The bandit smiled as he slowly drew the knife up in front of Ador. The boy was still crying, but silently, he could sense what was about to happen. The bandit turned the knife towards the boy and slowly sunk it into his belly. Ador screamed in agony, pushing against the man's arm in a vain attempt to stop him.

"NO!" Haldor yelled.

He stumbled to his feet, trying to get to the boy. The bandit standing above Ania's body drew his sword and made for Haldor. The ranger spotted a guard lying against a market stall with a spear dug into his chest. The bandit continued on, walking cockily, spinning his sword in the air in front of him. Haldor took no notice though, he stepped toward the guard and pulled the spear from his chest. As he turned, he gave the bandit a scornful glare and threw the spear with all the

force he could muster. The bandit clearly wasn't expecting it. It hit him just below his rib cage, cutting straight through, leaving the spearhead sticking out of his back, forming a waterfall of blood. The bandit dropped his sword where he stood, he stumbled a little and then fell backwards.

Now, Haldor was running at the remaining man, almost catching the dead bandit's sword as he fell. The bandit had let Ador fall to the ground. The boy was holding the knife with both hands, trembling as his white shirt became stained with crimson. The man was striding toward the dying ranger, sword drawn and ready to lunge.

Haldor let out a huge roar and swung the sword horizontally. The bandit thrust forward, driving the blade into Haldor's body, his hand then going limp and letting go of the handle as Haldor's blade took the man's head clean off his neck.

The body slumped and dropped to its knees, sitting upright like a man praying to his god. The head fell to the ground next to it and rolled into a rut between the cobbles. Haldor fell down, exhausted and shaking. The sword, luckily had only caught the flesh, entering and exiting through his left side close enough to the surface as to not cause any long term damage. He screamed as he pulled the sword out and lay there for a second panting and gritting through the pain.

He managed to turn over on to his front, but when he tried to stand, his legs just gave out. Looking over to Ador he saw he had stopped moving. He desperately clawed at the ground, crawling toward the steps. When he got there, Ador wasn't moving at all, he lay sodden in his own blood, his hands still holding the knife.

Haldor pulled himself up the steps and lay next to Ador. He lifted the boy up and cradled him in his arms.

"No, no, no, come back, come back", he was crying now, almost unable to speak clearly, "you can't, this wasn't supposed to happen, come back...come ba-".

He just sat, holding the boy, weeping, waiting to die.

\* \* \* \*

A loud crash rang through the rangers ears. He lay on the steps, holding the boy in his arms like he had for the last twenty minutes or so. He was slumped over now, on the verge of total collapse, he was bleeding from several differ areas, the bleeding varying from mild to quite severe in the case of the fresh arrow wound through his leg.

He could barely manage to look up, usin gall the strength he could gather jusdt to lift his head. As his eyes scanned the market place in front of his, he saw the bodies of the men he had just killed, still lying in the rain, now taking it all

in, realising what he had done, killing four men without remorse. He would do it again.

The crashing continued, the sound of wood striking a hard surface, barrels, crates and stray planks being thrown across the street, bouncing off the cobbles with tremendous force. As Haldor finally raised his gaze to the source of the noise, he saw his end. He knew what he would see, but he had to see it, only to confirm it in his mind. The beast, half coated in the blood of the former citizens of Fogdell, casting aside the last pieces of the barricade like it was trash.

Haldor didn't remember hearing it beat the wall for the last half an hour, he figured it had given up and tried either tried to find another way around, or had found some other worthless soul to destroy. He could just have easily blocked it out and forgotten about it, he wasn't sure, his mind was awash with emotion and sickness. Pain giving him the strangest sense of euphoria, like he was severally intoxicated, but still maintained the link with his senses. He figures he was probably on the verge of passing out, if not from the pain but the blood loss.

He maintained his gaze, looking straight at it, straight at the beast. It was striding up the street, throwing the abandoned market stalls out of the way like they weighed nothing at all. It too was staring, staring at the ranger. He didn't know if it was intelligent like humans, intelligent

enough to bear a grudge, but it certainly seemed like it. This thing looked like it wanted to ill Haldor if it was the last thing it did, and it looked like it would feel a great deal of satisfaction for doing so. It had its axe hung from one hand, letting it trail along the ground, leaving a wake of sparks showing on to the ground. It drew closer and Haldor just sat. He didn't care anymore. If this thing wanted to kill him now, he would be powerless to resist, if he even wanted to, resist that is.

Eventually it reached the end of the street, as it passed the fountain before the inn, it pushed a corpse into the still clear water, pausing for a second as it watched the blood slowly begin to taint it. Haldor could swear it smiled a little. It wouldn't surprise him.

The rangers breathing was shallow and the breaths were far apart now, like an old man lying in his bed, slowly slipping away. The beast came to a halt at the foot of the steps and raised its axe up to its torso, gripping it with both hands. What came next, the ranger did not expect.

In a deep, gravelly, voice that sounded like the very epitome of evil, it spoke up.

"My master has sent me with a message, ranger, for he is unable to be here himself, as you know".

Haldor sat in bewilderment, his heart beat rose and he drew quicker breaths.

"you have something in your possession that my master wants. Something you should never have found. Something that will be very useful to his cause. You know of what I speak, and I will take it from you corpse, ranger".

It suddenly clicked in Haldors mind. The shard in his pocket. *it wants the shard. All it wanted was the shard.*

"Well go ahead", called Haldor, his voice weak and raspy, "this was all for a stupid glass shard. He killed all these people. He killed...he killed my so-". His voice broke into tears.

"I wanted no part in all of this, I didn't want this stupid thing". Haldor took the shard from his pocket, not realising it was no longer in the box, not realising the box wasn't even in his pocket. He waved it around in front of him, not intentionally, but because he lacked the strength to keep it still.

"what was it all for, the trickery with the sorcerer, the tobacco, what was it all for?"

"My master knew the thinker had possession of an artefact and he knew the old man would try to get it to you. He didn't think you had the ability to use it, and so everything that

followed was for his own amusement". The beast took a step forward and began to raise the axe.

"Now, it is time for you to die".

Haldor let out of sigh of laughter. *Everything you love will die.* "I hope it was worth it".

He didn't feel anything after that. There was no pain. There was the void. There was a man. There was darkness. The darkness had come, and it would devour the land.

## Epilogue

"Sebastien, come, ride up here with me. We need to make good ground today if where going to Brennad's seat first. No time to dally staring into that cart", the man said, looking back to the young boy whose eyes where fixated on the carts contents.

"Come I said, up here", said the man again. He was tall, wearing armour, a plate chest with thick leather shoulders and chain under-shirt trailing down almost to his knees either side of his horse. The plate was well used, plenty of scratches and battle scars, it even had dried blood decorating one side of it.

The boy looked up toward the man and begrudgingly spurred the horse on to catch up. He was of mid teenage years, wearing a leather chest piece and a cape, it bore the oaken crest of a ranger's garb, but not exactly the same symbol. This one had

been made specially, and it was a little loose to allow for some growth. The boy was a good size for his age, perhaps five foot eight and toned. Not too much growth left in him now, that armour could well fit him for the rest of his years.

"What will we do?" the boy asked as his mare trotted up alongside the man.

"I don't know yet. Once we leave Brennad's seat, we ride for Cled. I know an inn keep there who will look after us while I decide what to do with it".

The man turned his body around to look at the cart worryingly, a few strands of his greying hair being picked up in the breeze. As he turned back he ran a hand over his head, putting the loose hair back in place.

"You know you don't have to keep drinking those potions out here, there's no one around for miles. No one is going to recognise you, we left the bandits behind in fogdell a day ago".

"You never know when someone is watching, Seb. Rangers have a way of hearing the forest, they may be miles away, but they could still be able to us. Never let your guard down if you're not sure. Remember that".

The boy looked off into the forest and they both continued on in silence.

Above them the first fine flakes of the winter snow began to drift down through the canopy, slowly and silently gliding through the air.

"Looks like the snows have come after all. That all we need out here", the man said, while turning up the collar of his shirt.

"It's only a few flakes old man", said Seb laughingly, "and besides, look up ahead, the trees are beginning to thin out. Isn't that what you said to look for?"

"I did. The trees will give way all together in another mile and we will riding above the canopy. And don't call me old man".

Sebastien chuckled. "There you go you see, we'll be there soon and then we can head back to the road."

"Heading back will cost us another day, we'll ride west for a day and intersect the road a couple of leagues from Cled. If the snow picks up though, there's no way we are pulling that cart through the thick forest".

Seb gave him a concerned look. This journey after all had been his idea. Or, more specifically, he had convinced the man they should go.

"We'd better hope we don't have to then, huh".

\* \* \* \*

The sun had long since set. The two were sat around a camp fire near the edge of the seat each with a small canvas tent behind them. There were no trees out there on Brennads seat so the horses were lashed to iron stakes that they drove in to the ground.

"we'll be lucky if those stakes hold the horses all night, grounds too sodden after all that rain", the man said. He sat perched on log, leaning in towards the fire, puffing leisurely on a pipe. The boy sat opposite, cleaning the meat off a rabbit's leg. Around them, the snow continued to fall, yet still light and powdery.

"You've been staring into those flames for an hour now. They can't tell you what to do".

The man sat, not acknowledging Sebastien's remark. Seb looked across to him, waiting for a response. After it became clear there wouldn't be one, he went back to stripping the leg.

It was a good couple of minutes before the man spoke up. "Watching the flames dance helps me to think. They're relaxing".

Seb threw the leg bone in to the fire and set about licking his fingers clean. "You're a strange one, old man. I don't know what it is about that thing that has you so spooked, but I hope you figure it out. You're giving me the creeps".

No response.

"what's it like looking over the edge. Ive heard it feels like the Gods looking down on creation. Looking over Altamar for hundreds of miles. My father said he would bring me here one day but...i guess. Well I guess he won't be now".

Sebastien joined the man looking longingly into the flames.

Finally the man spoke. "I hope so too. If it falls into the wrong hands, were in big trouble". He paused a little while, and continued. "Your father loved it up here. I came with him once, when we made a trip up to see the rangers many years ago. It wasn't too long after he was crowned if I remember correctly. He would sit at the edge, a fire roaring next to him, something roasting on the spit. He would sit for hours, looking across his lands, marvelling at what the gods created. We always said we would return, but other things got in the way, other responsibilities. I guess...in a way he is here with me now, in you. Unfortunately for you though, you're stuck with me". He looked up at Sebastien. A tear rolled down the boy's cheek, but he smiled.

The man took a long draw on his pipe and went back to staring at the fire. "Don't call me old man though".

Sebastien chuckled again.

Behind them there was a groaning sound. Sebastien sat tall and looked on in surprise. The man though just looked endlessly into the fire. The groaning came again, and the rustling of straw. From inside the cart, the figure of a person sat up, silhouetted against the night sky.

The man removed the pipe from his lips and slowly turned.

"Welcome back. Ranger".

**The journey is long. The tale is not over.**

