

# The Seven Keys



Denith's Story



**BOOK I**  
**DENITH'S STORY**

On the edges of the Borderlands, a young woodsman by the name of Denith passes his days in a peaceful and colorless existence, unaware that a spell of shadow has been cast over the world he lives in.

Then he is given a gift that turns distant memories of childhood dreams into everyday reality, and thrusts him into the midst of a mysterious battle between forces of shadow and beings of light—a battle that will lead to his ultimate destiny, and yet only be the beginning of greater things to come.

# The Seven Keys

Book I

## Denith's Story

**AS TOLD BY C. S. LEWIS**

Recommended age: 12 years and up.  
(May be read by younger children at parents' discretion.)

Cover and illustrations by Hugo Westphal

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## **ANOTHER WORLD**

There could not have been a more wonderful place on earth—or so it seemed to the young lad, as he sat feasting his eyes upon the scene spread out before him. It was a mystical, wonderful place—the kind where, if the fairy tales of one’s childhood could come true, it would happen here. Denith could never quite describe it—the odd glow that hovered in the sky as the sun made its way toward the ocean’s horizon. The vision clashed—if that were possible—with the gray shades that made up the world around him.

This was life as he knew it—as he had always known it: a world bathed in gray. There were lighter grays and darker grays, and then there was white and black. But that was all. Oh, there had once been stories of a time when the world was awash with colors of all sorts, but those were never told anymore. There were even tales of places where color could supposedly still be seen, but the few who were fool enough to try and find these places always returned with the tidings that, while people there claimed color was all around, the landscape in fact looked no different from the rest of their gray-tinted world.

For a moment Denith closed his eyes and tried

to picture what color might look like if it was real. But he quickly gave up. The only images that came to his mind were replicas of the same achromatic landscape that stretched all around him—the pastures, the forested hills, the stone cliffs that loomed over the monotonous ocean waters in front of him—all gray. Further to the side, where the rolling hills curved slowly down to meet the ocean, white breakers could be seen washing over the gray beach sands in their ritual of perpetual cleansing.

It was getting late, and a mist was now rolling in from the sea, shrouding the distant shoreline with a haze that would soon be upon Denith as well.

He pulled his coarse cloak tighter around himself, and allowed a small sigh to escape his lips. This was the one place where he felt he could reach, if ever so barely, beyond the realities of his daily life. But now once again it was over, like a dream that had ended too soon. *And just when it was starting to get good*, he thought to himself, as he reluctantly turned down the familiar path to his home.

It wasn't that life as a woodsman was bad. Denith and his father worked among the forests and in the open air all day. The work of tending and chopping trees had given Denith a robust physique at an early age, and now, still several years before his prime, he was hardy and muscular, and used to a good day's work. Forestry was the family trade, and he had learned it from his father, just as everyone in these parts followed his family's particular trade. The baker's son became a baker. The blacksmith's son became a blacksmith.

Life was simple—almost too simple, Denith often thought. And so he often took to this lookout point, where his imagination could carry him to distant lands, and place him at the center of untold adventures. The distant horizon represented a world far beyond the familiar trails of the Southern Bluffs



where Denith had lived all of his life.

Out there lay questions that had not yet been answered, sights that had not yet been seen, words that had not yet been spoken, tales that had not yet been told.

Making his way home was never an easy task. As quaint as the little wooden house he lived in with his parents was, he always felt it had so little to offer. *Besides, of course, dinner*, he now reminded himself. *And I am hungry.*

He walked almost reverently along the pathway. This was a sacred spot to him. He stopped at the crest of a small hill and turned to look down on the valley behind him that was by now covered over by the thin mist. He allowed his eyes to drink in the sight, knowing that, with the sun soon to disappear behind it, this would be the last he would see of it until the following evening.

"It's a beautiful sight, isn't it?"

Denith whirled around, startled at the interruption of his hallowed reverie. A small, wizened man stood not more than three paces away from him.

A little hesitantly, Denith responded, "To be sure. It's a beautiful place, and this is my favorite time of the day."

"Mine, too," the man chuckled. "It's the mist, I think. It really accentuates the colors, doesn't it?"

The statement caught Denith by surprise. *What colors?* Not wanting to appear ignorant, he opted for a vague answer. "Yes, I suppose it does."

The two stood in silence for some moments, until the sun disappeared behind the hazy horizon. Without taking his eyes from the view in front of him, Denith once again muttered, half to himself, "Well, I suppose I'd best be getting home." Then he turned, and continued on his way.

The distant sounds of the waves crashing on the

rocks far below echoed loudly. The rhythmic swell—that music the ocean played so well along the shoreline—chanted its endless greeting to those who came toward it; its farewell to those who left.

Then Denith hesitated. Something was amiss. He looked around. The sun had already faded from view, yet there was a light surrounding him. The dark shadows that usually hung over the world at this hour were gone. Instead there was an indescribable hue, a warmth, a subtle brilliance all around that he had never seen before. It was a vision Denith could only associate with distant memories of the kind of dreams he had long grown out of. But now it was here, all around him, and real enough for the moment. He caught his breath as a realization hit him: *Color?*

*The man.* Denith hastily turned around. Yes, he was still there, and was staring back at him with a bemused smile. On impulse, Denith turned and walked back towards the mysterious stranger.

“Who are you?” Denith asked.

“My name is Hoden,” the old man responded. “I’m just an old man—and a weary one, at that. I feel like I have been here forever.” He gave a little chuckle before adding, “And I probably have been, if the truth were known.” After another pause, he continued, “I have often watched you come here, you know.”

“You have?” Denith asked, surprised.

“Oh, yes,” the old man replied. “Not only have I watched you, but you have been watching me—or trying to, at least. We have felt you reaching out into our world. It looks as if you have finally broken through.”

“I ... I don’t understand,” Denith stuttered. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Ah, but I think you do,” the old man answered. “You’re just afraid that perhaps it’s not true, that

maybe this is not really happening, and that you're going to wake up and find it was all a dream—and what would be the harm in that? But rest assured—this is not a dream. It's real. It's as real as the shadowed world you live in. In fact, it's more real.”

Denith's heart was pounding, and he'd broken into a cold sweat. He was afraid, anxious, not wanting to hear and not wanting to see, yet at the same time desperately wanting to partake of whatever was happening around him.

“I know it's a struggle,” Hoden continued. “It is always a struggle when someone from your world reaches through into ours. There are those who are as eager to keep you from discovering it as we are to help you find it. But this time they have failed, and we have succeeded. They have not been able to keep you from seeking, and now you have found us—or we have found you, rather.”

Denith looked around a little nervously. “We? You mean there are more of you watching?”

“Oh, yes, there are many more of us, but we're not all watching.” Hoden came a little closer. “You must think I'm talking in riddles. Come. I will show you.”

Denith hesitated. Up until this point, he knew he could probably shake his head, turn around, walk off, and remember all this as nothing but a strange dream—a vivid daydream, perhaps. But he knew that if he followed what was happening, this “dream” would become reality.

He turned and looked back towards the cliff, hoping to find some clue as to what to do, or see some sign to warn him that this was a bad idea. But he could see nothing except the dark gray mist—while ahead of him a soft, pulsating glow remained.

“Yes,” he uttered at last. “Yes, I'll come.”

Hoden nodded slowly. “Good,” he said.

Denith followed closely as Hoden took a path that Denith had never seen before. He knew every hill, trail, and rock of the Bluffs, but now everything around him looked unfamiliar. What should have been only a rough, footworn path through a patch of forest was now an avenue bounded on both sides by stately trees. And color—if that was what these hues he was beginning to see were—was everywhere.

Soon the two men came upon a small and again unfamiliar clearing encircled by trees. At first glance it appeared they were alone in the clearing, but as they came in further, Denith saw several figures reclining or sitting on the ground. The figures remained only vaguely visible, and as he walked nearer, some vanished, while others appeared in new places, as if each figure was only visible from certain angles. Only one other figure remained distinctly visible, and she now stood and approached the two men.

The young girl appeared to be about the same age as Denith, though he realized she was probably not. But he *was* sure she was one of the most beautiful he had ever seen.

"You came!" she said exuberantly. "I'm so happy." She tilted her head to the side and looked at him. "We thought for a moment that you wouldn't."

Denith was overwhelmed. He was not even able to utter a sound, let alone offer any sort of coherent response.

"This must be a little much for you," the girl said with an understanding smile. "You commoners are such funny creatures! You long for more, you hope it exists, some are even brave enough to seek for it, but when you're faced with it, you wish that you had never wished to see it!" She shook her head and laughed softly. The notes of her laugh lingered in Denith's ears like a playful melody. "But please,

don't be afraid. We cannot stay very long. There's a small crack in time. Well, it's not really time. Perhaps it is better said, a window of opportunity where we can appear to you like this. It rarely comes and we never know how long it will last." She was silent for a moment before continuing. "But maybe that's all going to change. We shall see."

Denith looked around. He could vaguely see several other figures again, and now attempted to find some handle on this strange reality he found himself in. Only Hoden and the girl were distinctly visible. The other figures almost blended into the colors around him.

He soon became aware of the fact that these vague figures were conversing with each other, and now even with Hoden and the girl, though it was difficult for him to understand anything. The things that Hoden and the girl spoke of amongst themselves and with the other figures made little sense to Denith, and the replies from the vague figures hardly sounded like words at all. Like the girl's laugh, their replies came in what sounded like melodies or strains of music, the notes of which seemed to convey words, or perhaps even thoughts and feelings. The one thing he did manage to catch was that the girl's name was Faethé<sup>1</sup>.

"We have something to give you," Faethé said, interrupting Denith's observations. "It's a gift, a very special gift—a gift that will provide you with a link between your world and our world. Your world is clothed in so much darkness, seeing only shadows of the real and greater truth of what's around you. You have felt this, haven't you?" she whispered, all the while searching into his eyes.

"I have felt something," Denith answered, "though I could never quite understand what."

"It is a weariness—the weariness of a world that

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<sup>1</sup>**Faethé:** pronounced fa-EH-thay

needs healing, and knows not that it is ill. It is a captive world that cannot perceive its own longing to be set free. This is what you have felt, and shall feel all the more as you discover the truth about the world around you. The shadow has spread forth its tentacles and entrapped all it has come in contact with. It has suffocated the spirits and numbed the minds of those in its grip, so that they are left with nothing more than the empty existence they have accepted as their only reality.”

“Yes.” Denith was beginning to feel more comfortable with whatever realm this was that he had stumbled into, and now plucked up the courage to offer some of his own thoughts. “Yes, I have felt it. I mean, I’ve often felt like I’ve become trapped in this world. Not that my life is a bad one, but it’s just always been, well, a little too plain—a little too gray, perhaps. Of course, you just accept it because that’s all you see, and because everybody else accepts it.”

“And that is why things remain as they are—because so few believe in our world anymore, and even fewer realize what is happening to your world.”

“I don’t think I would believe any of this if I wasn’t seeing it right now. And even then, perhaps this is all a dream, just my own imagination—and when I wake up, I’ll find I’m right back in my normal, gray world. That’s what always happened when I was younger. I’d dream of things just like this, and then wake up, disappointed, until I suppose I came to my senses and stopped dreaming those dreams.”

“But you could not forget them, could you?” Faethé asked.

Denith looked down sheepishly. “I suppose I didn’t.”

“And that’s because we made sure you wouldn’t, so that you would be ready for this moment when it came.”

"What moment?" Denith asked.

"Oh, there is so much to tell you, but so little time. The forces of the shadow grow stronger with each passing day. But all it takes is one little candle to push back the power of darkness, to light yet another candle, to light another, and heart by heart the darkness will be driven back, until it is no more."

Faethé stood silently for a moment, and then gracefully held out her hand. She was holding something. It was wrapped in a white piece of filmy material such as Denith had never seen before. Carefully, with her other hand she unwrapped the gift she was holding.

Denith watched, mesmerized. Everything had gone silent, and though he dared not look, he felt that all the beings around him were likewise entranced with what was being revealed.

There lay the most magical sight he had ever seen. A set of seven keys—identical in form, but varying in size. All were attached to a single, unbroken key ring. A soft, pulsating glow emanated from the keys.

"They're beautiful!" Denith managed to whisper. "Almost ... alive."

"That's because they *are*," Faethé answered. "And what is more, they're yours!"

"Mine? What am I to do with them?"

"They shall light the candle, Denith, and begin to drive away the darkness. You cannot possibly imagine what hinges on their safekeeping, and yet they are endued with a power that shall be a greater protection to you than you could ever be to them. And it is given to you to hold them close, to treasure them, to be the keeper of them, to let them help you unlock the secrets of our world in yours."

As Faethé was talking, Denith instinctively reached out and covered the keys with his hands.

He felt their warmth, their vibrance, their pulse. Faethé's free hand closed Denith's fingers around the ring of keys, and she then drew both her hands back slowly.

Denith struggled for a moment to secure his hold on the mysterious treasure in his hands. So enraptured was he with his gift that he failed to see that the vision around him was beginning to fade.

It was with much difficulty that he lifted his eyes from the keys in his hand, only to see the faint form of Faethé waving farewell. The enclosure they had been standing in seemed to be swirling all around him, and he began feeling dizzy. He carefully sat down, so as not to lose his balance. Then he closed his eyes, hoping to calm the queasiness in his stomach.

When he opened them again, he found himself sitting back at the top of the cliff, the sun just sinking below the hazy, gray horizon. He felt a little hazy himself, as if he'd just awoken from a vivid dream. There was no trace of Hoden, or of the unfamiliar path Hoden had led him down. The hues that surrounded him likewise returned to the dull grays they had always been. Denith's heart sank till he felt a warmth in his hands. He froze, afraid of what he might see, yet at the same time afraid of what he might not see. Carefully, he looked down, and his eyes grew wide.

They were *real!* The keys were *real*. They were *colored*. And they were in *his* hands.



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## DREAMS AND WONDERS

The thought of returning home was not particularly welcome to Denith. He had no idea how he would explain to his parents what had happened, or even if he should. He didn't understand much of it himself—only that he now held a mysterious ring of keys, and that these had something to do with the colors he had somehow been able to see. For the moment, the only color in sight seemed to emanate from the keys. They glowed with an unearthly radiance that contrasted starkly against the dark and misty landscape that remained draped in gray all around him.

He wrapped the keys in a coarse bit of cloth. Their original covering had vanished along with the rest of the strange vision, and only the ring of keys remained as a testimony that any of this had happened at all. He now put the ring away in a pouch that hung off his belt, in which he kept his coins and a piece of flint. The pouch was concealed by his warm, fur-lined vest, as well as a long walking cloak, so that it made an ideal hiding place for such a prized possession.

Apprehensively, he set off along the familiar path that led to the wooden cottage he called home. Had he taken the time, he might have noticed the soft,

twilight colors lingering in the sky above him. But he didn't. Instead, his mind was filled with questions about the meaning of all that had just taken place.



"You're home just in time!"

Denith's musing was interrupted by his mother's voice. He had reached his home, the Woodsman cottage. Looking up at her, he was startled. The odd mix of colors that made up his mother's apparel was clearly visible in the glow of the porch lantern. He did not know what they were, but he knew they did not blend well together.

"Is something the matter?" his mother asked, catching his obvious stare.

"Why ... er ... no," Denith stuttered. He quickly made his way up the porch steps, greeted his mother with a kiss, and passed on into the house.

Miria, his mother, was a simple soul, and far too busy with the affairs of her small family to take much notice of Denith's manner, or the passing moods that often troubled him. He was still young in her eyes, and would grow more steady with time, she always told herself.

Denith's father, Elden, however, was quick to notice that there was more at play here than a passing mood. Elden was a simple man in his outward appearance, but he had an inner depth and strength of character that those who knew him well deeply respected. Some said he had been endowed with an unusual perception and insight into the world around him, although he was quick to retort that this was nonsense.

As soon as dinner was done, Miria, as was customary, left the menfolk to their discussions while she tended to the clearing of the table.

Elden's deep voice was the first to break the silence. "Looks like you've had quite the day, son,"

he said.

“Eh ... it was all right,” Denith replied.

Not being one to immediately get to the point, Elden opted for small talk. They spoke for a while about Denith’s work in the woods, till finally his father asked, “Son, is there anything you want to talk about? Did something happen out there today? Anything that perhaps your mother and I should know about?”

Denith looked down and sighed. A torrent of thoughts raced through his mind. He had known that this question was coming, but he had no idea as to how to answer. Would his father believe him? He could show the keys, but would his father’s perception of them be the same?

Miria, who was by this time also interested in learning what had come over her son, was wandering in and out of the room a little slower than usual—not wanting to impose, yet hoping to piece together enough of the men’s conversation to understand her son’s mood.

Elden, meanwhile, encouraged by Denith’s hesitation that there was indeed something afoot, cleared his throat. “You can tell me, son. What’s on your mind?”

Denith sat a while longer in silence. As he did, his hands slowly crept under his vest, and into his pouch. As his fingers nervously sought out the keys, he felt their warmth, and with it, an inner strength welling up within him.

At the same moment, deep in the background of his mind, he began to hear snatches of conversation—words and melodic whispers like those which the otherworldly beings had been conversing in. It was as if they were once again around him, once again deliberating, though this time he could not see them, only hear them. He couldn’t quite make out their words, but he knew they were there.

Elden, concluding that Denith was mustering up the courage to say something, waited patiently.

Pensively, Denith continued to look down, desperately trying to make some sense out of the whispers that he was hearing. They soon turned into a sort of rhythmic chant: *Tell him! Tell him! Tell him!*

Denith took the plunge. "I don't know what you'll think of me if I tell you all this, because it was strange even for me. I ... I'm still not even sure exactly what happened."

Miria now lingered at the doorway and waited to hear what Denith had to say.

"Go on," his father encouraged him.

"I was walking home from the bluff when this old man appeared. I've never seen him around here before, so I knew he was a stranger to these parts. But the strange thing was, he seemed to know who I was, and—I know you're going to think this is odd—exactly what I was thinking."

Elden sat silently and nodded, encouraging Denith to continue.

Denith continued his story, telling it exactly as he had experienced it. He dared not look directly at his father, or his mother for that matter—for fear he might see them mocking him or worrying that he had lost his mind—until he mentioned the name Faéthé. At that, his mother let out a short gasp, and Denith looked up at her curiously.

"Did you say 'Faéthé'?" Elden asked.

"That's the name I heard," Denith responded. "Why? Do you know her?"

"I never thought you'd remember her."

"Remember who?" Denith asked.

"Your great-grandmother," Elden answered. "I'd almost forgotten about her myself."

"Tell me, Father!" Denith pleaded.

"When we first met her, I did not even know I

had a living grandmother. My parents never told us kids about her. In fact, she never showed herself until after my parents had already passed away, and then she surprised us all by the fact that she had been alive all this time. It was shortly after she first came to our house that you were born, and she cared for you for the first young years of your life, while your mother was quite weak, and I was still struggling to manage my father's trade single-handedly. She died a few years later, though you were probably still too young to remember.

"But she always spoke of strange things like colors, and imparting secrets, stuff we never understood. We thought it was just an old grandmother's imagination, thoughts of a mind that belonged to a different time, almost a whole different world. But you were her pride and joy. She always wanted to be with you. We didn't mind. We didn't know much about bringing up children anyway. She always had the answers, and knew just what to do."

"But the Faethé I saw was young and beautiful—and alive," Denith responded. "She certainly didn't look like any dead great-grandmother to me. It was like they were all from another world or something. They spoke of colors too, and I thought I could see them. They were all around me. I felt like I was dreaming—until she gave me this."

Denith now carefully pulled the keys out from beneath his vest, and with great reverence unwrapped them, and then left them on the table in front of him—the testimony that all he had spoken of was true.

"They're impressive, son!" Elden finally managed to say.

Miria also came over and was gazing at them. "May I touch them?" she asked timidly.

"I ... I think so," Denith answered.

She reached out to touch them, yet when she was less than an inch away she stopped and looked startled. "I can't! I don't know what it is. I ... I feel I could just reach out and touch them, but ... my hand won't let me."

Denith looked at his father, who remained thoughtfully silent for some time. At last he spoke.

"It is undeniably a gift from the other world."

"The other world?" Denith asked.

"Yes, son—a world it seems you have just been given a glimpse of. I have heard of such tales before." Elden took a deep breath. "In fact, you are not the only one to have seen this world."

"I'm not?"

Elden laughed, and shook his head. "No, son—it wasn't me," he said. "Remember I've told you about your Uncle Celor, and how he mysteriously disappeared so many years ago, before you were born? Come to think of it, he was about your age when it happened. People had all kinds of rumors and explanations—that he'd fallen prey to a band of thieving Drifters, or that he had thrown himself off the cliffs and that his body had been washed out to sea. Everyone believed something, but I knew what had happened—at least, somewhat.

"I knew Celor better than anyone, and I know what made him leave when he did. Celor was always different in his younger years, a lot like you—dreaming of things he couldn't see, of lives he couldn't live. He wasn't content with the simple life around him. He wanted more.

"But our parents were not at all supportive of such fanciful notions, and Celor would often get rebuked for his vivid imagination. He was forbidden to speak of such things to me—but of course he still did. Under the cover of darkness, as we would lie in our beds, he would tell me stories of a world beyond this one, and how someday he would find a

way to get there. I was too young to make much sense of his stories, but they were exciting to listen to, nonetheless.

“Then, as he grew older, life became more difficult for my brother. My parents worked him very hard, hoping his toils would cure him of his childish dreams and thoughts. I thought that my parents were far too hard on him, although I know that they only wanted to help. Our mother was by far the most adamant about it. She even wanted to move elsewhere, saying that the life of a woodsman gave Celor too much time to dream. But my father would hear nothing of that. He had been raised a woodsman, and so his sons would be woodsmen, he said.

“But the night before Celor disappeared, as he was coming home from the hills, he saw them.”

“Saw who?” Denith asked, totally curious.

“The other world—or beings from it. I would wager that it happened much like what you just described to me, though I seem to recall he mentioned an old woman, and not an old man. Perhaps it could have even been Faethé. I don’t remember. As I said, that was many years ago. But whatever he saw or heard that day, I’m afraid he was not able to handle it all that well. He was brought to the gateway of the other world, as he told it, but he could not bring himself to enter. He faltered. He feared what our parents would think. But more than that, I think he was afraid of what would be expected of him. He had dreamed the dream, but when the moment came, he did not have the courage to follow it.

“I remember, he came home very late. He staggered in the door as pale as a ghost. At first your grandmother thought he was drunk. He wouldn’t answer any questions about where he’d been or what he’d been doing. I suppose he knew our parents wouldn’t believe him anyway, or would

only berate him more, so he kept silent.

“He got a stiff beating, suffered it in silence, and went to bed—a bruised and very broken-spirited young man. That night he told me everything, and when I awoke in the morning, he was gone. He had taken a few belongings, stolen some money from Mother’s jar, and that was the last anyone heard of him.

“I never believed that he could have thrown himself off any cliff, and as for being kidnapped by the Drifters, well, I had my doubts about that too. Everybody distrusts them, but nobody really knows who they are or what they’re like. Whatever the case, I could find no explanation as to where Celor had gone, and why he never came back. In time, I largely forgot about him. Everybody did. Even if he was alive somewhere, he was dead here, and that was that. It wasn’t until many years later that I thought of him again. It was shortly before Faethé died.”

“My great-grandmother,” Denith added.

Elden nodded. “Before she passed on, she made us vow that we would never do to you what my parents had done to Celor—to limit you from exploring the world around you, or to quench your dreams, no matter how childish they were, even if it seemed they could never be realized. She made me promise on the memory of my brother that I would give you the chance that my parents had kept from Celor.

“I never knew exactly what she meant by that, but perhaps I do now. I suspect that it will only be a matter of time before you discover what the purpose to these keys is—and then it will be up to you to follow it. In the meantime, even I can see that these keys are touched with the colors you have spoken of, and I have an inkling,” he said, standing and walking to the oil lamp in the corner, “that as I turn up the lamp, we shall all see a touch



of what color is.”

As he spoke, he brightened the lamp till it filled the room as much as it possibly could. As Elden had surmised, splashes of color were visible all around. It was the same wood-hewn walls, the same blurred glass windows, the same plants on the mantelpiece, rugs on the floor, and flickering coals in the hearth that they gazed at, only now in their true colors. The sight was almost overwhelming.

“It’s beautiful!” Miria gasped. “Whatever it is that you’ve touched, or been touched by, it’s beautiful! I don’t assume to understand all that you have spoken of, but whatever has hidden this beauty from our sight cannot have been good.”

They gazed about in wonder for some time, until Elden slumped back in his chair. His eyes suddenly felt very tired. “I must be going to bed,” he said. “These sights are still going to be here tomorrow, and I think these colors shall only yield us greater beauties and wonders to discover by daylight.”

With that, Elden excused himself, and Miria silently followed, leaving Denith alone in the room, still gazing in awe at the colors around him, and the keys in front of him. He picked them up again and studied them more closely. Their shiny color—which Denith would eventually come to learn as golden—sparkled brightly in the plain light of the table lamp.

The largest key stretched the length of his palm, and closely matched the diameter of the ring. The remaining six keys were all identical versions of the first, only progressively smaller. There was no visible way of removing a key, or adding one. The unbroken ring had evidently been created for the sole purpose of holding these seven keys, and these alone. If not a direct clue to their nature, it was a clear indication that these keys were not randomly grouped together for convenience, but that being

inseparably joined together, they formed a specific tool for a specific use—one that would be Denith's to discover.



With the events of the day still running through his head, Denith fell into a restless sleep. He dreamt he was once again at the top of the cliff, looking out over the same monochrome sunset he had gazed at that evening. When he turned, Hoden was there again, beckoning him to follow, which he did. Again they came to the clearing filled with colors, and again Denith saw the immaterial beings, though their forms were now a little more distinct. Faethé approached him, and stood next to Hoden.

"Where am I?" Denith asked, trying desperately to recall why this scene looked as familiar as it did.

"You're in our world now—in our dimension," Hoden answered. "Here you'll be able to see the things we see, or the way that we see them—whichever you prefer."

"What is this world of yours?"

"Our world is very much a part of your world. In fact, in many ways they are one and the same. But in other ways, they are not," Hoden explained.

"Your world, to put it as simply as possible, is an extension of ours," Faethé continued. "The things of your world are, in many ways, childlike illustrations of the greater realities that are found within ours. And by the same token, events in our world are often mirrored by their effect upon yours. But because so few recognize this truth, they remain blind to our existence, just like they are blind to the colors that surround them."

"But that I can now see," Denith concluded.

"Yes," Faethé answered. "And this is a moment we have long been waiting for—perhaps longer than you suspect."

For a moment, Denith was unable to tear his

gaze away from Faethé's penetrating stare as she locked eyes with his, until her gaze filled his entire consciousness. When he finally managed to pull back, he found he was no longer looking at the face of a youthful girl, but of an old woman. The eyes were the same bright and captivating eyes, but this time they stared from a face laden with wrinkles, and crowned with a head of silver-white hair.

"G... great-grandmother?" he stuttered.

"My darling little Denith," Faethé answered, and the age and wisdom in her voice teased distant memories in Denith's mind.

"You ... but you're dead!" No sooner had the words escaped Denith's lips than he realized how foolish they sounded. "I ... I mean, how could any of this be?"

"Like Hoden said, our world is still very much a part of your world, and your world of ours. To your world, I am dead, yes. But in reality, I am more alive now than I ever was then. In truth, it is your world that is dead, or dying, and that is why we have come to you."

"I'm not sure that I understand."

"Let me tell you a story, like I used to. Nobody remembers these stories anymore, and so they are left to themselves in a dying gray world—the one you have been calling your home all this time."

"I don't remember the stories," Denith confessed. "But I remember the dreams they used to give me."

"And those are what kept you searching, didn't they?" Faethé responded. "Oh, the power of words, the power of a story to open the heart and mind of man to things he cannot otherwise see or comprehend!" As she spoke, her form began to change again, and when she had come to the end of that sentence, Denith was once again looking at the youthful woman that—he now found it hard to imagine—was his great-grandmother.

"She was always a creature of the other world," Hoden now spoke up, with a twinkle in his eye. "I knew that the first time I saw her. That's why I married her."

"You're married?"

"That's right," Faethé answered. "He's your great-grandfather. You never knew him—nor did Elden, our grandson."

"I passed on from your world before he was born," Hoden explained. "But I was always here in this one—waiting, watching, over Faethé, over our children, and finally over you. I watched as you were born. I watched Faethé plant the seeds of truth in your young mind until the day she too passed from your world, and entered this realm. Then we watched together as those seeds were buried by time, and the world around you became your reality. But the seeds stayed safe, waiting to sprout—and now they have, and here you are."

"And there you go speaking in riddles again," Faethé said, with a playful poke in Hoden's direction. "Why don't you let me get on with the story?"

She motioned for Denith to sit down, and then sat across from him, folding her hands in her lap like she used to whenever she was about to begin a story.

"Once upon a time in a land where the grass was green and the sky was blue..."

Denith listened with rapt attention, feeling like a little boy again. Though he should have been unfamiliar with the colors described in the story, he was not. Perhaps it was the way Faethé described everything. She had a gift of painting pictures with words—pictures that moved and told stories all of their own. And here, in this "other world" that was too perfect to be a mere dream, the images and colors that her words painted were

unmistakable, and indelible.

“In this land there lived a great lord, who had great, magical powers. He had created the land and all that was in it. But his greatest achievement was the creation of light. The light, he proclaimed, would be above all, and over all. It would be everywhere. This light had power to create magical reflections called color. It fell upon everything he had formed—hills and mountains, lakes and oceans, trees and flowers; each was gifted with at least one of the endless hues of color that light could create.

“This lord was greatly pleased with his creation, and bequeathed it to his many children as their inheritance, to live in and enjoy. And so his children lived, walking in the beauty of the colors all about them. Wherever they looked, whenever they would see the colors, they would be reminded of the great power of the light, and remember their father who had created it.

“But one child was not satisfied. He was jealous of his father’s great works, and desired to make his own world, where all would think of *him*. He despised the colors and all that they stood for, so he sought a way to conquer them, to cause their influence to diminish, until they would be seen no more. It was then that he discovered the shadows.

“He observed that, wherever there was light, there was also shadow, and in the shadow, the colors were less brilliant, less distinguishable. If he could not create light—or color—he would create shadows, and shades. He would make a place filled with greater shadows and lesser shadows, lighter shades and darker shades, but there would be no color—nothing to remind people of his father’s greater powers.

“That would be the world in which he would dwell, where *he* could be his own lord. He would make it the seat of his power—a darkened world

that he would use for one purpose only: to obstruct the light, and create shadows.

“And so he set forth, to a distant part of the land, where he began to exercise his own inferior powers to recreate the landscapes around him and transform them into colorless vistas, and those who wandered into them could only see shades of gray, and no longer the full beauty of the world that their father had made.

“Some thought it perverse, and quickly left, but others thought it intriguing, different, and strangely alluring. These stayed, not knowing that the longer they remained in these dulled lands, the more veiled their eyes and the more dulled their hearts became. Soon they had no desire to return to their own places of inheritance, but remained in the Shadowlands, where life—as it seemed to them—was simpler and easier; where the presence of their father became invisible to them, and his goodness was quickly forgotten.

“The jealous son apportioned each one who desired it a new inheritance among the Shadowlands. In their blind contentment, those who chose to stay—trading the lands they had been given by their father for a portion in this realm of gray—became unwitting followers of and slaves to this son who had mastered the shadows. He, in turn, added each new plot of land that he acquired to the borders of his realm, until as much as a third of the land his father had given his children had fallen under the shadows.

“The father observed with sadness what was transpiring, and warned his other children not to go near the Shadowlands or venture into them. He grieved for those for whom it was too late, and whose children would be born never knowing the true beauty of the lands he had created, or the fondness he felt in their presence.” With that, Faethé stopped. There was a long pause. The story was over.

"That is a sad and rather pointless story, if that is all there is to it," Denith said with some disappointment.

"But it is not just a story, and that is not all there is to it," Faethé answered. "At least, it doesn't have to be. You see, it is a small picture of what has happened to your world. You common folk live largely in the Shadowlands, seeing only colorless shades instead of the real brightness and beauty all around you."

Hoden now spoke up. "Your great-grandmother here was one of the last surviving believers among the commoners. When many others were already blinded, she never faltered, never gave in. They thought her simple, they thought her crazy, but all the while, her eyes could see a world beyond their comprehension."

"This world?" Denith asked, looking around.

"Yes, this world—a world that remains largely invisible to the vast majority of common folk who have never known color, and so have difficulty seeing its creatures."

"You mean the figures around us?" Denith asked. "I can almost see them, but it is difficult. Sometimes I see right through them, or they vanish in front of my eyes."

"Exactly! And that is because they are creatures who exist only in the purest forms of color, like a rainbow."

"A rainbow?"

"Ah, yes. You have never seen a rainbow, because you have never been able to see the colors as purely as they are created by light. You see, all color is hidden within a single ray of light, and when that light strikes what is called a prism, it breaks open like a nut, revealing all the colors that hide within it. But if you cannot see the colors, such simple truths are not the only ones that become almost

impossible to comprehend.”

Denith could hardly make any sense of the man's words, and was at an equal loss as to what question he could ask in the hopes of understanding.

“These are things you will learn to understand with time,” Faethé said with sympathy. “Most folks don't know they are living in shadow. They have grown up with it all their lives, being told that colors are but a flight of fancy, that those who claim to see them are lost souls whose minds are not within them. And so these people—your people, Denith—have become dependent on their life, like a captive bird that has grown dependent on the security of its cage. They have forgotten the meaning of true freedom, even of their very existence—a meaning that is yours to rediscover, that you might help others to find it again.”

Denith fell silent again. A sense of responsibility came over him, and with it a heaviness of heart. He suddenly wished he hadn't asked so many questions.

It was at this moment that he awoke, and the dream vanished. He turned to look at the keys, which rested on a small nightstand beside his bed. Their soft, tinted glow lit the room like candle.

“What am I to do with you?” he questioned aloud. “What are all these things supposed to mean?”

He knew only one thing—his life was never to be the same. His future was suddenly a vast unknown. His entire world had changed from one moment to the next, and yet—perhaps most disconcerting of all—he had no idea what it had become.



- 3 -  
**AMY**

As Elden had surmised, the little Woodsman family discovered a lot more in the days that followed. The world around them was a totally new place. The beauty that stunned their eyes that first morning they awoke to this world of color—the blue skies, the green grass, the autumn-colored leaves—in time became an accepted reality.

It was a reality they kept to themselves. The Woodsman cottage was a remote one, and they had little interaction with the nearby village. Miria spent most of her time at home, and with Denith managing most of the active foresting on his own, Elden was the only one who regularly ventured into the heart of their little village, to stock up on supplies, and to deliver wood and Miria's forest-fruit jams to their customers.

This village had no name. Like all villages of the Commonlands, it had never needed one. These villages were largely self-contained communities who found their identity in whatever region they were part of.

For Denith and his parents, it had always been sufficient to know that they lived by the "Southern Bluffs"—which was not so much a name as a description of the fact that their village was located

near the cliffs on the southernmost tip of the Commonland territories.

Even that name was unusual. Most other villages simply belonged to the Borderlands (in which the Southern Bluffs also fell), the Heartlands, the Woodlands, or the Lowlands—the four regions that collectively made up the Commonlands.

But few were aware of these geographical distinctions. In fact, other than the Traders, few common people ever set out to travel any great distance.

So the sight and knowledge of the colors and the keys remained a secret of the Woodsman family (which, again, was more of a description than a name) for the better part of a year. In that time, whether it was by virtue of the keys, which Denith always kept with him, or simply the virtue of getting older, Denith noticed that his senses had become sharper, his thoughts about life and the world around him clearer, and his character and inner sense of purpose stronger. His more childlike yearnings for adventure developed into a more defined desire to fulfill his quest, though he did not yet know what form that quest would take.

He would often meander past the point where he had first met Hoden, hoping that he would once again see him, and perhaps learn what he was to do next. But the hillside remained as deserted as it had been before.

He was encouraged, nonetheless, by the steadiness of his father, who constantly reassured him that when it was time, he would know what he was meant to do. It was no use to venture out into an unknown world of his own accord, Elden cautioned him. It was better to wait until he knew where he was to go, and what he was to do. There was a time and season for everything, and when that time and season would come, Elden knew the

instructions would be quick to follow.



“What are you doing, young Denith, sitting there on the hillside by yourself?”

Startled out of his reverie, Denith looked up to see Amy. She was his nearest neighbor, though they rarely saw each other. Amy seemed to prefer a reclusive life, and lived even further from the village than Denith and his parents did.

Denith could not remember the last time they had met, and this was certainly the first time she'd ever approached him alone.

“Oh hello, Amy,” he said, looking up at the middle-aged woman. The colors she wore were hardly flattering, but Denith found that she was not altogether unpleasant to look at.

“It is hot today,” she said as she wiped her brow. “So what are you doing here, sitting and looking out to sea in the middle of the day?”

“Just taking a short break.”

“Ah, that's what it is. So what are you thinking about when you stare out to sea like that?”

Denith laughed, and looked down. “Sometimes I don't think at all. I just watch the waves, and the wind playing on the water's surface. It's very soothing.”

“Soothing?” Amy said with a laugh. “You speak like an old man. I don't think that you can know the full meaning of ‘soothing’ until you've lived just a little longer. Then, after you've known some of the stresses of life and the toll that years can bring, you'll really appreciate what ‘soothing’ can be.”

With that, Amy sat herself down next to Denith, and looked silently across the sea as well. *Surely he must have thoughts of young ladies running through his head*, she thought to herself. *Perhaps he'd—*

“What do you think of, ma'am, when you look

across the sea?" Denith asked, interrupting her thoughts.

She gave an enigmatic smile, and asked, "What makes you want to know what I think about, boy?"

But Denith missed the question. Her smile had caught him off guard. She almost looked ... beautiful. But Denith stopped himself. She was as old as his own mother. Still...

"What are you looking at, boy?" Amy's sharp question jolted Denith out of his thoughts.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Denith replied, quickly looking away. "I ... couldn't help but stare for a moment."

"Well, you'd better not be staring at the wrong places!"

"I'm sorry—I didn't—I mean, I wouldn't think of..."

"Never mind, boy."

Denith was suddenly anxious to change the subject. "Actually, there is something I think about when I sit here. I wonder what it's like on the other side—you know, the Barons. They say they're a fierce sort of people, but I don't know. I've heard other things that turned out not to be so after all."

Amy turned and, for several silent moments, looked into his eyes with a deep, penetrating stare. Then, without another word, she stood up and flounced off, her long skirt swishing around her legs as she walked.

*Funny woman*, Denith thought. *Strange encounter*. There was something curious about it all, and Denith knew he would not be able to rest until he discovered what.



"Father," Denith said, when they were seated around the table that night, "today I had a most unusual encounter."

"Oh?" Elden's eyes lit up.

“No, no—it wasn’t with the other world. It was Amy. I was just sitting there, minding my own business, when she came up to me.”

“Oh no!” Miria said, shaking her head with a disapproving look.

Denith looked at her, puzzled, then turned back to his father.

“Amy’s a strange woman,” Elden said, as if to explain Miria’s reaction. “Well, you’re a grown man. We can talk about these things now. Amy came from a poor family, and her parents died when she was young. All was well, however, and she was a cheerful and friendly soul managing her own affairs, until a rather unfortunate incident marred her life, and made her into the somewhat embittered and cloistered soul that she is today.

“It happened before you were born. It was a strange time, and as with many strange events, folks here do not talk about them much. Most common folk don’t like to talk of things they can’t understand. But that doesn’t mean the events are forgotten, and of all people, Amy is probably the one who remembers them the best.”

Denith looked intently at his father, eager to not miss anything of the story he knew was to follow.

“A Baron ship had washed ashore, wrecked on some rocks off our coast during a storm. It happened a good deal away from our village, and had the Watchers not warned us that these Barons were to be avoided, few of us would have even known about it at all. But that was only the beginning.

“Soon after, whole troops of these Watchers came into the village. We had seen them before, these soldiers that keep the peace in our villages, but to see such a large number of them suddenly show up as if out of nowhere was almost frightening.

“They rode right past our house on the way to where the ship had been stranded. They were an

impressive sight—dressed in uniforms, strong and armed. It seemed a big force simply to keep a handful of Barons from causing any trouble, but at least we felt safer for it—that is, until the next day.

“I was working in the forest when I heard sounds of fierce fighting echoing up the hills. But by the time I got near it, everything was over. The shipwreck was aflame, and the ground was littered with the bodies of Watchers. The Barons were nowhere to be seen. After that, we were in greater fear and dread of the Barons than we ever had been.”

“So where does Amy come in?” Denith inquired.

“Amy was all that much younger at the time, and she lived nearer to the scene of this wreck than anyone. She stumbled across one of the Barons who had washed ashore some distance from the ship. She tended his wounds, and would have returned him to his companions had it not been for the battle. By the time she realized what had happened, the rest of the Barons were gone.

“The man had lost much of his memory, so she decided to let him stay in her own house until he fully recovered, and regained some sense of his identity. Apparently it did not take long for romance to blossom between the two, and Amy soon found herself carrying the man’s child, though they had taken no formal marriage vows that anybody knew of.

“Then ... well, nobody really knows what happened, although there are many versions of the story. But some time in the midst of all this, the man left, and was never seen in these parts again. From that time on, Amy was never the same. She kept to herself more than ever, especially once she discovered she was with child. And that’s just about how she’s lived her life ever since.

“But she remains tight-lipped about the whole

thing. She'll never talk about the young man, or reveal anything she might know about why or how he left. The child, a girl, was soon born, but has rarely been seen. Being of illegitimate birth, and half-Baron besides, it is not surprising that Amy would seek to shelter her from the treatment she would likely receive from the rest of the village. If folks have not outright forgotten her by this time, they certainly no longer think of her, and that's just about the same. It's a sad story," Elden concluded.

But Denith's mind was still racing over a new unanswered question: What did Amy know about the Barons, and why would she never talk about it?

"What else do you know about the Barons, Father?"

"Very little. And even much that we already know is based on hearsay. No one really knows what sort of people they are, and even fewer care to find out. I've heard that Traders occasionally do business with them, but that is likely because their greed surpasses their fears—and even then I've never heard of them going anywhere other than the Seaport Islands."

"And what about the Watchers? Do they know more?"

"You know what they're like. They never talk much, if at all. They come in their small bands, collect their dues, and leave without much fanfare. They never have any business with the likes of us, just with the town court. But considering how ingloriously they were defeated by the Barons, I suspect they don't know much about them either."

The room grew silent for quite some time, until Elden spoke again.

"But that doesn't satisfy your curiosity, does it, son?"

Denith looked down. "I don't know, Father. Somehow I get the feeling this all has something to do with why I was given the keys. I'm not sure why or how, but ... I feel compelled to seek the answers to these things—wherever I can."

There was an even longer silence. Finally Elden responded, "Perhaps so. Only make sure that your curiosity leads you in the right direction. Don't simply go seeking adventure. Any fool can seek adventure, but it is a wise man who can discover and pursue the particular purpose that has been set before him."

Denith knew his father was right, but he also knew that he'd find no rest until he had resolved the questions that now lingered in his mind. He decided to visit Amy the next morning. If there was any place to start looking for some answers, that would be it.



Denith stood at a distance for some minutes, debating whether he should approach the humble cottage, or if it was perhaps best to do away with his foolish plan. But his curiosity—even more than his desire to pursue his contact with Amy—soon got the better of him. Before long he was casually strolling towards the cottage, hands in his pockets, humming as he walked.

Amy was tending a small garden. The familiar ocean horizon stretched silently behind her bending form. Startled by the sound of someone approaching, she raised herself up and shaded her eyes, trying to make out who it was.

"Well, what a surprise!" she called out skeptically as Denith came nearer. "What brings the likes of you here?"

"Well, ma'am, we are neighbors," Denith was quick to respond, "and you did me the pleasure of paying an unannounced visit yesterday, so I



thought I would repay the courtesy.”

She crossed her arms on the fence post, and leaned over with a bemused smile.

“So ... here you are!” Amy said, as if prompting Denith to continue with the conversation.

There was silence for a few moments as both stood uneasily looking at one another, Denith desperately searching for a topic—any topic—to start off on.

“So, how are things going around here?” Denith finally ventured.

Amy chuckled in her low, soft voice, and quickly brushed the hair out of her eyes. “Fine, I suppose. Come on in,” she said as she unlatched the gate. “Please.”

As Denith made his way up the stone path that led to the cottage door, he caught sight of someone peering from behind the curtains. Then the folds fell back in place, and the figure disappeared.

“Was that your daughter?” he asked.

“Yes. Ah, so that’s who you came to see, is it?”

“Well, yes—and no. You see, I mentioned our encounter of yesterday to my father.”

“You did, huh?”

“I’m very interested in your story. You’re a brave soul to do what you did. Most people would probably have left that Baron to himself, to die.”

Amy looked away, off to the side, towards the sea. After a moment of silence, she said, “I was young, a dreamer, impulsive. I don’t know that I would do the same thing now, especially not if I knew the trouble it was going to end up causing me. I didn’t stop to think much about what I did in those days.”

“So what did end up happening—I mean, with the Baron? My father said it was all rather mysterious.”

“And so it shall remain. Is that why you came?”

Looking for some new piece of gossip about me? Well, you'll find none, I assure you. It'll be a waste of your time!"

"No! It's not like that at all. I'm not looking to gossip—really! I ... I just came to talk."

"Well, you certainly chose a bold topic to start with!"

"It's only because, when I heard the story, I knew there was something more to you than there is to many of the simple folk around here. Plus, like I said yesterday, I've always been interested in the Barons, so when I found out that you had actually ... you know ... been with one, I had to come see you again."

Amy looked down, pondering his words for a moment. "Well, the least I can do for your trouble, in that case, is introduce you to my daughter—she is half-*Baron*, after all." Then, turning towards the house, she shouted in a rather commanding manner, "Keren! Keren, come on out!"

A nervous girl, trying with all of her might to appear casual, stumbled awkwardly into the open doorway. Flustered, and blushing even more at the rather clumsy entrance she had made, the girl kept her eyes downward. It was obvious she was not eager to be introduced to anyone.

Amy, however, pretended not to notice. "This is Denith, our neighbor. He's come to pay us a visit—courtesy call, isn't that right?"

Denith nodded, as Amy now led her daughter to where Denith stood.

"Denith, meet Keren, my daughter."

"Pleased to meet you," Keren said softly.

"Likewise," Denith answered.

"You must be thirsty," Amy suddenly said to Denith. "I'll go and get you something to drink."

Before Denith had a chance to respond, Amy had disappeared inside, leaving him and Keren alone.

Though from her look and timid manner Denith would have guessed her much younger, he nevertheless knew that she was about two years older than himself. She stood silently before Denith, her eyes cast towards the ground. Denith took the opportunity to discreetly study her appealing physique, and the half-Baron features which, at least in his opinion, served to make her far more attractive than any of the village girls he'd had the opportunity to meet before—and whom he had never been very interested in.

Keren, with her olive skin, long, dark eyelashes, and almond-shaped eyes, was an interesting blend of foreign color with the somewhat concealed beauty Denith had earlier spotted in Amy.

"Drinks are served," Amy said when she finally emerged from the house again to find the two still standing at the same spot in silence. "Come, you two. We'll sit on the porch in the back, where we can all make ourselves more comfortable."

The back porch provided a magnificent seaside view. From here Denith could see the distant tree-topped cliffs upon which he himself often sat. *I didn't realize how high they were*, he thought to himself, studying them from this new angle.

While the ensuing conversation yielded little in the way of answers that Denith was not already aware of, he found himself drawn to Amy and her daughter, and a friendship quickly developed. After this, he began visiting more often, even helping around the house with improvements and tasks the two women were unable to tackle themselves.

The pressing questions that had occupied him at first soon gave way to a more passive curiosity and observance of these women, their ways and moods, their conversations, their manner with him and each other. It was different from his home life in many ways. His father seldom let his words or

thoughts run away with him as these women did in their discussions, and Denith learned to enjoy this part of their character. This, together with the fact that the ocean view from their porch was beautifully enhanced by the presence of these two women, made Amy's cottage his new spot of preference to spend the evenings watching the sun bid its farewell to the day.



"The spring season is coming to a close, son. There isn't going to be much to do around here for awhile. Are you still having thoughts about going somewhere?"

Denith plopped himself down in the chair directly across from his father. "No, I can't say I have. It hasn't really been in the forefront of my mind lately."

"I remember not too long ago you were anxious to pursue something. I don't know if you still have the same desire, but it might be wise to make some plans if you do. The seasons are not friendly for travelers all year round, you know, and if you are indeed meant to set out somewhere, this would be the most likely time for it."

Denith nodded. Elden was, as always, as practical as he was wise. But still Denith hesitated before answering.

"I'm not exactly sure anymore that I'm supposed to be setting out. I've been spending more time with Amy and Keren lately."

"I know, son," Elden interrupted.

"There's really nothing going on," he said with a shrug. "They're interesting people—different from everyone else."

"I'm sure they are. So, have you told them anything?" his father asked.

"Told them anything? Oh ... no, nothing outright. We've talked about the colors sometimes, but I've

never told them about the keys or the other world or anything like that.”

“Well then, let me ask you one question.” Elden paused for emphasis. “Why are you pursuing this friendship if it is not to pursue your quest, to seek the answers you felt these keys were compelling you to find? Or is it only a distraction that is serving to distance you from the things you were so intent on discovering only a short while ago?”

Denith grew silent. These questions had also been entering his own mind of late, though he had brushed them aside as inconsequential. But hearing them put into words suddenly made having ignored them seem very wrong. “I don’t know, Father. I thought I could start by finding some answers with them, about the Barons and all.”

“I see,” Elden said, and then decided to drop the topic, not wanting to make an issue out of it.

But Denith was already unsettled, and that night decided that, at their next meeting, he would tell Amy and Keren all he knew, and watch how they responded to his tales of the other world.



“You’re very quiet today, Denith,” Keren said, sitting beside him on the porch swing the following evening.

“I suppose I am,” Denith said.

Amy looked first at Denith, then at Keren, wondering whether Keren had sensed something that she had not. She looked on with interest as the conversation continued.

“So what’s preoccupying your mind today?”

“Well, since work will be slow for the next while, I’ve been thinking about having a change, doing something different with my life.”

“Oh, Denith!” Keren said, a look of eager anticipation in her eyes.

Denith shot a troubled look over at Amy, who

was looking a little distressed herself that her daughter seemed to have the wrong notion of Denith's plans. In spite of her intriguing appearance, Denith had shown little interest in Keren other than the interest of a friend. But unbeknownst to Denith, Keren's feelings had grown a good deal stronger towards him.

Amy lowered her head and bit her lip, worried as to what would follow. For many years—all through Keren's childhood and as she was entering womanhood—Amy had sheltered Keren from the reality of how people saw her: an outcast and illegitimate daughter of a Baron. She knew there was little hope that Keren could ever improve on her lot, not being of wealthy heritage either.

But Amy knew that one day Keren would have to face the truth of what she was to the rest of this narrow-minded community. As a mother, Amy had dreaded the coming of that day, and this seemed to be the start of it.

"I've been thinking of going on a journey," Denith abruptly began again.

Keren's mouth dropped.

Denith was quick to see her dismay, and at once realized the reason for it.

Amy, with a transparent smile, quickly took over the conversation. "And tell me, where are you thinking of going?" she asked.

"I ... uh," Denith stuttered, first looking at Amy and then at Keren. "I'm not sure," he answered, suddenly at a loss for words. He had hoped to find some measure of support or encouragement for embarking on his venture, but instead, he realized he had just devastated Keren.

"Well, maybe it's not a very good idea," he said. "I only said I've been thinking about it."

"Maybe it is a good idea," Amy retorted, with a touch of coolness in her voice.

Keren quickly excused herself and went inside, under the pretext of needing to tend to something.

Amy sat quietly for a while, then said sharply, "You timed that quite well, didn't you?"

"I'm very sorry. I had no idea!"

"I know you had no idea, though you must have been quite dull witted not to realize that such a tender, emotional girl would be bound to fall in love with the first man who took any interest in her. My only wish is that you could have let her down a little more gently, rather than just coming right out and saying you were leaving."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, I suppose it's done now. We'll just have to cope with the consequences later. But tell me, what's really behind these changes you're thinking of?"

Denith really didn't feel like talking any more, let alone passing on the truth of this other world he'd planned to tell them about. *Here I thought I knew so much and have seen so much, yet I failed to see how easily Keren's heart would be broken*, he reasoned. "What does it matter now?" he finally mumbled.

Amy's attitude softened. She realized that Denith was inexperienced in matters of the heart, and that he had intended no harm. "It will be all right," she said gently. "She'll get over it, I'm sure. We all do."

"It's not that I think badly of her," Denith tried to explain, then hesitated.

"It's okay. I doubt she can hear you. She won't be back for a while, so you can talk freely. I can't shelter her from pain forever, and she may as well start getting used to it now. But why would *you* want to travel? You don't strike me as the kind of man that becomes a Trader. So what is this about?"

"It's a long story. I received this gift from someone that ... well ... it's a very special gift, and somehow

I knew this gift would end up taking me somewhere, as in leading my life along a path different from the typical ones people around here follow.”

“Speak plainly, boy!”

Denith took a deep breath and, leaning back against the porch swing, began to rock back and forth. “Very well. Then let me tell you the story from the beginning.”

He proceeded to tell Amy the story of Hoden, Faethé, the gift of the keys, and the beautiful beings that had surrounded him and instructed him with their melodious whispers.

As he spoke, he felt like he was reliving it all again. The pictures and images came to his mind vividly, so much so that he wondered whether those beings were right there with him, surrounding him and reminding him of each detail of their meeting.

Amy sat in rapt attention. She was unable to take her eyes from Denith while he told his tale. Finally, when all was done, she said, “Well, I’ve told a lot of stories in my time, and heard many more, but this is certainly the most fanciful tale I’ve ever heard.” Then Amy looked at him and continued with a seriousness that he’d seldom seen in her, “But this is more than just a fanciful tale, isn’t it?”

Denith reached inside his shirt and felt the pouch that he always wore close to his body. “Oh yes, it’s real,” he assured her, as he carefully drew the keys out, laying them out on the table in front of her. “Could anything be more real than this?”

Amy gasped. “They’re beautiful,” she whispered. “They ... they’re glowing! What’s that odd glow?”

“Do you see their color?”

“That’s color?” she asked, and then looked up. “Oh my!” Her eyes darted back and forth before she covered them with her hands, as if they were in pain. Then she opened them and looked around again. “I can see them too—the colors you spoke



of—they're here, Denith! They're here. Oh, everything ... it's so real!"

Tears started streaming down her face. "This is the most beautiful gift I have ever been given. I had always wished there was more, but I never knew what to believe. They..." She looked across the ocean. "They too speak of colors, and strange things about shadowed ones and dark lands. I never thought it could be true."

She continued to weep. "How has this secret, these colors, been kept from us all this time? You ... with these keys ... you've been seeing them all along, haven't you? And yet you've kept them hidden from us all this time?"

Denith was quiet. He did not know how to respond to her questions—or why he had not revealed the keys to them before, especially seeing how eagerly Amy embraced the sight of the colors. "I'm sorry," he finally managed to answer. "I didn't know that it would be this simple for everyone. I ... I think this treasure I hold is far greater than I realize."

"Wait! I have to show Keren. She will forget her heartbreak instantly, I am sure."

Denith shook his head. "I don't know if that's such a good idea."

She looked at Denith sternly. "Why are you so afraid of this beauty? Why are you so afraid of sharing this treasure? How could you doubt it, now that you can see?"

She left and soon reappeared, pulling a reluctant, puffy-eyed Keren behind her.

"No, Mother, stop! Leave me alone!"

Amy stood and almost pushed Keren till she was standing directly in front of Denith, who was still sitting, the keys hidden behind his curled up hands.

"What's this all about?" Keren asked. She

glanced at Denith's hands as he cautiously opened them, and squinted for a moment, as if the sight stunned her eyes.

"It's the keys," Amy encouraged her. "Look at the keys."

"Why? What for?" Keren once again turned and stole a glance at the keys. "They're glowing. They're..." She paused, as though searching for the right words. "They're different—not like the world around us."

"It's because they come from a different world," Denith explained.

"What do you mean, a different world?" Keren asked.

Amy hastily scooted a chair up behind her and sat her down. "There, now," she said, looking at Denith in an almost commanding manner. "Speak! Tell her the same story that you told me."

Once again, Denith recounted all that had happened to him that evening over a year ago. Once again the other world seemed to dance before his eyes as he told his tale. It was almost as though the purpose of these keys grew with every telling of the tale, and as he spoke, he started making sense of things that had been somewhat mysterious to him before.

Keren, like her mother, was mesmerized. Amy sat through the entire tale again. By the time it was done, the sun had fully set, and darkness was settling in.

"So now you feel the nature of this gift compelling you to embark on a journey," Amy concluded.

"Yes—though I am not sure where, or even why. But I feel something pulling me, away from home, away from the bluffs, away from all I have known before—and away from you." Denith said the last bit with a tone of regret, and looked at Keren.

"I understand, Denith. I do," Keren replied in a

AMY

whisper. She then turned to Amy. "Mama, you said that Papa spoke of these things too."

"Shhh," Amy cautioned, putting her finger to her lips. That topic was closed to discussion.



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## THE SWORD

A blustery wind, appearing almost as if from nowhere, began whipping across the trail along which Denith was trudging home. Feeling a sudden chill, Denith tightened his cloak around him. It was not the season for this kind of wind, but the evenings were always chilly, and he was glad now for the added warmth his cloak provided.

It had been over a week since he told Amy and Keren of his intended journey, but he was at this moment no closer to leaving than he had been then. He was still waiting for something, he told himself, though he did not know what.

It was difficult to see who was standing afar off on the pathway, but after coming a little closer he recognized Keren. She was standing with a distraught look on her face, clutching her arms around her body. Denith hurried to her.

“Keren!” He reached out and clasped her by the shoulders. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Mother!”

“Amy? What about her? Can I help?”

“No! It’s too late!”

“What do you mean? Tell me, quickly, what’s happened?”

“I don’t know,” Keren said, looking up at him with

quivering lip and tear-stained face. "I came home today and she was gone!"

"Perhaps she just went visiting, and the winds delayed her return, or maybe—"

"No, Denith! She's gone. She's not coming back."

"How do you know? Did she leave a note?"

Keren shook her head, and burst into sobs.

"Come on. I'm sure it's just your imagination! Let's go to your house. You're going to catch your death of a cold out here."

"No, Denith, it's not my imagination!" Keren protested between her sobs, and then sniffed back a few tears. "I'd gone for a walk, exploring every new color I could lay my eyes on. It was such a peaceful afternoon, and before I knew it, it was already getting dark, so I hurried home. When I got there ... it was windy, but ... the door ... it was wide open. There was no sign of Mother anywhere. I went into the kitchen. She'd been preparing dinner. The fire was still lit, the food was half-prepared on the table. I called her name, but there was no answer."

By now Denith had taken Keren under his arm and was slowly leading her back to her cottage. After a brief lull in their conversation, Keren burst into sobs again.

"Please don't cry," Denith urged her. "We'll figure this out. Tell me everything!"

"I panicked. I thought maybe she'd fallen and hurt herself somewhere. I ran to the vegetable garden. She wasn't there. There was no sign of her anywhere. I went back into the house to look for any clue as to where she might have gone. I was so afraid, Denith! I knew something was wrong, but I didn't know what. Then I came to my mother's bedroom, and there, lying on the bed..."

She again stopped, buried her head in her hands, and sobbed uncontrollably.

"Shh! Stop crying. You have to tell me—what did

you find on her bed?"

"There was no sign of any struggle..."

"Go on!"

"It ... it was this horrifying sword, lying on the bed. I was so scared, Denith. That's when I ran."

"A sword? That's all?"

"It was so terrifying," Keren sobbed. "I wasn't going to touch it—I didn't want to touch anything. I didn't know who was there, or what they'd done, or if they were still hiding, waiting for me..."

As she spoke, they neared the cottage. The door was still open, being swung back and forth by gusts of wind that swirled through the front porch.

Denith stepped inside.

"Be careful, Denith."

He took a deep breath and tried desperately to exude some semblance of strength and courage. "Come, show me where you saw it," he said, a little louder than necessary. The house remained silent, undisturbed.

Keren stood behind Denith, directing him towards the room. The door was slightly open. Slowly, Denith approached the door and peered through. All was still. Carefully he opened the door further. The room was neat and empty. Keren, feeling safer with Denith at her side, now pointed towards her mother's bed.

"There," she proclaimed, proving this had not merely been her imagination.

Indeed, there it was, lying on the bed—the huge, ever-so-slightly curved sword and scabbard. The scabbard was a deep, dark red, of the finest leather dyed to a perfect tone, with strange inscriptions and patterns embroidered into the leather with shiny yellowish thread—almost like the color of his keys, Denith observed.

"Do you know these inscriptions?" Denith asked. "They look like some sort of lettering, but like nothing

I've ever seen before."

"Maybe it's Baron writing," Keren suggested. "The sword is curved, after all. Mother told me that's what their swords are like."

"Is it meant to be a sign?" Denith asked. "Perhaps a signal of some sort that they were here, and that your mother is now with them."

"But what would they want with Mother? What use could she be to them?"

"Use?"

"I mean, what could they want with a woman her age?"

"Your mother is a gracious woman," Denith answered. "Never think that because of the way she allows herself to look or because of the sharpness she sometimes speaks with, that she has nothing to give."

"So," Keren continued as she sat down shakily on the edge of the bed, "Mother is with the Barons. But is she safe, or is she dead?"

"If she had left of her own accord, she most likely would have left a note. But why leave so suddenly? I think it more likely that she was taken by surprise—though, as you said, there's no sign of a struggle, so she must have gone willingly. And the sword was probably meant to be a signal of something, though I can't imagine what."

"I don't care what they left it for. I don't like it," Keren suddenly concluded.

Denith looked at the sheath once again. "So you think these are Baron inscriptions? I wonder what they mean." He leaned over and clasped one hand around the hilt, and the other on the sheath, and then pulled the sword out. It was not as heavy as he had thought it would be. As he turned it from side to side, the blade glinted in the last rays of sunlight that were coming through the bedroom window. "Magnificent," he whispered in awe. "You



could do a lot of damage with a sword like this.”

Keren had little interest in the sword. “What am I to do now, Denith?” she said with a sob, slumping onto the bed. “I am so afraid! I’m afraid to stay here alone, but I have nowhere else to go. Oh, what a life! I thought it was getting better, but it was all for the worse. I’m so afraid.” She was shivering, and was a most pathetic sight.

Denith laid the sword back on the bed and hurried over to her side, wrapping his arms around her. She rested her head on his shoulder as he gently began stroking her hair. He eased her to her feet and led her out of the bedroom.

As they left the room, Keren looked back over her shoulder. “Take it off the bed! Please, take it. I don’t want it to stay here. Can you toss it off the cliff into the sea? Please?”

“Yes. Don’t worry. I’ll get rid of it.”

With that, Denith led her into the main room, where he seated her on a couch, and then walked over to start a fire in the hearth. There was something very final about the sword on the bed, and somehow Denith knew Keren was right to think that Amy would not be coming back.

It was a long evening. Keren refused to do much except stare dismally into the fire. Occasionally she would begin to make some conversation, but at the mere thought of her mother or of what had become of her, she would break down in tears again.

Denith himself was feeling very tired. It had been a long, hard day. He had little doubt that Keren was just as tired, yet he knew she would probably not be willing to lie down and rest for fear of what might happen while she was sleeping.

“You must try to rest.”

“I can’t. I don’t want to. What if they come for me?”

“You must rest,” he said again. “Come, let me

take you to your room. I'm sure things will look different after a good night's sleep. I'll stay beside you—don't worry."

Somewhat reluctantly, she allowed him to help her stand. She walked to her room and flopped down on the bed. Once again overcome with grief, she rolled over and buried her head in her large, soft pillow, and sobbed.

Denith felt too weary to offer any comfort. Her grief was obviously more than she could bear, and he knew there was little he could do about it. He sat on the edge of her bed, stroking her hair and laying a hand on her shoulders. After a while, her sobs softened, and then stopped. Just as he thought that she was drifting off to sleep, she turned over and brushed her hair away from her forehead.

"Oh, thank you, Denith. Thank you for being here," she whispered.

There was something in her look that took Denith by surprise, and the attractiveness of her form suddenly danced before him—her comely figure, her soft skin, her flowing hair, her Baron-like features. And the more aware of these he became, the more he wanted to hold her close and caress her entire body—to kiss those waiting lips. He had not felt this way about her before, but there was something about the closeness—being there, touching her, feeling her body responding to his caresses as if pleading with him to continue. He hesitated, afraid of what this was leading to.

Her hands reached up as she moistened her lips with her tongue.

Denith took a deep breath, all the while holding her gaze steady in his own.

As her arms began to encircle Denith, she ran her fingers through his hair, and then down his cheeks. Slowly her hands moved across his shoulders, down his arms and then back up again,

letting her slender fingers wander up inside the sleeves of his shirt—caressing, feeling, silently begging for his arms to wrap themselves around her. No words were spoken.

Then she began to remove his vest. There was little doubt now what she was inviting him to do. Again he swallowed, but still was not able to utter a word. The urges he felt rising inside of him were almost more than he could contain.

There was a struggle going on inside him, a struggle between his passion and his common sense—the knowledge that it would not be wise to give in to her advances. Her hands found their way under his loose shirt, and began caressing his bare chest. She slowly rubbed her hands up and down the sides of his body—and let her fingers linger in places where no one else's had wandered before.

Passion vanquished common sense as Denith, unable to resist Keren's advances any longer, leaned over and started kissing her gently...



Keren had fallen into a deep sleep at last. To the contrary, Denith, who was lying beside her on the bed, was wide-awake. Common sense once again came to the fore. *What have I allowed myself to do? This is not going to help anything!*

Eventually he too dozed off and slept fitfully till just before dawn, at which time he hastily jumped out of bed. He had to return home before Father and Mother would be up and about their duties.

He quietly dressed and slipped out of the bedroom. He would return to see Keren at a more decent hour, he told himself.

Just as he was about to leave the house he remembered with a jolt—almost as though the memory had been forcibly brought to his attention—the sword on Amy's bed.

*The sword! I must take the sword. I promised. He*

quietly walked into Amy's bedroom. The sword remained just as he had left it.

Denith carefully picked it up. He was again struck by its lightness. *What strange metal*, he thought. *It looks dense and heavy, and it's obviously a worthy weapon.* He laughed aloud at his thoughts. *As if I know anything about swords!*

He fastened the sheath around his waist. It fit comfortably. Then he set off towards his favorite cliff, to toss the sword into the watery depths below.

Soon he neared his familiar spot. It had been some time since he had last come here. A peaceful stillness hung in the air, and the quiet solitude soothed the eeriness that he'd felt just hours earlier. The air around him was slightly mystical, as it had been that evening long ago when Hoden first appeared.

*Perhaps Hoden will once again be here to greet me!* Denith thought.

As he turned a bend, coming out of the trees, and on to the rocky ledge, he stopped in his tracks. There was Hoden!

Denith was startled. "I ... I thought you might be here, but I didn't expect to see you. I don't have a lot of time right now..."

"Time? What is time?" Hoden answered. "When you see me, you are peering into a dimension where time does not exist, and it will hold no sway over your life or mind, so you need not worry."

Denith nodded, though he did not understand, and waited for whatever message he knew Hoden was about to deliver.

"You must not throw the sword over the cliff," Hoden continued. Denith noted that he spoke slowly, very carefully, and with great effort. His speech seemed to require a great deal of strength, and his words did not flow as easily as they had the last time they had met.

As if answering his observations, Hoden smiled and responded, "It's not always easy for us to appear like this. The forces and influences of the shadows are sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker—like the waves of the sea that wash up and down, ebbing or flowing, but never escaping the boundaries that have been set for them. Right now, the shadows are strong, but nevertheless, a message must be given, so I will say it quickly, in case I do not have the strength to say it all.

"This sword you have found has come to you for a purpose. You must not throw it away. Keep it, as you have kept the keys. Both are to help you discover your role in the story that is being told. The purpose of all these things shall yet become clear, but I have come to point you in the direction in which you are to start. Though you have already taken steps down this road, there are yet other steps to be made, and they must be taken now."

Denith looked at the old man questioningly.

"You must not go back to your home, to your parents. Neither must you think of Keren. You must leave this place, and leave now. The time of your journey has come."

"B-but I am hardly prepared for a journey! I have no money, or anything to take with me!"

"You shall need nothing that shall not be given you, or that you have not been given."

"But..."

"Why would you wait longer? It would only defeat the purpose for which you have been preparing. Everything that had to happen has now happened. From this point on, your future is yours to discover, and your decisions along the way will prove you either worthy or unworthy of it."

"I scarcely know that I'm worthy of anything," Denith muttered in reply.

There was a short silence, and then Hoden

continued, "You need not worry for the young girl. She will be taken care of. No harm will come to her. I promise. We will be watching over her, and over her mother."

"Her mother?" Denith asked. "What happened to Amy?"

"I am only here to tell you those things that you need to know. The questions that need to be answered will be answered in their own time, and not before."

Denith bowed his head, slightly ashamed that he had asked something he should not have, especially with Hoden's answers being as labored as they were.

"Your parents also are ready for this. They knew this day would come, and already they know that it has."

Denith looked stumped, but Hoden continued undaunted.

"You must start down the road that leads north, towards the dark heart of the Commonlands."

"The dark heart?"

"From where the forces of shadow rule this land," Hoden answered casually, though the answer brought a look of dread on Denith's face. "But don't worry. I did not say that this is where your journey would take you. I only said that you must *start* your journey in that direction." Then, with a slight chuckle, he turned Denith away from the sea, and added, "And that's not such a strange thing to say, because, from where you stand, there is little other choice of direction. The sea is behind you, and everything you know lies on your left and right. To discover what you have not known before, you must go forward."

Denith looked towards the pathway that led back down to the village, and to the road beyond it.

"There," Hoden said. "Now I have pointed you in

the right direction. My task is done. You have only to follow the road—and the rest shall come to you.”

“It’s all happening so fast,” Denith said.

Hoden smiled, and Denith saw he was beginning to fade.

“You’re leaving me?” Denith asked. “But wait! How will I know what to do, what to look for?”

“Listen for the whispers! We are still with you.” Hoden’s words faded with him as the old man’s figure vanished into the morning haze, which then quickly dissipated, leaving Denith facing the path he had been told to follow.

*No food. No money. No luggage. Nothing but—* Denith felt the reassuring warmth of the keys against his body, *nothing but the keys, and this mysterious sword—my sword!*





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## A STORY BEING TOLD

It was hard to ignore the path that turned back towards Keren's house, and even more difficult to walk past the road that led to the small cottage where he had lived all his life.

His actions were almost mechanical—one foot in front of the other. By the time the sun had fully risen and was awakening the rest of the world, Denith had put some distance between himself and his village. He soon felt the gnawing pangs of hunger in the pit of his stomach, though it was with some regret that he realized he would not be able to do very much about them for the time being.

After traveling a little further, he passed by a small farm. He was quick to note a pail of milk standing next to an empty stool not far from the edge of the road. A lone cow stood watching him plaintively from a nearby pasture. She had evidently just been milked, and looked resigned to a long day of grazing and chewing ahead of her.

*How fortunate!* Denith thought. He furtively looked around to see if anyone was watching, and then sidled over to the pail. He knelt down on his knees and lifted the pail, tipping it gently so he could refresh himself with the warm milk.

No sooner had he drunk his fill than he heard a

woman's voice angrily shouting, "Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

Denith hastily wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stood up, only to find himself face to face with an angry woman, who now continued in a huff, "Shame on you—drinking my milk as if it was your very own!"

"Well ... uh ... thank you for the milk," Denith stuttered. It seemed as useful a thing as any to say at the moment.

"What did you think you were doing?"

"I'm sorry. I was hungry, so I helped myself to some milk. I shouldn't have, but I couldn't resist."

"And I'm supposed to just stand here and accept that? Who do you think you are, anyway?"

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry, ma'am," he said, holding out his hand to formally introduce himself. "My name is Denith."

"Denith who?"

"Just Denith, ma'am. A woodsman by trade, but a traveler at the moment."

She hesitated. Her annoyance was starting to give way to a slight amusement at the young man's innocent manner. "Well ... you'd better not be drinking my milk anymore!" she finished quickly, trying hard to keep her stern face.

"I'm sorry. Really, I am. I have no food, I'm embarking on a long journey and when I saw this pail of milk, I was impulsively driven to drink from it. I barely even thought about what I was doing. But I can assure you, I am very grateful for it. I didn't drink all that much, and you can be sure I won't do it again."

The woman allowed herself to soften a little. "Where might you be going?" she asked.

"I'm heading inland."

"Inland? Just inland?" she repeated with a suspicious scowl. "Looking to become a Trader, are

we? Well, I suppose it's none of my business. Still, you're a handsome-looking fellow." She stepped back two paces and eyed him up and down, taking obvious note of the sword and its strangely inscribed sheath that hung around his waist.

Denith, in turn, took a moment to look the woman over as well. She was obviously a good number of years older than him, though not as old as Amy. He noticed that her hands were full of freshly baked bread, and it looked like she was intending to carry the pail of milk as well.

"I see your hands are full. Can I help you by carrying the pail of milk for you, as a token of my apology?"

She cocked her head to the side, and then answered, "I suppose that's the least you could do. Though I suppose you'll be wanting me to give you some bread next?"

"No, never. I wouldn't expect that. I would never dream of even asking for it. I'm grateful enough for the milk I already had."

The woman rolled her eyes and then looked back at Denith. "You left on a journey with no food. You're not dressed for traveling. Your shoes are not going to last any distance and—there's a thought," she said, with a very cheeky smile spreading across her face, "I'll bet you don't even have any money."

Denith drew himself up as tall as he could. "And why would you think that?"

"If you had money, you could have stopped at an inn and bought yourself some food. Instead, you're walking along, stealing for sustenance as you go! You're not going to get very far that way."

"I was hoping to make a good distance today."

"On an empty stomach?"

Denith shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll tell you what I'll do. You carry this pail back to the farmhouse for me, and spend an hour or two

chopping some wood. My uncle always expects me to do it, but I hate it. I can barely lift the axe above my head, let alone chop wood. It takes me three times as long as it would take a strong young man like you. So here's what we'll do—I'll give you a good breakfast and a little extra food—enough to last until you stumble across another milkmaid's pail—and in exchange, you chop my pile of wood for me."

Denith thought about her offer for a moment. It sounded very inviting, and under the circumstances it was not a bad deal at all. "Very well, ma'am," he said with a small half-bow. "I accept your offer!"

"Then it's done," she answered with an amused laugh, and then added kindly, "By the way, the name's Gwyn."

Denith nodded, picked up the pail of milk, and followed her. He soon found himself inside the farmhouse kitchen. They met a few other members of this household on the way, but nobody had asked about Denith's presence. It seemed nobody questioned anything Gwyn did, and Denith already had a pretty good idea why.

True to her word, she set before him a very hearty breakfast, which he quickly devoured. Gwyn was starting to take quite a liking to Denith, and by the time breakfast was over she had warmed up in her conversation, and was even beginning to exercise her charms on this young man.

"So if you're not thinking of being a Trader, where is this journey going to take you?" she asked. "Judging from your lack of belongings, it couldn't be all that far."

By now Denith was beginning to feel a little self-conscious about not having any food, money, or belongings with him. Perhaps he had been too impulsive in going off without anything, even if that was what Hoden had told him to do. He didn't

answer Gwyn.

“You’re a strange chap, to be sure,” she said with a sigh before turning away, but not before casting another glance his direction out of the corner of her eye.

He wondered what was to follow.

She shook her head, “But for some reason, I like you. Now that’s a contradiction, because there aren’t many that I like. But you seem to be a good chap. There’s something about you.”

He smiled, thankful that at least she thought kindly of him.

“Well, if you’re done, woodsman, you can follow me to the back. I’ll show you the pile to be chopped.”



It took Denith a solid two hours to finish off the entire pile of wood that was his end of the bargain, and he was rueing the fact that he’d agreed so readily to the job purely because of an empty stomach. Still, he didn’t complain and did what was his due, all the while thinking to himself that he would be a little more careful next time he agreed to such a deal.

He’d no sooner finished than Gwyn was once again at his side with more food, a cool drink, and a wet towel to wipe his brow.

“Thank you,” she said. “I really appreciate you doing that for me. It’s getting harder for me to do these kinds of things, and any respite from it is always a help.”

Denith nodded. “I’m sure.” He sat down on the newly chopped pile of wood and gratefully devoured all that was set before him, again wondering how he was going to survive his journey without any food.

Gwyn left him to eat, and soon reappeared with a sack, a pair of boots dangling from her arm, and other assorted belongings. “Now don’t ask me why

I'm doing this," she said, "as I'm not exactly known for my charity. But here, I think you might need these."

She thrust the boots in front of him. "They belonged to my late husband. He was about the same build as you. See if they fit."

He took his shoes off and put the sturdy boots on his feet. "Perfect—they're a perfect fit! And already worn in too."

"They are well worn, I grant you that. He wore them till he died in 'em."

"That's an encouraging thought," Denith muttered to himself. Thankfully Gwyn didn't hear. She then offered him the sack, in which Denith found some articles of warm clothing.

"It's warm now," she said, "but depending on how long you'll be gone you might need these. They won't do me any good anyway." She then gave him a long cloak that rolled up on top of the sack, and finally produced a small bag that he could sling over his shoulder, containing some bread, cheese, a skin of wine, some fruit and other small food items. "This should keep you going for a while," she added with a slightly crooked smile on her face.

She put her hand in her large apron pocket. When it reappeared, it was clasping a gold pocket watch. "Here, you may as well have this, too. It doesn't work any longer, but even if it did, I would have little use for it."

Denith looked at Gwyn curiously, but she continued, "In the village up ahead there's a watchmaker. You could sell the watch to him. It should fetch a good price. It's been handed down for generations, but I don't exactly have anyone else to hand it down to, and I think you'll need the money."

Denith was overcome with gratitude. He stood up and impulsively embraced Gwyn. "I don't know

how I can thank you enough. You're too generous—far too generous. You're giving all of this to me, a perfect stranger to you. I appreciate this very much—and I promise, I'll remember you."

Gwyn looked deeply into his eyes. "I believe you will, as I will remember you—though I'm not sure exactly why myself. I went inside and I was just going to get the boots, but it was almost as though I heard my husband, rest his soul, whispering in my ear and telling me to give you this, give you that, give you his cloak, give you his garments, and finally to give you this timepiece. I think you'd better be on your way mighty fast, before I regret what I did and take it all back," she said sternly.

"Gwyn," Denith said, clasping her hand in his, "you are too kind." He lingered a moment, wondering what else he could say. "Your husband must have been a fine man, and I'm sure he's passed on to a better place in the other world. He must have, to have been able to come and whisper such thoughts to you."

Gwyn looked startled. "The 'other world'? Ha! You *are* a strange lad."

"No, but it's true!" Denith persisted. "Look, Gwyn, you've been very kind giving me all these things and hardly knowing me. Now, you may think I'm poor, both in sense and belongings, but I did not set out on this journey of my own accord. You see, there *is* a world beyond this one—a world of life and color that most of us have been blind to all our lives. But that doesn't mean it isn't real. In fact, I can show it to you."

Gwyn was momentarily taken aback. A sense of purpose had suddenly come over this young man, who only moments before had appeared to know nothing about where he was going and what he was doing.

Denith quickly reached into his pouch to pull

out the keys. Reverently and triumphantly, he held them up for her to see.

Gwyn stared at the keys for a moment, and then back at Denith, then suppressed a laugh.

"Are you going to unlock something, or are they just for me to look at?" she asked.

Denith was stunned for a moment, not quite knowing what to say next. The keys seemed to have no effect on her whatsoever. He quickly put them back in his pouch, and was suddenly eager to get back on his way.

"Uh ... never mind. I think I should be going now!" he said as he picked up his belongings.

"Yes, I think you should too," Gwyn said with a chuckle. "Off with you, then! And mind those milk pails!"

Quickly turning, Denith started on his way without a glance backwards, secretly afraid that, as she had threatened, she might change her mind about the things she had given him.

But he need not have worried. Gwyn stood watching him till he was but a speck in the distance, with her hands on her hips. "Other world indeed!" she muttered to herself. "I hope he doesn't get himself into trouble."



Though Denith didn't know where he was heading, he was glad to find that the road he had set out upon led only in one continuous direction. There were paths that branched off to other villages or settlements, but then led no further. At some he would stop to rest or buy provisions, only to continue on his way along the main road shortly after.

The watch had fetched him a good price, and he now felt more secure as well as confident in the otherwise nebulous venture upon which he had embarked. Denith spent his money carefully. While the weather remained fine he slept in the open,



not wanting to have to take a room at an inn.

As he journeyed, Denith pondered all that had happened to him. He worried much for the safety of Keren, though occasionally in his sleep he would be visited again by Faethé. He would dream of her and she would encourage him, telling him not to worry about the things that had been left behind, that he was going in the right direction, and that this road was leading him where it was supposed to. And so he soon left off thinking of Keren, and set his eyes more resolutely on the path before him, wondering where it was to take him.

After the awkward attempt at showing the keys to Gwyn, Denith had decided to keep the secret of the keys largely to himself. And since he did not meet a lot of characters along the road he traveled, this was not a difficult thing to do. Still, he wondered why they had had no noticeable effect on Gwyn. Perhaps she had already been able to see the colors. But the fact that her clothes appeared as mismatched as those the rest of the commoners wore made this doubtful.

Then all at once, a thought struck him: *The stories! Faethé said something about stories. Something about the power of words to open people's eyes to things they otherwise could never see.*

Little did he know that, at that very moment, Faethé was whispering those exact thoughts to him.

*There was that story she told me in my dream, though it did not have much of an ending. I wonder if I could recall it. Then perhaps I can make up a better ending myself.*

"Once upon a time," Denith began, speaking to himself as he walked along. "Yes, I'm sure that's how it began. It's a good beginning for any story, I suppose. But what was next?"

He thought a while longer, until a phrase came to his mind, and he repeated it aloud.

“Once upon a time, in a land where the grass was green and the sky was blue...”

With nothing to do but follow the road, Denith kept himself busy along the way, telling and retelling the story, remembering new details and adding new characters, until he was afraid he'd lose track of the story's thread, and then he'd go back and repeat it to himself again. Several characters and details were added and then forgotten in the process, but finally he settled for a version that encapsulated what he deemed the most important elements of the story as he remembered it.

“And now, for a better ending.” An idea struck him at once. “But why not? This great lord can make a set of keys—magical keys that can restore color to the gray Shadowlands. He'll then give them to a strong young man, and charge him with sneaking them into the darkened territories, to reclaim the lands by turning them back into color somehow.”

At once, Denith realized this was not merely a new ending, but a new twist that would take the story much farther. *Well, I have little else to do but walk, so I might as well amuse myself along the way. Let's see, we'll need a name for this new character ... a noble name, perhaps ... ah, yes ...* “Howard!” He spoke the name aloud.

At the next village, Denith bought himself a paper scroll, a quill and an inkwell, so that he could note down the points to his story in the order he wanted to remember them. He had rehearsed the beginning of the story so many times that he kept very simple notes of that part, but when it came to the part he was making up as he went along, he took more careful notes of the details and scenes that he wanted to remember.

It was easy for him to identify with Howard—a

character like himself who had been sent from the court, where this young man had spent all his life. Denith described Howard's experiences in the words of his own awe and curiosity at the new sights he saw along his journey. And just as Denith now kept the keys hidden, so Howard proceeded on his secret mission to the Shadowlands keeping his keys a secret to all he met as well.

And so both Denith and Howard traveled a great distance, neither of them noticing the hours and days as they went by. Denith's story kept him occupied as he walked the normally solitary road, and his quill would write it down whenever he stopped for a rest along the way.

Eventually, the towns and regions Denith traveled through became progressively darker—not in any tangible sense, but in a feeling of heaviness that would descend upon him, sometimes to such a degree that not even thinking further on his story brought any cheer or release from the invisible weight on his soul. Already it was not easy to be traveling alone. What few fellow travelers he did happen to come across, whether on the road or at the inns and taverns he stopped at, were usually Traders who paid little attention to him—other than eyeing him with great suspicion. And for good reason: He looked odd. He was dressed as a common farmer, but carried an elaborately sheathed sword, and traveled alone.

The further he traveled, the more augmented his feelings of loneliness became, and soon all thoughts of his story had been forgotten. His only hope of relief now came from more actively looking around for some sort of sign or signal from the other world of what to do next. "Listen for the whispers," Hoden had said, but thus far, for all he knew, he had heard nothing.



Denith

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## **ROBBED**

Denith's money was now beginning to dwindle. He lingered quite a bit longer than usual at a local tavern one evening. It was easy to tell the locals from the travelers in such places. The locals were usually engrossed in noisy and slurred conversation that seemed to fill the whole room. Traders tended to sit apart or amongst themselves; and if they did converse, it was in hushed tones.

This tavern, however, was unusually quiet. Only two or three other tables were occupied, and there was no conversation. The atmosphere only caused Denith to sink deeper and deeper into the self-contemplation his lonely path had led him to. He wondered if he had made some wrong turn somewhere, or digressed from the path he had been meant to follow. He recalled with some nostalgia how easy and simple life had been when he had first set out with just the clothes on his back. There had been questions and uncertainty, but nothing like the feeling that had crept over him now.

Perhaps it was because he had been freely relying on the money he had acquired, he mused. All that he needed would be given to him, Hoden had said. So far, with his frugal spending, he had always been able to get what he needed for himself.

*Perhaps if I ran out of money, they would be forced to give me a sign of some sort.* Without thinking, he poured the rest of his coins onto the table in front of him, and decided he would no longer be as sparing in using them. He would eat and drink his fill tonight, and then see what would come of tomorrow.

Having thus decided, Denith returned the coins to their purse, ordered a hearty meal and another drink, and yet another. His head began to feel light. He soon decided it was time to leave, and as was his custom, he headed outside to find a place to spend the night.

He never noticed the lone man who had been eyeing him intently from the moment he stepped into the tavern. Shortly after Denith left, the man donned a large cloak, hiding his face under its dark hood, and followed Denith out into the cool of the night.



Before long, Denith had found a sheltered, grassy area with enough room to spread out the large cloak upon which he had become accustomed to sleeping. Drowsy from the good food and drink, he was soon sleeping contentedly, totally oblivious to what was about to befall him.

He was startled awake by rough hands grabbing his shoulders. "Get up, man! Get up!"

Still groggy from the drink that had not yet dulled into a morning headache, Denith felt himself being pulled to his feet. Before he could quite come to his senses, a second man deftly grabbed his arms from behind, and held them locked behind his back. Then the first man plunged a dagger into Denith's belly.

Denith doubled over in pain, and as he did, his jaw met a hard fist. He fell back and hit a tree before slumping senseless to the ground in front of it.

A third man was already sifting through his belongings. "Damn!" he said angrily. "He spent more of that money than I thought he did. There's very little left here!" He threw down Denith's purse in disgust, having emptied out the few remaining coins before the second man joined him in rifling through the rest of Denith's belongings.

The first man was now busy searching Denith's body. "Let's see what else we can find. Surely he wouldn't be traveling this far from home with so little money."

At that moment Denith began to come to. He opened his eyes and would have tried to get back up, but a swift kick to his stomach, and then several more to his head, left him in an unconscious sprawl once again. The ringleader now caught sight of the impressive sword he wore at his side. Weapons were hard to come by in these parts, and the man was quick to recognize its usefulness, if not its value.

He quickly knelt down to undo the buckle that was attached to Denith's sword, only to find that, no matter how hard he tried, it would not open. He decided to go for the sword itself, but to his dismay, no matter how hard he pulled, the sword could not be retrieved. The man quickly looked over to see if his two companions had noticed his futile attempts, but they hadn't. He quickly continued feeling around, looking for any other treasures this young man might be carrying with him.

"Here," he finally called out, closing his hands around the hidden pouch under Denith's garments. "This is where he keeps his real treasures, you fools—right on his body!"

The other two men quickly stopped inspecting the food and garments they'd found, and gathered around Denith, waiting to see the bounty their leader had discovered. They watched with eager interest as he uncovered the pouch.

But as soon as the man touched the cords that held the pouch closed, a jarring blow to his hands knocked him back with a jolt that he felt through his entire body.

The other men looked on, confused at what had happened. "What's going on?" one asked hesitantly.

Their leader was too stunned to speak.

"Let me have a go," the second man said. He reached for the pouch, only to meet the same fate as his predecessor.

"This is ... uh ... strange," the last man muttered, taking a few steps back, and away from Denith.

By this time their leader had regained his senses. "What was that?"

"I t-told you!" the third man stuttered fearfully. "I told you we shouldn't do this ... that strange look he had in his eyes when he left. Let's ... let's just go. Let's leave this place."

Once the second man was also back on his feet, he pointed to Denith's scratched and bloodied form lying motionless on the ground. "What about *him*? Do you think he's dead?"

"I don't know. But in any case we can't just leave him here," the leader answered.

"Why not?" the other two countered.

"How do we know he's not someone important?" the leader replied. "What if they find him in this state, and begin questioning people at the inn? We were some of the only ones there at the time—the innkeeper knows us only too well. It's too risky. We'll have to get rid of him and his belongings somehow."

"I'm not going to touch him," the second man said.

"We've got to. We can't leave him here," the leader insisted.

"Where should we take him?" the third man asked, eager to leave as quickly as possible.

"Let's drag him and his belongings further into



the woods. We can cover him with leaves and before long he'll be dead—if he's not already. No one will ever know he's there. If they do smell something, they'll just think it's a dead animal."

"I don't want to touch him again!" the second man repeated.

"Just do it!" the third man insisted, already having grabbed hold of one of his legs.

Reluctantly—and gingerly—the second man grabbed hold of Denith's other leg, and the two men began pulling Denith further into the forest, and finally rolled him down a slope, so that he landed limply in a pile of leaves that had gathered at the foot of it. The remainder of his belongings were quickly gathered up and tossed down next to him, before they covered the pile with a heap of rotting leaves. Then they fled, anxious to put as much distance between themselves and the scene of their crime as they could.

Their activities, however, had not gone entirely unnoticed. A tribe of Drifters was encamped in the middle of that very forest, and one of them had witnessed Denith's unfortunate encounter.

The Drifters, as their name implied, were bands of wanderers. They were much disliked, and generally avoided by the common people. Their freer ways of life, complete with their distinct languages and culture, contrasted strongly with the more settled habits and ways of the common people, who regarded the Drifters as primitive folk, or worse.

The Drifters, in turn, disliked the common people, and rarely ventured anywhere near them. They were especially distrustful of Traders. More than once these roving, brutish, greed-driven characters had been known to kidnap unsuspecting Drifter women and children, using or selling them as slaves for extra profit. So Drifters, by nature, were content to keep to themselves, and to let the

world go on around them with as little interference or help from them as possible—which was usually none.

So it was that witnessing this scene had made Baden feel quite uncomfortable. Though it was not likely that anyone would find the body, if they did, and searched the forest, the Drifter camp would surely be discovered, and the Drifters naturally accused of committing the crime.

Normally Baden would have quickly left the scene, warned their chief, and the camp would have been uprooted before anyone even realized that they had been there in the first place. But instead he hesitated, his curiosity aroused by what he had seen. He was determined to see for himself what it was that could strike such fear into the hardened hearts of Traders.

Cautiously he clambered down the embankment and stumbled into the musty leaves that had collected at the bottom. He kicked around in the growing darkness till he struck what he supposed was the body.

Leaning down, he dug amongst the leaves, till he had uncovered the stranger. He held his ear over the man's mouth and found that he was still breathing. At least he was still alive, though barely. Baden glanced around nervously, hoping no one would come and find him hunched over this near-dead body.

A low moan escaped Denith's lips. Baden quickly put his hand over Denith's mouth. Denith half-opened his eyes, and was startled to see the face of a stranger looking down at him. He tried to raise himself up, but the painful effort quickly rendered him unconscious again.

Baden pulled aside the man's outer vest, and felt for a wound. His fingers soon came across a crusty lump of leaves and dirt that had clung to a

blood-soaked part of the man's garments. He ripped open Denith's shirt, and examined the wound. Though it seemed deep, it did not bleed very profusely, at which Baden was relieved. The man would likely recover. At the same time, Baden noticed the pouch that contained Denith's treasure. The pouch—and whatever was in it—appeared intact. Baden deftly undid the cords that held it closed (not realizing that this had been impossible for the Traders) and gingerly peeled it open. Then it was Baden's turn to fall back, though not by any jarring force, but from his own wonder at the keys that now glistened in the dark with a pulsating golden glow.

Baden instantly knew where these keys had come from. The Drifters, as a people, believed in and knew of the other world that Denith had only recently discovered for himself. They could also see the colors. But in spite of, or perhaps even because of this, the magnificence of the keys as they were revealed to Baden was even more outstanding. The unearthly glow and pulsating aura that surrounded the keys were clearly visible to him.

Quickly he closed the pouch and pulled the jacket back across Denith's chest. Then, with Denith's form still half buried in the leaves in front of him, he sat on the ground, and pondered what to do next. There was obviously more at stake here than the simple principle of not involving himself with the affairs of commoners, but Baden was equally as unsure of involving himself with something so obviously touched by the other world. While the Drifters were aware of this world, insomuch that they could see the colors, in truth they knew that there was much more they did not know about it.

What they did know was that their beliefs, and the freedom it gave them, was not greatly appreciated

by those who ruled the Commonlands and watched over the lives of the common people. The Watchers would routinely kill or capture any Drifters they came across—if they could—and there were other, more sinister forces that would be sure to take notice of the significant treasure this young man carried. Perhaps they already had. Perhaps they had sent the robbers.

At the same time, Baden knew that he had been brought here by the same power that had protected this stranger from his attackers. The other world wanted him here, most likely for the reason of helping this poor stranger. Baden knew that helping him would risk bringing increased trouble upon their camp under any circumstances. But then again, his tribe was obviously much better prepared to evade and even withstand attack than this young lad was, who—in spite of his large build—could not even defend himself from common robbers.

It was Denith's size, in the end, that led to Baden's conclusion. Baden was not as young as he used to be, though his many years had by no means weakened him. He was a strong and sinewy man, in spite of his somewhat shorter stature. But he knew there was no way he would be able to carry this stranger back to the camp by himself. He would have to go back and get some help. At the same time, he could speak with the chief and the council and come to an agreement of how to proceed, and whether or not they should help or shelter this stranger with his mysterious treasure.



Back at the camp, which was settling down for the night, the reaction to Baden's plea was mixed. Nevertheless, several men set off into the now moonlit forest, remaining alert in case this was some sort of elaborate trap. But the forest was as

deserted as it was quiet.

They soon came to the place where Denith lay. Baden had left him covered with his cloak, and now quickly checked to make sure Denith had not succumbed in his absence. Then he reached for the pouch, and revealed the pulsating ring of keys that was hidden inside.

"It could be dangerous to involve ourselves in whatever it is this man has become embroiled in. These are forces and powers we know little about," said one of the senior members of the council who had accompanied the group.

Baden persisted. "Still, we can't leave this man here to die. Perhaps he can help us to learn more..."

The other men scowled suspiciously. Learning from a *commoner*?

"I mean, he must know something about the other world," Baden continued, undaunted. "At the very least we can find out how he came by these keys, and what they are for. If they are the secret to the power I saw protecting him, they could likely be of some use to us as well."

"Then why don't we just take the keys and be gone?" a Drifter suggested.

"Baden speaks right," the councilman answered. "We cannot leave this man here, and the keys will do us little good without this man telling us what they are for. He may well be a commoner, but a common commoner he is not. Look at his belongings. He is obviously on a journey, which in itself sets him apart. And then that sword. No, my friends, he shall come with us, at the least until he is well."

Within a short while they had made a rudimentary stretcher for Denith and placed him on it. They removed his sword, and gathered whatever other belongings of his they could find amidst the leaves. Then they made their way back to their camp of tents and wagons.

The commotion of their arrival had awakened several of the women and children, who now stood silently watching, their apprehension mingled with curiosity.

A couple of the women soon stripped Denith to his waist and tended to his wounds. The Drifters were adept at their medicinal cures and remedies—largely as a result of their daily struggle for survival living on the run, and the battles they frequently fought with the Watchers. But even as the women labored over Denith's battered body, it was clear to them that there was a life force sustaining him that was greater than any medicines they had seen before.

These people had a respect—bordering on superstition—for matters pertaining to the other world, and so none of them dared to touch the pouch that held Denith's peculiar treasure. The women bandaged him up as best they could, and he was laid in a covered wagon to rest.

Fearing for their safety, the small tribe packed up their camp and quietly and unobtrusively slipped away to a new location under the cover of darkness.



Denith was startled to see the concerned and fearful faces of several women standing around, looking at him. He turned his head from side to side. His whole body ached. He couldn't remember ever feeling so bad before. He desperately tried to recall what had happened, and how he had gotten here. His memory slowly came back to him. *The keys?* He reached for his waist, which felt strangely numb, and felt the pouch still safely nestled against him. *Yes, they're there.*

The womenfolk that tended him looked relieved as well, though he could not understand what they were saying.

*Drifters!* Denith thought with some alarm. He'd heard of them, but had never actually seen any before. *What am I doing here?* He struggled to sit up and examine his surroundings. He was in a large tent. The familiar freshness of forest air pervaded the "room," which was artfully decorated with colorful wall-rugs, and straw-like mats laid edge to edge like pathways on the floor.

He then noticed, with some alarm, that a large, white bandage was wrapped around his waist, and that his arms and stomach were full of nasty scratches and bruises.

The women around him, all the while, watched him closely.

Before long, a Drifter man entered the tent.

Denith wondered what was going on. The women began hastily chattering with the man in some unintelligible language, until finally the man managed to evict them all, and turned his attention to Denith.

"You feel well?" he asked, in the language of the common folk.

For a moment Denith tried to be suspicious of what was going on, but found that this only brought a painful throbbing to his head.

"No," Denith finally moaned. "Not well at all. I feel very sore, very bad."

"I understand," Baden answered. "If what happened to you had happened to me, I would feel very sore myself."

"What ... *did* happen?" Denith asked weakly.

"You do not remember?"

Denith shook his head, only to feel the throbbing increase.

"You were attacked by robbers. They took your money and left you for dead under some leaves in the forest. That was all I saw. Then we brought you here."

"Who are you?" Denith asked, interrupting the man's tale.

"My name is Baden—a Drifter."

"Oh."

"And you?"

"Denith," he answered softly.

Baden quickly realized the effort it took Denith to speak. He patted Denith's shoulder. "You don't have to talk. Can you try to eat? We can get you some broth. You'll be safe here. We are tending to your wounds, and they are healing well. But you still need to gain strength. Then we can talk more."

Denith was thankful that he was not going to be expected to engage in any extensive conversation at the moment. The little strength he felt was fast failing. He eagerly accepted the broth, and shortly afterwards fell back into a healing sleep.



The days passed. Little by little, as Denith was tended to by gentle souls with soft voices and skillful hands, he began to feel better. Once he was well enough to sit outside, the children would often come and play nearby. They'd heard stories of a secret treasure he carried, and each hoped to be the first to catch a glimpse of it.

It did not take long for Denith to start liking the Drifters and their ways, which to his pleasant surprise were not at all as disreputable as they had been made out to be. Although most of the men kept their distance, they would always respectfully nod in greeting as they passed by. Baden, who was apparently the only one in this tribe who could speak the common language at all, would visit him every evening.

"You are starting to look well!" Baden said one day.

"I want to thank you, Baden," Denith answered respectfully. "You've done much for me. You didn't



have to rescue me. You could have left me. In fact, with the hatred you suffer at the hands of my kind, I can't understand why you didn't."

Baden smiled, and looked down.

"So ... what was different in my case?" Denith probed.

Baden thought for a moment, and then decided that perhaps it was time to tell Denith the whole story.

"When the Traders attacked you, even when you were sleeplike, I saw them get thrown back by a strange force protecting you. When I came to you after they had gone, I was curious as to what force this was. Then I found the keys."

Denith looked up, surprised. Baden had not mentioned the keys before.

"I knew you had been visited by the other world," Baden continued. "You see, we know about these things—the colors that your kind do not see, the gifts of this other world that have been taken from you. But your keys ... they show the power of this other world, and so you must know of it also. Am I right?"

"So far, yes. But I don't know much. I ... I was given these keys, but I still do not know exactly what they are for. I was given a sword too."

"Ah, yes! Your sword. We took it off when we brought you here. We had to be careful. But we have it still. It's with your things—at least, what things we managed to find. But that sword...?"

"...is a Baron sword." Denith finished the sentence.

"Yes. You have been to the Barons?"

"No ... no, I haven't. They came to us. That is, I never saw them, but they left this sword. I didn't see any harm in keeping it," Denith said, deciding for the moment to be careful about how much of his history he would reveal.

Baden nodded before continuing, "As I was going to say, we can give back your things as soon as you wish. But I think you should not be hasty to depart. Perhaps we can help you to discover the purpose of these keys. There are those amongst us who..." Baden hesitated momentarily, not sure if he should go on.

Denith looked at him expectantly. "Who what?"

"Well," Baden continued, "who hear things from the other world."

"The whispers?" Denith asked, his eyes lighting up.

"Whispers?" Baden asked, thinking a moment. "Ah, yes, whispers. Yes, whispers they are. You know these whispers?"

"Yes ... sometimes I have heard them. But usually those from this other world have come to me, and then spoken. Sometimes I feel like they are still there, watching me."

"This is fascinating," Baden said, pulling up a stool next to Denith.

Denith looked up at Baden and could see that Baden was anxious to hear more.

"Well," Denith offered, "seeing that you might be able to help me unravel some of the mystery behind all this, why don't I tell you the whole story?"

So Denith again proceeded to tell the story of all that had happened to him. And, as he had found before, whenever he spoke of these deep mysteries and secrets, and the wonders of the other world, the words seemed to infuse new life into his own soul as well.

Baden sat in silence for a good while after Denith finished his story. Denith sat quietly too—waiting, wondering what Baden thought of it all.

"So you have not heard anything since you began your journey?" Baden asked.

"No. They were supposed to tell me what I was to

do, but perhaps I have somehow missed them.”

“Then I know of someone who may be able to help you—a Drifter. In fact, when you told that story ... the one from your dream ... I found myself thinking about her. You see, she is mentioned in many such stories that are told amongst our people. Her name is Charine. There is a saying that we Drifters live half in this world and half in the other. Well, Charine lives almost completely in the other world.

“She is always spoken of as an old woman, though nobody knows exactly how old she is. Some speak of her as the mother of all Drifters, and the color-seeing folk, but if that were true, she would be too old to be alive, and the stories speak of her still living among our people.”

“Is she real?” Denith asked.

“That I wouldn’t know,” Baden answered. “Those who speak of having met her always say she is. But whatever the truth or myth about this woman is, one thing is sure: If you would know things from the other world, it is she you must seek. Perhaps that is why I was allowed to see what befell you that night, so that we Drifters could help you to fill in pieces of the puzzle that you have not yet found.”



## TO MAKE A WARRIOR

“Here,” Baden said a few days later, popping into Denith’s tent with a cheerful look on his face. “I think you might want your sword now.”

Denith remained silent as his eyes lit on the sword Baden was carrying.

“I think, from what I saw in the forest, that you’re not exactly a man of war—or that you even know the ways of fighting. But if you have been given such a worthy sword, I think it is meant for you to use it.”

Denith looked thoughtful, but Baden only smiled, and continued. “Besides, even though you’re back on your feet, the lack of movement these past weeks has not done you a lot of good. I know of no better way to get some color back to your skin and strength back in your limbs than through the rigors of practicing for combat!” He raised his eyebrows and smiled at Denith.

“Combat?” Denith questioned. “I don’t know. You’re right about one thing: I have no inclination for the ways of war!”

“I know! That’s the way all you commoners are. I know it only too well. All you want to do,” he said as he began prancing around and acting out his words, “is tend to your goats and sheep, milk your

cows, and coax your gardens to bear fruit.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” Denith asked defensively.

Baden swirled around, unsheathing the sword and pointing it menacingly at Denith in a single, smooth motion. “Wrong?” he responded vehemently. “What’s wrong is that you have allowed the simplicity of your lives to blind you to the war that is raging all around you, so that you can’t even see it when it is being waged on your very doorstep.”

“What war?” Denith asked, pulling himself back from the tip of the blade.

“You see? You don’t know,” Baden said as he sheathed the sword again.

“Know what?” Denith asked.

“About the forces that are battling all around us ... the dark forces, Lancer’s men.”

“Lancer? Who’s Lancer?”

“You do not know of General Lancer?” Baden asked, greatly surprised.

“Am I supposed to?”

“Do you know anything?”

Denith looked a little embarrassed.

“Lancer is the self-proclaimed Lord General who commands the Watchers. He rules the lands you live on, and the lives you lead. I am surprised you do not know this. What else did you think those Watchers were for?”

Denith shrugged.

“See? You do not care. It makes little difference to you. That is because you don’t realize what they have done to your lives, and to your people.”

“What have they done?”

“They’ve kept you snugly under their subjection, from seeking your freedom. Why do you think the Watchers hate us, and tell your people to hate us? It is because they are afraid of our free ways, and of your people discovering them. They cannot

control us. And what they cannot control, they fear. And what they fear, they fight.”

Denith looked at Baden. He had never seen the man so worked up before. Still, he could make little sense of the man’s words.

“So what does any of this have to do with *me* learning the ways of fighting?” Denith asked sheepishly.

“The simple and obvious fact that by accepting those keys you have chosen your side in this war—the war between freedom and bondage, between the colors and the shadows, between the light and the darkness. However you see it, it is the same war, and you are now part of it. Even if you do not seek battle, the battle will find you, and you shall not be able to escape it. The only thing you can do is hope to be prepared for it.”

Denith looked at Baden, feeling a mixture of disbelief and alarm.

“You may not have seen them yet,” Baden continued, “but there are those who walk this world without a touch of color on them. They exist only in shadow, and are the emissaries of forces even darker than Lancer’s men. They are our true enemies. It is they who know of the colors, and yet despise them. It is their influence that has kept your people from seeing them. And their greatest enemies are people like us—those who can see their true colors—or lack of them. It is they who invoke Lancer and his Watchers to fight us, to keep us out of their lives, and out of yours—to keep you content in your snug little lives as their slaves. Your people have become so acceptant of this life, and even dependent on it, that even if you could see what was really happening, you would still do nothing, simply because you have ... how did you say it ... no inclination for the ways of war?”

“But what use is there in fighting? Our lands

are at peace. Isn't that a good thing?"

"Ah, if only they were at peace. The ways of peace are indeed better than the ways of war. But peace without freedom is a false peace. Your people are captives of these Shadowed Ones, as if they had been born in prison, not even knowing that there is true freedom beyond the confines they are content to remain within. They sit in the darkness of shadow, when the sun is shining all around them, beckoning them to discover the freedom of its warmth and light.

"But they cannot see it, because they are captives. They cannot even comprehend it when you tell them of it, because the world outside their prison is foreign to them. True peace is a gift of the light, just as the true colors are. What the Shadowed Ones have brought your people is not peace, but slavery. And as a slave, you have now escaped. You have found a way out of the prison they have kept your people in, and discovered the truth that they have sought to keep from your eyes and hearts. And so you have become a danger to these forces of darkness, just as we Drifters are a danger to their system."

Denith was quiet as he pondered Baden's words. Things were starting to make some sense—the sight of the colors, and the keys of this other world that had somehow broken whatever influence had blinded him to them before. It all sounded so much bigger and involved than he had imagined. Strange powers, dark forces, creatures of shadow.

"So, what will it be?" Baden asked, holding Denith's sword up in front of him. "You need strengthening, and learning to defend yourself is a good thing. At least you won't have to rely on strangers to rescue you next time you're attacked by simple thugs."

Denith smiled. He was already persuaded.



"You're right! Let's start!" he said with a note of determination in his voice. "Teach me!"

"What? Now?" Baden asked, caught off guard by this sudden change in Denith's manner.

"Why not?" Denith answered. "I mean, at least I could learn how to pull that sword out as smoothly as you did. That would be progress enough for one day!"

At that, Baden burst out in hearty laughter. "Then let's do it!"

They found a secluded spot not far from where they had set up camp. Baden was most proficient with the sword, but he could also skillfully wield a knife, and hit targets from a great distance away. He was a fierce fighter, even with his bare hands.

"It's in our blood," he confided to Denith, as he set up props and branches for targets. "We grow up fighting, almost from the day we leave our mother's womb. It's part of our life—our survival."

"You're such an odd people," Denith commented. "On the one hand you are gentle souls with a joyful and peaceful way of living, and yet you can be so fierce!"

"We have to be," Baden replied. "And you'll have to be too!—Here! I don't intend to keep this for you for a moment longer," he said as he tossed Denith the sword. "Put it on, and let's begin."

Denith strapped the sheath back around his waist. He curled his fingers around the hilt, and carefully, almost reverently, drew the sword. It slid out easily. He pointed it upwards, and away from him, inspecting the look and feel of it in his own hands.

It was an impressive sight, even for Baden. "What sort of commoner is this, and what is he to become?" he whispered to himself.

"What was that?" Denith asked.

"Huh? Oh, nothing," Baden said, making a

pretense of clearing his throat as he regained his composure. "That was pretty smooth—for a beginner."



Baden coached Denith through increasingly difficult levels of training. As the weeks went by, Denith's strength continued to return and his fitness improved. In spite of his hardy physique, he had never been exposed to the kind of rigors that Baden was subjecting him to now, and it took him quite a bit of catching his breath before he found himself fully up to the trials that Baden placed before him.

They would run through woods, uphill, downhill—Baden spurring Denith on until his muscles ached and he could run no more. His arms and shoulders strained from wielding weaponry and climbing ropes and trees, and he felt at times that he was scarcely able to take another breath. Yet each day he found himself a little surer, a little more nimble, a little more attentive, and able to push himself a little further.

Much to Baden's surprise, Denith found great enjoyment and challenge in pushing his endurance to the limit. Soon his skill with the sword had improved so much that even Baden was surprised at the maneuvers and techniques he mastered. He was no match for Baden yet, or any of the other menfolk of this small Drifter tribe, but his potential was clearly beginning to show.

Baden and the others soon packed up camp, and began their journey in search of Charine. Throughout their days of travel, Baden was determined not to let Denith's training stop. Each morning well before dawn, he would wake Denith and take him to a place where he would set up torches, and the training would continue. He would make Denith run alongside the rolling wagons instead of riding them. He taught

Denith horsemanship—how to grab the mane of a running horse and swing onto its back, or to jump from one running horse onto another. It seemed there was little that Baden could not teach, or that Denith could not learn.



“We’ll be setting up camp here,” Baden informed Denith as they reached a secluded clearing.

Denith nodded, taking little notice of Baden’s comments. He was thankful for the break in their traveling schedule, as he hoped it would afford some more time for training. “Time to practice, then!” he proclaimed.

Baden looked a little concerned. “Yes ... time to practice. And that’s the truth, for soon it may be more than just practice.”

Denith looked puzzled. “I’m not sure that I understand.”

“The closer we get to the Dark Forest, the stronger the presence of the dark forces becomes.”

“The Dark Forest?” Denith questioned.

“It was once a sacred forest to the Drifters, though we were driven from it long ago. We called it the Enchanted Wood, until the Shadowed Ones came. Now it is dark, like everything that has come under their evil influence. But it is said that some of it remains enchanted, and in those parts is where Charine dwells.”

“So how close are we?”

“It is still several days off by horseback.”

“Then why are we setting up camp here?”

“Because this is as far as the camp will go. The council doesn’t want to bring the tribe any closer to harm’s way. They have traveled this far only because it agrees with our normal course of travel. A few of us shall go on with you, but off the main roads, until we get to the Dark Forest...”

“Where we will find Charine,” Denith said,

finishing Baden's sentence.

"Precisely, but not as easily," Baden answered. "The forest is vast and deep, and is for the most part a dreadful place. It was once enchanted with pleasantness, when the Drifters had it. But now it has become darkened—so darkened that even most of Lancer's men dare not enter it."

Denith listened in awe, fascinated by Baden's words.

Baden, however, felt some concern over the glimmer of adventure that he could see dancing in Denith's eyes. "Let me tell you one thing about our journey," Baden said, his voice taking on an emphatic and somber tone. "It will be a treacherous one—treacherous trying to evade the dark forces, and treacherous wandering through that forest. This is no small thing that we are setting out to do."

But Baden's words did little to dampen Denith's enthusiasm, and he began toying with the hilt of his sword in anticipation of some more practice time.

"You have never had to face the dark forces, have you?" Baden challenged.

"Well, there were those fellows who attacked me."

"Ha! They were not the dark forces. They were Traders—prisoners of shadow like the rest of the commoners, only a little less refined. The dark forces are the Watchers, who rule over your people, and the Shadowed Ones, who rule over the Watchers. I suppose you know nothing of the netherworld either."

"The netherworld?"

"Just as I thought," Baden remarked with a hint of frustration, and attempted to explain. "The netherworld exists much like the other world does—in realms that remain invisible to most. You cannot really accept or be aware of the one without having to acknowledge the existence of the other. And

though its power is not as strong nor as great as the power of the other world, it is still a power—and the heart of the shadow and its Shadowed Ones that rule over your world. And a sword will do you little good in the face of these enemies.” With a swift movement, Baden suddenly snatched Denith’s sword from its sheath, and held it casually in front of him. “You think you have learned much because you are now able to wield a sword. But there is much more to this war than weapons of combat.” With that, Baden flung the sword a short distance away.

Denith groaned inwardly and a troubled look crossed his face.

“What’s the matter?” Baden asked. “Have you only now realized the danger that we face?”

“I am troubled,” Denith said, shaking his head. He plopped down on a nearby log. “I thought I’d learned much, but now you say there is so much more to learn! I’ve spent all this time and energy mastering the sword to keep myself out of trouble and free from harm. But now you tell me that all this will be of little help against these Shadowed Ones? Why didn’t you tell me this at the very beginning, before I spent so much time learning how to wield a sword that still leaves me powerless against them?”

“I’m not saying you have no power against them,” Baden was quick to respond. “All I am saying is that you have not yet learned to fight them.”

“I am too weary to learn how to fight a new battle,” Denith muttered.

“You are too *proud* to learn how to fight a new battle!” Baden retorted sharply.

Denith looked up in surprise at Baden’s tone. He could feel that Baden was beginning to lose patience with him.

Baden continued, “You are so foolish to think

that when you have learned one thing you have learned everything! This one little skill has puffed you up. Do you think that now you are invincible? You need to learn that you know nothing!—And that the more you know, the more it tells you what you don't know.” Baden shook his head angrily. “But if after only a few lessons you feel good and proud in yourself, then I'm afraid you are looking forward to a mighty fall!”

With that, Baden turned and stormed off, leaving Denith alone.

Denith was distressed that he had upset his friend, but also disheartened by Baden's words. *I need to get away*, he thought. *Perhaps a walk in the woods will clear my mind and do me some good.*

He found a path that led off into a nearby wooded area, and decided to follow it. Before he had gone far he felt a nudge, a voice like a whisper. *Your sword! Remember, a warrior never goes anywhere without his sword.*

Denith hurried back, quickly retrieved his sword from where Baden had tossed it, and placed it back in its sheath. Then he turned back towards his trail, to find solitude, peace of mind, and a chance to ponder all the things that Baden had told him.

He had not been out alone since the Drifters had rescued him, and the first thought that struck him as he wandered further was how quiet everything was, and then how alone and even fragile he was. He shrugged these thoughts off, however, as he was worried that entertaining them was a sign of weakness.

The woods around him grew darker, though Denith tried to comfort himself that, of course, forests were often dark, with their threaded and intertwined branches and leaves blocking the sunlight—and warmth. The pathway soon began to narrow, till it ended at a wall of hedges that could

not be passed. Denith sighed in resignation. The path of his thoughts had come to just as abrupt an end, without any definite or helpful conclusions.

He turned to begin his journey back, but as he did, he found himself standing before a cloaked and hooded stranger. His surprise quickly turned to anxiety. He had not been aware that anyone was following him, and he was unsure what to expect from this encounter. He tried to distinguish the stranger's features, but the short man lowered his hood even further, so that his face was filled with shadows.

Denith suddenly felt a warmth against his side. *The keys!* he thought instantly. He had mostly forgotten about them these past few weeks that he'd been training, but he now became acutely aware of them. At the same time he felt a power surging through his being, filling him with watchfulness and courage—an apparent premonition of what was to come.

"Who are you?" Denith challenged.

The stranger did not move as Denith approached.

"Where did you come from? I demand that you let me pass!"

"You cannot pass me if I do not wish it," the man answered coldly.

"I am not sure that I agree!" Denith said, preparing to grasp his sword. "Do not force me to lift up my sword against you, for I see you carry no equal weapon."

"Yours is a very worthy sword," the stranger answered, "that I can see. A Baron sword, no less. But I see that you do not know who I am, for if you did, you would understand that I have no need of a weapon."

"How can I know you when your face is hidden?" Denith answered.

"Nor do you have any fear of me," the stranger said with some surprise, "and yet you have come into my presence. Why?"

It suddenly dawned on Denith that this was no earthly stranger. His sense of wariness heightened. Though he felt no fear, the man's presence was unnerving.

"It is *you* who have come into *my* presence," Denith persisted. "And your company is not desired. So be gone, stranger."

"You would fear me more if you knew who I was," the stranger replied. "I have the command of all the forces within this region at my disposal. I will give the orders here, and state my likes or dislikes!"

A shudder swept through Denith, as he realized where this creature probably came from. Still, the stranger seemed more puzzled by Denith than Denith was by him. Denith took a measure of comfort in that observation, and decided to press his advantage.

"You do not look like any commander to me," Denith said without a trace of fear, stepping closer to the figure. "For all I know, you're nothing but a short, shriveled old man under that cloak you hide in."

Getting aggravated at this young man's lack of respect for his powers, the stranger deftly opened his cloak to reveal a dark gray uniform—as well as a hefty sword, which he now drew menacingly. "But I do have a sword. You see, it is not always as you think, young man. Beware of challenging powers you know nothing of."

The black blade of the sword glistened darkly, as if it was in some strange way aglow with shadow. But Denith did not flinch. He felt an inner assurance from the power of the keys, and somehow he knew that this creature could do him no harm while he carried them. He did not draw his sword in



response. "So, you have a sword. That still does not make me fear you."

"You are not a Drifter, yet your speech and manner resemble a Drifter," the stranger observed, and his tone almost softened. "By your insolence I sense that you have been living among them, though you are clearly of the common folk. But even that would not be enough to bring you so strongly to my attention. Who are you, young man with the Baron sword?"

Denith swallowed. He was not sure how to respond. He had no desire to reveal any of his secrets to this creature of darkness. He tried again to discern the stranger's features, but darkness was rapidly falling and the man's face, already shadowed by his hood, now became even more shadow-filled, until Denith was staring into a void of nothingness.

It was then that he heard a whisper: *He's not really there...*

Denith shook his head slightly, but the whisper sounded more loudly this time: *He is not of your world. His sword cannot touch you. Only beware of his words.*

Denith hoped desperately he could trust the whisper he was hearing at this moment. "You may have a sword," he answered, "but I sense that, for all your bold display of power, your presence here is only as a wisp, a phantom, a figment of some dark imagination! You may be able to make yourself appear before me, but that is all you can do. If I were to draw my sword to fight, it would do you no harm. But neither can you harm me. I don't know who you are, or why I have come to your attention, but I for one have no desire to find the answer to either of those questions."

Feeling emboldened, Denith raised himself up as tall as he could, and said, "I am not going to be

hindered or stopped by you. I am going on, whether I have to go around you or," he said, stepping forward resolutely, "right through you!" With that, he passed right through the figure, and when he looked back, the apparition was gone.

Denith knew he had just stood face to face with a creature of the netherworld, and could not help but feel shaken by the experience. Somehow Denith had evoked the attention of this creature. Was it because of the keys? The creature had not mentioned them—only the sword, which, as far as Denith knew, was not imbued with any special power of itself. But this creature had appeared from nowhere, and returned there again. What if he were to appear and see the keys? Or was the creature perhaps still there, and still watching invisibly?

Denith was suddenly struck with dread, and he wanted nothing more than to be gone from this ominous place. Quickly he ran back to Baden's camp, defying the branches that slapped his face as he rushed by them, till finally he came to the edge of the clearing where the Drifters were beginning to set up camp. Here he collapsed on the ground, sorely out of breath. It did not take long for Baden to find him.

By this time Baden was feeling sorry for his impatient outburst. After all, the young man knew very little about the ways of the other world, and could hardly be blamed for his ignorance and misplaced self-confidence.

Baden haltingly began to speak, "I ... I'm sorry, Denith."

"Sorry?" Denith asked, "Oh, never mind that. I was just in the forest by myself and ... I think I met one of the Shadowed Ones."

"What? Here?" Baden exclaimed.

Denith proceeded to tell Baden what had transpired during his solitary trek into the forest.

Baden listened in silence, then looked distressed. "The camp must leave!" he said.

"Leave? Why?"

"If the netherworld has discovered your presence here, it may not be long before the Watchers will be crawling all over this place. The ways of the dark forces are difficult to understand, but if this is the first time you have come to the attention of the Shadowed Ones, they will not stop until they have discovered why—and more often than not it falls to the Watchers, who are indirectly under their control, to accomplish this. We may not have much time here."

"I have put you in danger," Denith said in anguish.

"Do not worry yourself! We have seen danger before. This is the peril I was trying to tell you about. You never know where it will come from or how it will show itself. Sometimes it brings the Watchers, and battle. Other times, it brings only unseen forces that are more sinister, whose words or thoughts like weapons enter the mind and weaken it, bringing doubt and fear. And at other times—perhaps this time—it can bring both. Our little tribe will not stand long against a host of Watchers." He thought for a moment. "I shall recommend to the council that the camp move elsewhere. As for our part of the journey, we may have to go on with fewer men than I planned. The camp will need help to move to a new place for the winter."

With that, Baden slowly turned and made his way back into the camp to share the news with the others. He pondered all that had befallen Denith. He couldn't shake the feeling that there was much more to this young man than he had originally thought.

*Who are you, Denith? he wondered. Why were you given those keys? And what sort of power do you wield that both attracts and defies the dark forces?*



Baden

## THE DARK FORCES

There had been no objections to Baden's proposal this time. Though the Drifters had safely inhabited these parts before, they were aware that danger was nearer here than elsewhere, and after hearing of Denith's encounter, it was agreed that the wisest course of action would be to move to a safer location.

A group of eight men, including Denith, would continue on towards the Dark Forest in search of Charine. There was little doubt now in Baden's mind that they needed to avail themselves of whatever truth, wisdom, and insight she possessed.

Denith, however, was pale, and obviously distraught with all that had happened.

Baden, noticing his lack of cheer, asked, "What's the matter with you? We don't have time to indulge in any self-pity. The horses are saddled and laden with provisions, and we must soon be on our way."

Denith looked up. "I'm very sorry that I've caused you so much trouble," he said. "I don't understand what is happening but it just seems that ever since you've met me, you've had one problem after another."

"That's an exaggeration. I don't know that we've had any *real* problems till now, have we? You need

to stop thinking that you are the center of the universe—that all goodness, all answers, and all problems come from you!” Baden said with a laugh. “This is not your doing. You do not seem to understand this. None of this is your doing. You are only a player, playing a role. It is your keys that are bringing this upon all of us. And because they are from the other world, this means that the other world is bringing these things on us. And what they bring, they bring for a purpose—a purpose we shall try to discover by finding Charine.”

Baden shook his head and continued, “I don’t know what’s happening either, but I believe we’ll find out sooner than later. Such struggles are not new to us. And I think they are not going to be new to you for much longer either! So come, get up on your horse. The sun is setting, and we must be on our way.”

As they rode, Denith found a lot of time to think and reflect on Baden’s words, and all that had happened. He felt very incapable of playing any role against such forces. But at the same time he felt a strength growing within him—a strength that seemed to be waiting to be released at the right moment, under the right circumstances. He had felt a measure of it when he confronted the shadowed stranger, and knew that this strength was not his own, that it was not something he could emulate or possess in himself. It had been given to him in the moment of danger, when he needed it. It was as if he was merely an empty shell for this strength to use, possess, and empower. *Except*, he thought, *perhaps the shell is not quite empty enough yet!*



At daybreak the band of seven Drifters and Denith emerged from a forest to see a wide expanse of open terrain before them. In the distance, the

Dark Forest loomed wide and dark, like a thick rug thrown over the rolling terrain of hills that stretched to the horizon. The small group reined in their horses and paused at the edge of the forest they had just come out of, gazing out across the tract of land between them and their next destination.

The Drifters spoke among themselves as one of them pointed in the direction of a pillar of smoke that rose from the other side of a hill.

“He says there’s an encampment of Watchers there,” Baden translated for Denith. “That won’t make it any easier for us to get across this space unnoticed.”

The other men were discussing various options amongst themselves in their own language, occasionally casting sidelong glances at Denith. They all knew he had yet to face a true enemy in hand-to-hand combat.

“They are saying that perhaps it is best to bide our time here,” Baden continued. “This thicket will give us ample cover until nightfall, when we can sneak across under the cover of darkness.”

Baden was concerned to see a troubled look on Denith’s face once again.

“I realize you’ve all fought men like these before,” Denith quickly explained, “and you’d do so again without hesitation. So your only reason to wait is to protect me from this confrontation. But that confrontation is going to come upon us whether we go or stay. It cannot be avoided.”

Baden looked up, curious.

“What I mean,” Denith continued, “is that I fear this shadowed creature has been tracking our journey. It’s almost like he is trying to push himself to the forefront of my mind again, and materialize before me. I am doing my best to ward off such thoughts, but they are getting stronger, and increasingly difficult to ignore.”

"And you fear he may lead other Watchers to our position," Baden suggested.

"Yes. And they may not be very far off."

"I feared as much myself when I saw the Watchers encamped just here," Baden answered. "They have a way of sensing these things, and are difficult men to take by surprise. Very well, I shall tell the others."

With that, Baden returned to the group of Drifters, and explained all that Denith had told him.

"I fear for his mind," one of them replied. "These commoners seem so easily influenced by the Shadowed Ones. Keys or not, he cannot hope to last long like this."

The other men nodded.

"I agree," Baden replied. "And that is why it is all the more important that we find Charine. She is the only one who would know about these things, and be able to help him. As it is said, for every force of darkness, there is an equally powerful counterforce of light. I am sure there is something he can do against such dark influences, and perhaps that is what he is meant to discover—not only for himself, but for his people."

Meanwhile, Denith had drawn himself a short distance away from the group. In the back of his mind he had begun hearing snatches of words—faintly at first, though he was sure it was the whispers. They were telling him something! He closed his eyes, trying with all of his might to concentrate on the words they were saying. At the same time, and almost without realizing it, Denith found his hands making their way towards the keys, which were nestled safely in their pouch.

The Drifters looked in Denith's direction, suddenly worried about the trancelike state he seemed to be getting into. But Baden, noting the serene look on Denith's face, smiled. "It is okay. I



think our friend is even now discovering a counterforce,” Baden whispered.

As Denith’s hands grasped ahold of the keys, the whispers suddenly became clearer: *The only power this Evil One wields is fear. The moment you yield to that fear, he will have power over your mind, and will appear once again. And if he does, he will be more difficult to resist.*

As the voice grew clearer, Denith recognized that it was Faethé who spoke, though he could not see her. He smiled.

*We are right here with you, the inner voice continued. You are protected by the power of the keys, the power of our world. We have not left you, and are still with you. You are still upon the path we have placed you on, and you have done well. There is more to come, and much to learn, but so long as you hold on to the keys, you have nothing to fear—not from the Evil One, and not from his shadows that walk these lands. Do not waver, but go forth to meet them, for this is what you have been trained for.*

As quickly as they had come, the whispers were gone. But the warmth they had brought with them remained—a warmth that emanated from the keys and flowed over his entire body. And with it came peace—a peace that Denith felt could defy any fear.

Denith now noticed Baden and the other Drifters staring curiously in his direction.

“I’m fine,” Denith assured the group of men. “It was the whispers. I’ve heard them again. I think they mean for us to go forward. And if that means we must fight, then I am ready for it.”

Denith’s resoluteness caught the Drifters by surprise—all but Baden, that is. He had expected it.

“Alright, then!” Baden said. “We will try to find the safest and fastest route across, but no matter where we cross, they will spot us before we reach

the forest, and it won't be long until they are upon us. We shall have to hope we can make it as close to the forest as possible before we are knocked from our horses, and will have to fight and run at the same time."

They rode off in single file, staying within the forest, taking great care to remain out of sight. Coming to the crest of a hill, they gazed down the far side. The encampment of soldiers was sprawled in the dale below them, and various patrols could be seen marching or riding along the stretch of land between them and the Dark Forest.

"This could be more difficult than we thought," one of the men said. "It looks like the Shadowed Ones have alerted them to our coming."

"It won't take long for us to be seriously outnumbered," the other Drifter continued. "We shall have to put as much distance between us and the main camp as we can before we cross if we want to get anywhere near that forest before these Watchers overtake us, and to have a decent chance of making it there alive."

"I agree," Baden replied, "and that will only be the beginning."

Being so outnumbered was their greatest concern, and some of the men muttered among themselves that Denith would likely prove of little help—if not actually worsen the odds altogether by needing to be protected by them as well.

Denith himself wondered if he would even be able to raise his sword against another man in earnest. Practice was one thing, but the thought of actually wounding or killing someone was almost incomprehensible to him, though it didn't seem to disturb these other fine men he was riding with.

Baden knew more than anyone the chance they were taking in exposing Denith to this battle. Facing

down a faceless apparition was one thing. No harm had been done. Confronting men of flesh and blood was another battle entirely, and Baden realized the very real possibility that Denith might turn and run when faced with such danger—or worse still, freeze and be unable to lift his sword to protect himself. If that were the case, someone *would* have to protect him.

“Well, the time has come, Denith,” Baden said once the plan had been formulated. “It will not be an easy battle, but we shall take our chances. These men are not hard to defeat individually, but their numbers will be the greatest challenge. But with a little help from the other world, we shall be in that forest before the noon hour!”

They rode a little further along the woods, until they came to a plateau that stretched straight before them all the way to the Dark Forest. Hopefully it was far enough from the main encampment to yield them the advantage of time they needed. The ground was also level enough to give them good visibility of any oncoming forces.

At Baden’s signal, all the men unsheathed their swords, and then lowered them towards each other in salute. Then they spurred their horses, and began the charge.

Sticking as close as he could to Baden, Denith rode in the middle. His heart was pounding. Baden didn’t dare look at him, for he did not want to unduly worry himself with a glimpse of Denith’s stricken face.

A small patrol of soldiers was the first to spot their dash. Though startled initially, they were also quick to respond to the trespassers. The alarm was raised, swords were drawn, horses were spurred, and soon soldiers were converging on the galloping intruders from the direction of the camp.

The Drifters rode hard, but they had not

expected to reach the forest without a fight, and they didn't. The first wave of Watchers was soon upon them. The battle that ensued was not without its casualties. One of the Drifters leading the group fell almost immediately at the hand of a large group of Watchers that had surrounded him. Though it did not take the other Drifters long to lay this man's killers low, the damage was done, and they were now down one man.

Baden momentarily forgot about Denith, becoming consumed with his own struggle for survival at the hand of several attackers. But he need not have worried. As soon as Denith saw these men coldly attacking and killing his friend, he felt the anger rise up within him.

These men, he could now clearly see, were appropriately referred to as the dark forces—the arms of whatever power was keeping the Commonlands and its common people subject under its colorless spell of shadow. Darkness filled the eyes of these Watchers. Their contorted faces looked pale, as if they were drained of any natural color they might once have had.

As yet another of these dark menaces descended on Baden, Denith spurred his horse to the outer rim of the circle of Drifters that had formed around him. Then he unsheathed his sword, and joined the struggle.

Denith fought deftly. It was not difficult for him to wield the sword. In fact, the sword almost seemed to come to life on its own. It curved through the air with a deadly skill and precision that Denith did not know he possessed. In fact, so foreboding and menacing was his presence that he began to strike fear into the hearts of some of the less-seasoned enemy soldiers, who sought their opportunity to escape the fight by falling down with some minor injury and hoping the battle would move on so they

could quietly remove themselves from the scene.

Soon the Drifters were forced from their horses, which further slowed their advance towards the woods as the battle moved to hand-to-hand combat. The Drifters fought well, defeating each incoming wave of attackers as they approached.

It wasn't long before the captain of one of the patrols took it upon himself to engage Denith in battle. After a prolonged fight, the captain cornered Denith on the edge of a piece of flat rock that jutted out of the ground. Their swords clashed with an earnestness that showed they both knew this was a struggle to the death. Soon their swords locked between them. The captain gave a heave, and Denith lost his balance and tumbled off the rock's edge. But before he fell, Denith grabbed on to the captain's cloak with his free hand, so that both men were pulled to the ground.

The fall was far from soft, but before the captain could do anything, Denith was already back on his feet, and had the captain's chest pinned to the ground underneath his sword. Denith closed his eyes for the final thrust, and pressed his sword down. It sank easily, and was just as quickly withdrawn as Denith prepared to face whatever adversary would beset him next. But when he looked around, everything was quiet. The battle was over. He had been the last one fighting.

Denith solemnly surveyed the scene—the bodies, the blood, the injured or riderless horses. Five Drifters were left standing, including Baden, who was now staring at Denith in surprise.

"You never fought like that when we were practicing in the woods," he said, catching his breath and wiping the sweat from his brow. "What came over you?"

"I don't know," Denith answered. "It was like I knew what to do. I knew where he was going to

strike at me, and I was prepared. I know I've practiced, but I also know I've barely mastered the rudiments. It was like some power that was not my own just took over, and multiplied everything I've learned. It ... it certainly wasn't me."

Baden shook his head, amazed. "Well, we don't have a lot of time to be impressed!" he continued, and then shouted out to the other Drifters still standing, "Gather horses and supplies. We have to go, quickly, before further reinforcements arrive. Once we make it to the Dark Forest, they'll never find us."



Never before had Denith seen such a tangled web of dark green foliage. It was a frightening and foreboding place. Baden whistled a tune loudly as he carefully led his frisky, unsettled mare through the wooded pathway.

Denith came up behind Baden. "Why are you whistling?"

"It helps my courage."

"But aren't you afraid that it will draw attention to us?"

"Attention?" Baden laughed. "We can't help but draw attention to ourselves in this place. It is filled with the eyes and ears of the netherworld, and creeps with everything that is disagreeable and unpleasant. That is why I whistle!"

"I thought you said the dark forces don't enter this place?" Denith asked.

"I said that Lancer's *men* do not enter this place. But there are other creatures, darker than the Watchers, and even more treacherous, that inhabit this forest," Baden explained. "Perhaps the most dangerous are the eeghaws. They are bird-like creatures that fly silently about in many places, but mostly in places where the presence of the netherworld is strong. Their eyesight is keen, and

they can detect movement from a great distance. They are quick to spot anything unusual. I am sure they witnessed our battle, and have already passed on the news of its outcome to their masters.”

“The Shadowed Ones?”

“No ... creatures much less powerful, but no less despicable. They are called Toilers. You could say they are like the peasants of the netherworld, though scavengers might be better. They live in many dark regions, like this forest.”

“And Charine chooses to hide herself amongst all these?” Denith asked, somewhat surprised.

“It is surprising, isn’t it? But it is said that there are many sides to this forest. Some are darker, and some more peaceful. It is the peaceful places we are looking for. That’s where we will find Charine. But it will not be easy. The forest is not charted, and only by wandering through it can we hope to stumble across what we are looking for.”

“If we even know what that is,” one of the Drifters beside Baden muttered.

Baden shot the man a stern glance, warning him to keep silence.

Denith looked at the man, and at Baden, wondering what the man had said, as he had spoken in the Drifter tongue. But from Baden’s glance, he knew there would be no translation of the man’s words. *I must see if I can learn this language for myself*, he thought.

The already gloomy forest soon became even darker with the approach of evening.

“We’ll have to find some sort of a clearing—if one exists in a place like this,” Baden said.

“We’re going to have to spend a night here?” Denith asked.

“Well, I don’t know that we have much choice,” Baden answered, glancing around uneasily. “It’s unpleasant, I know, but we have the advantage.

For every force of darkness, there is an equally powerful counterforce of light. The creatures that roam this forest in darkness do so because they are afraid of the light. As long as we stay together and keep a fire lit, they will be afraid to come near us."

"You mean the Toilers?"

"Yes. Despicably strange creatures. They walk much as men do. Only they are shorter, and always stooped, cloaked in filthy garments. They are horrid, stinking creatures, bred by the netherworld itself. They work with General Lancer, and are as his eyes and ears in places like this. You see, there is little that happens in these lands that the dark forces are not somehow aware of. But there's also little that they can do against us so long as we are watchful. They have a great revulsion to light—and fire in particular. As long as we surround ourselves with a circle of torches, and keep the fire aglow as we rest, they'll not come too close."

They soon found a clearing. They placed what wood was readily available near the center, while some of the Drifters set out to gather more. They had soon stockpiled quite a large amount. Torches were prepared, and placed in a circle around the clearing, and the main fire in the center was lit.

Darkness soon fell, and the shadows deepened the instant the torches were lit. Bread, cheese, and water were pulled out of the men's sacks and passed around. A strange, loathsome smell soon wafted through the camp.

"Ugh! What's that smell?" Denith asked.

"It's them," Baden spoke in a monotone voice. "The Toilers. Despicable, as I told you. They're out there, just beyond the circle of fire, perhaps trying to gather their courage to break in. But they are poor fighters, so unless we are surrounded by a great horde of them, they should not pose much of



a threat.”

And so the Drifters and Denith passed the night, taking turns staying awake to keep the fires burning, and to stand guard.



## CHARINE

With the approach of morning, the small band of drifters let the fire die out and extinguished the torches.

“Well, I sure hope these Toilers aren’t the only ones who know we’re out here looking for Charine by now!” the Drifter who had proven himself the more outspoken thus far muttered.

Baden again narrowed his eyes and looked sternly at the man.

Denith couldn’t control his curiosity any longer. “I can’t understand how anyone could hide in a place like this—especially with these creatures watching every move that’s made in this forest.”

“It is the forest itself that protects her, or at least so it is said—the parts that remain enchanted still, and which we must find.”

In spite of his words, Baden sounded uncertain, but that was the end of the conversation and the question of exactly how they were going to come across Charine would remain unanswered for the moment.

Instead, they wandered through the forest, looking for some clue as to where such enchanted places lay, though, if the truth were known, Baden knew little more than Denith about exactly how or

where they would find Charine.

What he did know, though he kept this to himself, was that one could only contact Charine if they were worthy. And if they were worthy, the way to her would be shown. All they could do was wait for some sign or acknowledgment of their presence, though Baden suspected that this sign was more likely to appear to Denith than to any other in the group. But out of fear of the forces that had been probing Denith's mind, Baden kept this information to himself, trusting that if Denith *did* see anything, he would likely say it.

So Baden contented himself in the fact that their path had continued to lead them deeper *into* the forest, and that it would just be a matter of time before they would find the clue that would lead them to Charine.

The day progressed, and morning turned to afternoon. Denith became increasingly uneasy and worried that they would have to spend another night in the Dark Forest—a prospect none of the group was looking forward to.

They soon came to a brook, and decided to rest. But refreshing as it may have sounded, it was not. In keeping with the unpleasant atmosphere of the forest that they had found themselves in thus far, the brook was little more than a muddy stream that murmured and groaned as it moved along its dreary path. A heavy mist soon moved in as well, shrouding the men in its wet clamminess.

Denith sighed. There seemed to be no respite from the loathsomeness of this place. He sat, gazing gloomily into nothingness, his blank stare fixed across the brook on a large boulder. Through the mist it looked another unpleasant sight, covered by dark patterns of moss and vines that curled and twisted their way down from the giant trees that overshadowed it.

Then something caught Denith's eye. He stood up and jumped over the brook to investigate further. He knelt down and ran his hand along the underside of the boulder, which rested on several smaller rocks to form a small enclosure underneath it, almost hidden behind the draping vines. He thought he'd noticed something close to the ground.

"What is it?" Baden asked, curious. "Did you see something?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was my imagination, but I thought I saw something sparkling underneath this boulder, but"—he shook his head—"perhaps it was nothing."

Baden looked up expectantly. The small "cave" Denith had uncovered was hardly big enough to shelter a sheep or goat, but it was well hidden.

Denith casually poked his foot into the enclosure and kicked up some leaves that lay on the ground. "What was that?" He kicked again, and his foot hit something hard. He crouched down.

Baden and the other, more outspoken Drifter came over. After clearing away the pile of moss and dead leaves, they uncovered a trapdoor of some sort.

"Look here! A hatch!" Baden proclaimed. The door was smooth with no handle or keyhole.

"It looks tightly shut, Denith. And there's obviously no way to open it from the outside. I don't think this is going to help us much."

Denith looked at the hatch and rubbed his fingers along its edges to clear away more debris, but he soon realized that Baden was right.

The Drifters were already on their feet, and had hopped back over the brook again. Denith turned and was about to stand up as well when a strange sensation swept through his body. He turned back towards the enclosure, and felt the sensation clearly now. It was a warmth, coming from the

pouch with the keys.

"Wait!" he said, digging into the pouch and retrieving the keys quickly. They were more aglow than usual, and the men around him gasped. Besides Baden, none of them had seen the keys before. Even Baden was surprised, however, at their brilliance in the shadowed daylight.

"Does it mean something?" Baden asked.

"I think it means we're close to whatever it is we're supposed to be looking for," Denith answered. He brushed his hands through the ground again, and then up one side of the rock wall that supported the larger boulder. "What do we have here?" he asked, when a small rock moved easily aside to reveal a hole in the structure. Once again the men drew near.

"There's something here," Denith said, as he peered in and saw what looked like a keyhole.

*Wouldn't that be something?* he thought, fingering the ring of keys in his hand.

The men watched with bated breath while Denith fanned out the keys and chose one to fit the opening. He slid it into the hole and turned it. For a moment he looked puzzled. It had turned much too loosely to unlock anything, and he had felt no resistance to the key's movement. He was about to try again when Baden gave the hatch a thud, and to their great surprise, it jolted loose and swung down on its hinges, hitting a wall behind it with a dull clang.

In an instant all of the men were hovering near the opening, talking amongst themselves.

"The men are worried, Denith," Baden translated. "They fear it may lead to the Toilers. They are known to live in underground tunnels."

But for once, it was Denith who had the answer. "If these keys were able to unlock this door, I would say we are probably heading in the right direction—whatever we'll end up finding. I say we go—unless

somebody wants to spend another night out in the open in this place.”

There was no argument.

“We all have our swords, and we should bring torches as well!” Denith continued.

A torch was quickly lit and brought to Denith. Holding it over the opening, he saw that it dropped down almost a man’s height, and appeared to be the beginning of a tunnel of some sort. He handed the torch to Baden, lowered himself into the hole, and dropped down. Baden then dropped the torch to Denith, and jumped down himself. The other Drifters followed close behind.

“This is certainly a well-hidden entrance to something,” Baden said, lighting another torch. “The question is, to what?”

Once inside, they saw that the hatch was easily closed and opened from the inside, so they closed it, and made their way in the only direction they could go. They had not traveled far when the passageway they were in opened up into a wider hallway, with several similar-looking tunnels leading off in different directions. They hesitated, not knowing which way to go, until the faint sound of a distant echo reached their ears.

Baden nodded, giving the signal to go ahead. In single file, the men walked through the arched opening that led in the direction the sound appeared to be coming from. As they traveled down the corridor, they began to feel warmth, even a sense of peace that seemed to pervade the atmosphere. The echoes became more distinct, until they were clearly recognizable as the sounds of hushed voices.



It was hard to say who was the most startled: Baden, or the man he almost ran into as he turned the corner. A fellow Drifter—though not one Baden

was familiar with—stood in front of him. Quickly regaining his composure, Baden held out his hand and smiled warmly, hoping to assure the man they had no hostile intentions. Hesitantly, the Drifter responded, clasping Baden's hand in the Drifter manner.

"We are sorry to intrude," Baden began. "We are being sought by the dark forces, and needed a place of refuge."

The man did not immediately respond.

Baden continued, "We have come to seek Charine—if this is indeed where she may be found. We have much that we need to ask and share with her."

The man looked at them with some reservation. For a moment Baden wondered if perhaps the man had not understood him, but then the Drifter politely asked, "How was it that you came in?"

Baden cast a glance at Denith. "He used his keys," Baden replied, motioning Denith to come forward, which he quickly did.

As soon as the man caught sight of Denith, he noted with surprise that he was not a Drifter. "He has keys?" the man asked curiously.

"They are a gift from the other world," Baden answered solemnly. "They have led us here. That is why we must see Charine."

Baden motioned to Denith again, and he pulled out the keys. Their soft and magical glow was still clearly visible.

The man hesitated, clearly in awe, but not wanting to show it, or lose his composure before these strangers who were obviously already familiar with this otherworldly sight.

"Indeed," the man finally replied after Denith returned the keys to their place of safety. "Please follow me." The man turned and took a step, then stopped. He turned back to the group. "Are you



armed?" he asked.

"Yes," Baden answered.

"You shall have to give me your swords, knives, and any other weapons you have with you. You will not need them here, nor do we allow them."

They wisely decided not to argue. One by one they presented their weapons, which the man calmly collected in his arms.

Denith was particularly hesitant to part with his Baron sword when Baden translated the man's words. But he, too, realized he had little choice in the matter. And so, along with the others, he reluctantly placed his prized weapon in the hands of this stranger.

When they were done, the man turned, and again bade them to follow.

The group of men followed their guide in silence. Before long they came into a large room, well lit by several torches along the walls. It appeared that it had been very recently occupied, yet now it was totally empty. Whoever had been there before had apparently quickly vacated the room. There were large cushions and pillows scattered around, and it appeared to be a waiting room of sorts.

"Please, feel free to sit and wait here," their guide politely offered. At that, the guide left the room, still carrying their weapons in his hands, and returned a few moments later without them. Then, turning to Baden, he motioned him over to a corner of the room where they conversed in hushed tones. After a short while, the guide walked over towards Denith.

"I must ask you to wait here, with the others. Your friend will come with me," he said. For a moment Denith was taken aback. The man spoke in the clearest tones of the common language Denith had ever heard from a Drifter—or even a commoner, for that matter. And almost as quickly, he felt uneasy about the thought of Baden being

taken away by this perfect stranger, and the rest of them being left to themselves.

Almost as though the man sensed what Denith was thinking, he turned and said, "You have no need to fear. We are a peace-loving people. We harm no one. I am taking your friend to present your introductions to Charine. I am sure you yourself shall meet her shortly as well. But it is unusual for any but a Drifter to come into her presence. You will understand, then, that I am first taking your friend to make your introduction."

Denith looked down, feeling a little ashamed that the man had perceived his lack of trust.

They waited for a good time—the Drifters making quiet conversation amongst themselves, and Denith silently and patiently waiting for Baden's return. At one point some women came into the room carrying trays of refreshments and food. They did not linger for any conversation, but quietly put down their trays and left again. The Drifters, after a few glances back and forth, readily began to eat. Denith, however, sat aside. He did not feel like eating.

*If it wasn't for the fact that I know them to be on our side, this would be an eerie place to be,* Denith thought.

Just as he was considering trying some of the food anyway, the guide returned, without Baden. He walked straight to Denith and asked, "Would you like to join your friend? He is at this moment sitting with Charine. She is eager to meet you."

Denith nodded and followed as he was bid.

The guide led him through a maze of passages, which Denith thought with some alarm that he would be unable to remember the way out of should he need to make an escape for any reason. The twists and the turns were so many that it took only a few minutes for him to become thoroughly

confused as to what direction they were traveling.

They eventually came to a door guarded by two Drifters who resolutely looked forward, their stony faces unflinching. The guide did not so much as look at them, nor they at him, but he went straight to the door and opened it.

The door opened into a huge, dimly lit chamber that looked both like a bedroom and living quarters. There was a sweet, thick fragrance filling the air, and an almost surreal emerald glow all around, wafting as it were on the drifts of the fragrance, if such a thought were possible. Denith quietly followed his guide, who brought him to the side of a large bed. Sitting propped up against several pillows lay a very old, white-haired woman. She looked frail, and her thin, crepe-like skin translucent in the soft, emerald light.

The guide stepped back while Denith stood, silently, respectfully, a few paces away from the bed's side. The woman turned and looked at him—eyeing him from head to toe, not saying a word, not showing any emotion or any sign of what she was thinking.

Finally, with a crackling voice, and in the common tongue, though with a distinct Drifter accent, she began to speak. "Where is your sword? I have always seen you with your sword."

Denith looked a little surprised. "I ... I was asked to hand it over when I entered the tunnels," he respectfully answered.

"You must never lose sight of your sword, never!" Charine exclaimed. "A warrior is never without his sword—and a warrior you must be."

Denith remained silent, not wanting to interrupt any insightful thoughts or words that would be forthcoming.

After a momentary pause, Charine continued, "Your friend tells me you carry a gift from the other

world. May I see it?"

Denith carefully drew the keys out of their hiding place, and held them in his outstretched hand so she could see them. For a moment they only rested in his hands, their soft glow pulsating in the atmosphere around them. Then all at once the keys began shooting out rays of light that blended and streaked into the emerald glow that hung over the room, becoming one with it, until the room was bathed in the golden warmth of the sight around them.

Charine heaved a contented sigh at the beautiful display before her. "The time has come. Yes, this indeed is the sign for which we have been waiting."

"A sign?" Denith asked.

"My time here is almost finished. Soon I must leave this world, and go on to the next one. I have done what I could for my people. We have fought much against the Shadowed Ones and their Watchers but we have kept alive the colors in our hearts, and they have not been able to take them from us. Now the time has come for you to help your people to see them, and this gift, this marvelous gift, is what you shall need to do this.

"We have tried to help your people, but they do not listen to us. They cannot believe in something they cannot see. But now they shall see, and believe. And so their eyes shall be opened. See the life force that these keys have? As long as these keys are in your hands, the other world shall be able to send forth its light and color to those who are open to receiving it—to open their eyes, as yours have been opened."

"But I know so little about any of these things," Denith said, disheartened. "How can I help others understand what I do not even understand myself?"

"Can you not hear the whispers?" Charine said, with some surprise.

"I ... I have heard them, but only at times. Those of the other world told me I would hear them, but I have not heard as much as I would like."

"But they are them," Charine said. "Those of the other world *are* the Whisperers. And to hear them is to know them, even though they are rarely seen."

"I have seen them. That's how they first came to me. That's how I got the keys."

"Very few have ever seen the beings of light. But you need not see them to hear their whispers. Indeed, to see them at all, it is magnificent. Even I have never met them, except in my dreams and visions. But you have, and yet," she continued, somewhat puzzled, "you understand so little of their ways."

Denith felt ashamed. He didn't know how to respond. Although in many ways he felt that his understanding had grown tremendously since having received the keys, he knew that much of it had been in regards to the specific situations he had found himself in. But when it came to a more comprehensive understanding of the ways of the other world, he realized this woman was right. He knew little more now than he did when he had first spoken to Hoden and Faethé.

"Tell me of them," Charine asked, breaking Denith's train of thought.

"Of who?" Denith asked.

"Those who gave you the keys."

Once again Denith found himself relating the story of all that had happened.

"You have been blessed with a mighty gift, young Denith, even if you do not think that you understand what it is all about," Charine finally said when Denith had made an end to his tale. "But perhaps that is because you are trying to look too deeply, even within yourself. These keys—and it is a simple picture—are nothing less and nothing more than

the keys to the other world. They unlock the doors that keep our two worlds apart. And when these doors opened for you, the power and colors of the other world could flood into your life.”

“I have felt the power at times, only when I needed it. And the whispers too,” Denith replied.

“I think you do not realize what a treasure it is to hear these whispers, or to possess such a channel to the other world. But much that you must learn shall be learnt from them—from the Whisperers. We know very little of ourselves, and the ways of the other world can be hard to understand. You have seen that it sometimes takes great effort for them to break through into our world. Well, sometimes it is we who must make that effort to reach into theirs. But I believe this gift that has been given to you will help you in this, much as these tunnels help us.”

“But how?”

“It takes time to learn these things. But perhaps that is why you were led to us. You must stay. It is safe here, and we can teach you what we know. Those who pursued you will not find you here.” She stopped and look deep into Denith’s eyes. “Even the thoughts and probings of the Shadowed Ones cannot break through the protection that surrounds us. So long as you remain among us, you will be safely hidden, as we are. As for the purpose you seek, and what your future will bring...”

Charine’s voice faded, and she remained silent for a long while. Denith thought she looked troubled, but it was hard to tell. Finally she spoke again.

“There are many things set before you, but much of what will happen, of where your path will lead, depends on your choices. There are glorious paths, and lamentable ones. But they are yours to choose. So much of what is planned by those of the other

world is dependent upon our choices in this one, and many things are waiting on yours. Yet even you cannot alter the final outcome of the plan that the other world has set into motion by placing these keys into your hand. And what is this plan?"

She paused again before continuing, "I can only tell you as much as is obvious. A time of great struggle against the dark forces shall come to your people, and to you. You have already met the dark forces in battle. But even such battles are meaningless next to the unseen struggle between the worlds that from this point forward shall only grow. The Shadowed Ones shall sense this, and shall seek to strengthen their influence over your people. But when the time comes for the forces of light to be unleashed against them, they shall not be able to stand, for darkness cannot stand before the light.

"Even in our world we can see this. You walk into a darkened room and light a candle. Does the darkness smother the candle? No! Instead the opposite happens. The light penetrates into the darkness, until the shadows are driven away completely. In the end, when the light shall fully come, the darkness and the creatures of its shadow shall vanish and be seen no more. And the colors and those who live in them shall return in their fullness to walk the earth and teach those like us the ways of light, even as the Shadowed Ones and their creatures walk amongst us now. But in that day, the dark forces shall be forgotten, and the age of the Whisperers shall have come."

"And these keys are going to do all that?" Denith asked in amazement.

"They signal that it has begun. The power they bring with them shall strike great fear into the hearts of the Evil One and his shadowed emissaries among the children of men. And because you have

been made the keeper of these keys, you shall become their foremost target.”

“Then what must I do?” Denith asked.

“That will be for the Whisperers to reveal to you,” Charine answered. She again grew quiet, almost trancelike. “Many times you will come to a crossroad in your life. These crossroads will become more frequent, and the choices more difficult to make. Your future will be determined by these choices—whether you take the road to the right or the road to the left. Only one will be the right one, and only by heeding the whispers will you know which road that is.”

Charine smiled. “Yes, you will learn to hear the whispers. Your keys shall help you do well in this. But I can see that what will be more difficult for you is *doing* what the whispers tell you. Sometimes they will tell you to do things that you feel, within yourself, you cannot do. This is the choice that you will constantly be faced with—whether or not to do or go as the Whisperers direct.”

“And what about these keys?”

“Keep them always close by you,” Charine answered, reaching out towards them. “They hold the power and strength of the other world, and you will need this link to see the paths the Whisperers place before you.” She stopped speaking, though she continued to look off into the distance with a faraway look in her eyes.

Denith felt very unsettled by her words. He had been hoping that he would be given some specific instruction, some mission or quest to embark on. Instead, he was almost more troubled than when he had stepped into the room.

Charine smiled at Denith. “This was not what you wanted to hear, was it? Oh, you’re young, so young! But you will learn. Stay here a while. Stay and learn what you can, and let the whispers reveal



to you when it shall be safe to move on—and indeed, what mission or quest shall come to you in its time.”

She didn't wait for Denith's response, but continued. "I do not know that we shall see each other again. But there are others here who can teach you. They know how to reach into the other world. Stay and learn from them." Charine was now whispering so softly that Denith had to lean close to her in order to hear what she was saying.

When she was done her eyes closed and her head dropped back onto her pillow. Their guide motioned both Denith and Baden to follow him out of the room and back down the passageways they had come.

Upon being reunited with their fellow Drifters, the group was led to an assortment of austere sleeping quarters. It did not take long for sleep to overcome them all, after the rigors they had endured the previous day.

When Denith later awoke, he found his sword lying beside his bed. He strapped it on, determined that he would never let it out of his possession again.



The tunnel passages were perpetually lit by soft lighting whether it was day or night on the surface. Because of this, the days and nights slipped into a haze of timelessness for the newcomers, as they adjusted to the habits and routines of the other Drifters around them.

At first they imagined this network of tunnels and rooms to be a very quiet and secluded place where few visited. However, they were soon surprised to find very much the opposite to be true. There were many Drifters that came and went, some staying for a time, others only shortly, but all partaking of the messages spoken by the Whisperers, the secrets and tales and mysteries of the other world, before leaving again to wherever they had come from. It seemed the quiet

and secluded atmosphere of the tunnels made this the chosen place for these Drifters to come to hear such messages. It was their own secret place where they could connect with the whispers that were more difficult to hear on the surface, and in the midst of their day-to-day lives and routines.

It soon became apparent that most of the Drifters in this place came and left frequently, without much fanfare, while others, such as Charine, appeared to have made it their lives to stay in this place and listen to the whispers, providing further encouragement and instruction to those who continually came and left.

It was a fascinating place to Denith, as he watched those around him who had so perfected their ability to discern the presence of the other world that they could interact with its beings as easily in this place as Denith had once spoken with Hoden and Faethé by the cliffs, only without their visible presence. But they were known just the same through their voices and whispers.

While the other Drifters who had come with them were, at their own request, soon escorted back to a place from where they could safely start making their way back to their tribe, Denith and Baden chose to remain in the tunnels. They were both eager to learn what they could about hearing and understanding the whispers from the other world—Denith so that he could in time discover the destiny that was to be his, and Baden, in his own way, to be a help to this unusual commoner he felt a strong sense of responsibility for.

And so they learned. They learned to discern the voices of the Whisperers for themselves, though this was markedly easier for Denith than for Baden. They learned of secrets of the other world that had been told, and were recorded on many writings kept within these tunnels. Many such writings took the

form of stories, which Denith imagined might well have been the same stories told him by Faethé in his childhood.

In this atmosphere, gradually, day by day, Denith's knowledge and understanding of the other world grew, and his confidence in its whispers was strengthened. Soon he, too, found himself bringing questions to the Whisperers, and writing down the words that echoed back into his consciousness from their melodic voices—echoes that grew clearer with each passing day, and with them, Denith's sense of what was to come.

True to Charine's words, Denith never saw her again. Many years later he would find out that, unbeknownst to all but a select few, she passed away during the time he was living in the tunnels.





- 10 -

## A NEW DEVELOPMENT

“Lord Urkhin is here, my lord, and requests an audience with you,” the uniformed messenger said, timidly addressing the imposing figure standing before him.

General Lancer furrowed his brow and let out a reluctant growl. Meeting a Toiler lord was never very pleasant, especially when they came on business of their own. “Very well, show him in.”

The messenger turned and left the room, only for the great double doors to open several moments later, and quickly shut again after they had admitted the visitor.

General Lancer, nevertheless, easily managed to control his revulsion at the figure before him—and the stench the figure brought with him—and beamed a broad smile in the creature’s direction.

“Why, Lord Urkhin, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?” he said as genially as if he had been speaking to a favored grandson.

“My Toilers in the Dark Forest report greater numbers of Drifters about the place, when it is your men who are supposed to be keeping them out!” the Toiler lord responded in deep, sepulchral tones. “You will understand that we do not look very kindly upon such unwelcome intrusions, which, according

to the terms of our treaty, you are meant to keep at bay."

"We try, Lord Urkhin," General Lancer replied. "And many are apprehended. But these are slippery characters, these Drifters."

"Slippery or not, I am holding you responsible to keep them out of that forest!"

"But of course. I shall increase the number of troops there immediately."

"And make sure they are of better stock than the ones you have there now. It wasn't so long ago we saw a whole contingent of your men defeated by a small band of Drifters and some common warrior with them."

"Ah, yes. I heard that report as well—the common warrior with a Baron sword. But as I heard it, there was a whole tribe of Drifter warriors that this man led against my men."

"That's what *your* men told you. Toilers could never deceive one another. They know what they saw, and there were only eight of them."

"Who evaded your Toilers just as easily, as I recall."

"Of course," Lord Urkhin responded. "Such a small group is easily lost within that vast forest. And we have more to do than watching after your men's failures."

"But of course you do," General Lancer agreed patronizingly. "I understand completely. Besides, that is an old matter now, and we must see to it that we tend to things of greater importance. I shall dispatch more troops as you have requested."

"Thank you, General. That is what I was hoping for."

"So long as we can continue to rely on the resources your Toilers supply us with, there is no measure so drastic that it cannot be implemented for the benefit of our friendship," General Lancer

added.

The Toiler lord only grunted his assent, but the general kept his gracious mien.

“Is that all, Lord Urkhin?” he enquired pleasantly.

The Toiler only grunted again, sensing the general’s displeasure at these dealings in spite of the man’s unaffected manner.

“May I invite you to dine with us this evening?” Lancer tried again.

At this the Toiler looked up. “I shall be no more eager to accept that offer than you would be to dine in my house, amongst my kind, General. But do not trouble yourself. Our alliance is in no danger on account of our differences. Only let us each do what we must do.”

“As you wish, Lord Urkhin,” Lancer responded.

At that, the Toiler turned, pulling his dark cape around his hunched form before shuffling towards the doors, which opened as if of their own accord to let the creature out.

It would take a while before the Toiler’s odor would follow him out of the room, but General Lancer took little note of it. He immediately summoned one of his officers, who promptly came, though the man’s discipline could not keep his face from souring at the fouled atmosphere into which he walked.

“Send another detachment of troops to help keep the Dark Forest!” General Lancer ordered. “And go with them. I want you to keep an eye on things personally. I trust those Toilers little more than I like to smell them, and if there is something going on around that forest, I want to know of it.”

“Yes, General!” the man responded.

“My men may inflate figures to excuse their incompetence, but if the Toilers are that concerned about their forest being invaded by such small

numbers, it makes me wonder why. Don't venture into the forest, as that could provoke unnecessary suspicions among the Toilers. But at the same time, find out what you can about what is going on there, and send your reports directly to me."

"Yes, General."

With a nod of his head, General Lancer dismissed the man. When the doors closed behind him, Lancer was left alone in the empty council chamber. The last few flames of a fire that had been built in the huge fireplace embedded in the wall flickered low, as if ashamed of their inability to provide warmth.

Lancer, meanwhile, had turned towards a window, and stared out silently. A thought was brewing on the edges of his mind, but he could not quite make it out yet, only that it was something important, and it would not go away. The chill that pervaded the room suddenly reached his skin. Lancer shuddered and wrapped his cloak of black fur around himself with a discontented growl.

"They are not quite as unreliable as you suspect," a voice said from behind him.

Startled, Lancer whirled around and found himself standing before a stranger whose form was almost entirely indiscernible for the light that streamed through a window behind him. The silhouetted figure stood short, though not as short as a Toiler, and his face was concealed not only by the glare coming from behind the man, but by a large hood as well, so that even if Lancer had known this character, he would not have recognized him.

"Who are you?" Lancer demanded. "Where did you come from? How did you come into my presence unannounced?" Lancer glanced angrily towards the doors. They were still closed.

"Who I am is of little importance to you. What matters more at this moment is where I have been,



and what I can tell you.”

Lancer looked the figure over again. The stranger, however unexplained his entry, did not look like he could pose much of a threat, so Lancer allowed himself the luxury of a relaxed composure.

“You have my attention,” Lancer said.

“I come from walking to and fro throughout your lands, from going up and down in it, from seeing things you haven’t seen in ways you or your men will never see them.”

“Get to your point, man,” Lancer said impatiently. Just because he looked relaxed did not ever mean that he was.

“Very well. These lands you rule and call your own are in danger of being wrested right out from underneath your feet—without you ever realizing what happened, or how. There are dangerous forces beyond the intelligence of the Toilers, and certainly beyond the intelligence of your men.”

“What do you mean, dangerous forces? The Drifters are scattered too far and wide to pose any serious threat, and as for the Barons, we have our agents among them, who assure me that they hardly even notice that our lands exist.”

“Indeed they do not, though they will soon enough if nothing is done.”

“Done about what?” Lancer said, starting to get aggravated. “Get to your point, creature, or you shall feel the cold steel of my sword!”

The figure was not perturbed in the least, and remained as calm and collected as when he had started.

“There is a lad among your people. He is not of the Drifters, though he lives with them, nor of the Barons, though he carries their sword.”

Lancer sighed. “Oh, please, not another lad-with-the-Baron-sword tale. I have heard quite enough of those.”

"You have not heard anything yet!" the figure uttered menacingly. "His colors are strong, and it is almost as though he has come from the other world—"

"There is no other world!" Lancer bellowed. "And there are no colors!"

At this, the figure seemed to sigh, although Lancer, for his own outburst, failed to notice.

"What sort of creature are you," Lancer challenged angrily, "that you would dare waste my time with such mythological nonsense? Reveal yourself, stranger, that I may have the pleasure of seeing what I am killing!"

The figure did not move, or even in any way look frightened—which aggravated Lancer all the more. He was a man used to getting his way, and not used to having his authority questioned, or as in this case, openly ignored.

"Very well," the stranger said, sensing the general's obvious displeasure. "You may not want to listen to my counsel now, but I assure you, it will not be long before you shall come seeking for me yourself. Perhaps then we shall speak again."

With that, and without so much as a nod, the stranger turned his back, and headed towards the door. For the first time Lancer noticed the shimmering white color of this man's cloak, but it did little to impress him. The stranger's lack of respect had by now enraged Lancer, and he drew his sword and rushed upon the stranger.

Sensing Lancer's approach, the stranger stopped, though he did not turn around to face his aggressor.

Still unchecked in his fury, Lancer swung his heavy sword down with full force onto the man's shoulder, only to lose his own balance when it met with nothing, sending Lancer hurtling to the floor.

He was back on his feet just as quickly, but found

in stunned amazement that the stranger was gone. The room was empty. The doors remained closed. Everything looked exactly as it had only moments before—except that the fire was now dead, and only crumbling gray remnants of coal remained. Lancer shuddered again.

“I hate these visions!” he shouted to the stone walls around him as his sword found its way back into its sheath. Then he stormed out of the room.



Time in the tunnels passed in a blur. Denith and Baden had soon lost count not only of the days, but of the weeks and months they had spent tucked away. Denith began to think that perhaps this was his destiny, and that he would remain here forever. He quickly picked up the Drifter language and was using it as comfortably as his own. If he'd felt like a Drifter before, he felt ten times more so now.

It was a very quiet lifestyle in many ways, though it had an excitement all its own that was different from anything Denith or Baden had experienced before. The days were all much the same—devoted to quietness and solitude, hearing the whispers, listening to requests of those who came in, and recording the words, tales, and visions that were spoken by the Whisperers. There was little break in their routine, and this at first disquieted Denith. However, it soon became richly rewarding and satisfying, to the point that he came to wonder if he could ever be happy doing anything else.

Through the writings and messages that abounded in these tunnels, Denith learned much about the histories and futures of both the other world and his own. He learned of the mysterious forces that struggled to keep them apart, and the forces that strove to bind them together. He learned of battles they had fought—battles whose casualties could not be numbered in dead bodies, but whose

victories and defeats were visible in their effects upon those influenced by these otherwise invisible forces.

There was an ultimate power behind the nether-world, and behind the other world as well, and each strove to bring the world between them—Denith's world, the common man's world, the Drifter's world—closer to itself. Lancer was the Dark General, the Prince of Shadow—a figurehead of the shadowed oppression that hung over the Commonlands, and of the forces that sought to stamp out the Drifters. Charine was the guardian of the colors and truths of the other world. But beyond both of these figures lay the greater powers of the unseen worlds: one Presence known as the Maker and Master of the Light and Colors, and the other as the Evil One—characters Denith recognized as the great lord and his shadowed son of the story Faethé had told Denith in his dream so long ago.

Denith found all these things beginning to make some sense to him, like different pieces of the same puzzle coming together. Denith found himself delving back into his memories to rebuild and pen Faethé's story. His notes of it had been lost when he was robbed, but he found his memories in this place of solitude and quiet were refreshed, or at least it seemed that way from how the words flowed whenever he put pen to paper.

At these times Denith would feel Faethé's presence near. Sometimes he even thought he could see her. It was like she was right there, watching over his shoulder all the time, and he could sense her pleasure at the things he was learning. Although it often seemed she wished to speak, she remained silent, as if she knew it was not yet her time to speak, and that there were other whispers for Denith to listen to first.

Then one day, that changed.

Denith had come to a part in his story that left him wondering what was to happen next. Howard, the story's new hero, had made it deep into the Shadowlands, narrowly escaping an attack from a bizarre, shadowed creature. After he came to a place of refuge, the words had stopped flowing. Denith laid down his pen, closed his eyes, and breathed deeply, allowing himself a moment to bask in the peace and tranquility that surrounded him in this underground room.

"This has become your life, hasn't it?"

Faethé's voice startled Denith, and he opened his eyes to see her sitting, smiling and looking at him. It had been so long since he had heard her speak that for a moment he could not bring himself to answer.

Finally he managed to utter, "Yes, I suppose it has. It's like time doesn't exist here, and you hardly notice that it passes at all. I could easily die and discover I've lived all my life here without even realizing it."

"And for some, that is their mission. But not for you, Denith. Your destiny follows another path."

"Another path?"

"Yes, there is much more that awaits you—for which this has only been your time of preparation. That time is now over. It is time for you to move on to your real mission, on the surface."

"What mission?" he asked. "What could I possibly do up there? I'm just a woodsman living with a bunch of Drifters. I can fight with a sword—at least I hope I still can, though it's been so long. Down here I've learned to listen to the whispers, and learned about your world. But on the surface everything is different."

"There is much that you can do," Faethe expounded. "These gifts have not been given into your hand for you alone. They have been entrusted

to you so that you might use them for the benefit of others, for the benefit of your people, even as these Drifters use their gifts for the benefit of their kind. Thus they have been protected from the forces that have overshadowed your world. It is time for your people to learn what you have learned. This shall be no small task, but it is a task that must be started, and its first steps are yours to take.”

Denith thought of his parents, and of Amy and Keren. He remembered how Amy had been almost angry at how he had kept the colors secret for so long. He wondered what had become of them all. It all seemed so far away.

“You have been down here,” Faethé said, pausing in thought for a moment, “for two years according to your time. Staying here any longer would be merely a luxury on your part.”

Denith looked up, a hint of apprehension in his eyes. This place had become his home. Here he felt a sense of security and belonging. Leaving was not a comfortable thought. Almost afraid to ask, but finally gaining the courage to do so, Denith questioned, “Where would I go?”

“There is a small town at the edge of the Dark Forest. Its people know of the colors, and are believers, if in a limited way, in our world. Here you will discover the true nature of your mission, Denith, and what the future holds for you, and for your keys.

“The choice is still yours. You could stay longer. But this time of peace and learning has been just that—a time. Now you must take the next step, and you may find as you do that you’ll feel just as much at home in a life of greater works and action as you have in this one of preparation.”

Faethé began to fade. “It shall be a road filled with danger and difficulties, but if you can follow it, you will find that it brings with it a fulfillment

and reward of its own. There is much that you have yet to experience, Denith. Your mission is far from over.” With those words, the vision faded, and Denith was left in silence to contemplate its meaning.

Faethé’s words had shaken him out of a complacency he did not even know had settled over him during this time of peaceful learning. Something new had suddenly been introduced into his world—a challenge at a time when he was not necessarily looking for one.

And yet, as he wrestled with the words Faethé had spoken, Charine’s words of long ago came to mind: the many roads before him, the choices, the decisions, and how only by following the whispers could the right road be found, and chosen. There was little doubt in Denith’s mind what the right path and choice was, but that did not make the decision any easier. Finally he came to terms with himself, and decided he would do as Faethé had said. Then he sought out Baden.



“Denith! What brings you here?” Baden asked.

“Faethé spoke to me,” he answered quietly.

Baden raised his eyebrows.

“She said it was time for us ... well, for me ... to move on. She said something about a town nearby, that the people there know of the colors, and are believers in the other world. Do you know of such a town?”

“Hmm, I don’t recall hearing of one,” Baden replied pensively. “But it would make sense. They have to get food and supplies to these tunnels from somewhere, and I doubt they find it in the forest. Perhaps we just never thought to ask about it. Come, we shall see what we can learn of this.”

It was not unusual for secrets to be kept within the tunnels, though it was hardly a secretive place.

In fact, the degree of friendship and trust between all who inhabited this place had quickly made Denith and Baden feel like part of a family—a family and home that it had come time to leave, and that Denith knew he would miss greatly. But he also knew that part of this life had become so engrained in his being that he would forever carry it with him.



After the tunnel Drifters heard of Denith's call to move on, things proceeded with great speed. Denith and Baden learned that the tunnels were indeed connected to a certain town just beyond the northern edge of the Dark Forest, which was where many of their supplies came from. The town had a rather unique heritage in that it had always had close levels of interaction with the Drifters, some having even intermarried with the local common people. Drifters freely entered and traded within this town, so that those of the tunnels could mingle freely among them without revealing the presence of the tunnels.

Before he knew it, Denith found himself nervously following behind a group of Drifters who were seeing him safely out of the tunnels. There were no emotional farewells aside from a private farewell to Baden, who had decided that he would be staying in the tunnels for the time being. As difficult as the thought was for Baden to part ways with Denith, he had received his own assurances that this would be for the best, and that when his time would come, he would be told just as surely.

Denith's excitement mounted as he followed the Drifters through the maze of passages. He carried little more with him than he had when he first set out on his journey from the Southern Bluffs, and in many ways he felt as if that journey was starting all over again. Besides the keys, his sword, and the clothes on his back, he carried only a small



satchel of papers—writings from the tunnels that had been given to him, as well as the story of Howard that he had written down.

The further he got from the heart of the maze, the sharper he felt his senses becoming. It was not that his senses had been dulled by living in such a place, but more that they had become attuned to a different dimension. But now that he was returning to the surface, an almost entirely different world, his eagerness to embrace whatever lay ahead grew with each passing step.

Denith's heart pounded as the lead Drifter slowly lifted a wooden hatch. He peered cautiously through the opening before lifting himself through, and then motioned for the others to follow. The room they now found themselves in resembled a cellar. A rickety staircase led up to the cellar's only other door out.

The first man through the hole now knocked rhythmically on the door. After some moments, and a repeat of the same pattern, the door creaked open to reveal a large shed on the other side. A figure stepped back to allow the men to pass through. It was cool, and from the lamps along the wall, and the darkness outside the windows, Denith could tell that night had fallen.

The portly man who opened the door now stepped forward with a bright eager smile on his rounded face, which perfectly suited his rotund body. "Welcome, welcome!" he greeted the small group in the common tongue—a language that, after all this time in the tunnels, sounded quite foreign to Denith, though he could still comprehend it. "We're happy to have you. Glad you could make it! You must be Denith!"

Grappling to think of an appropriate response in the common tongue, Denith hardly managed more than a nod before the man continued his

greeting.

“Will the rest of you be staying long?” he asked the Drifters who had accompanied Denith.

“No, we must be getting back,” the first Drifter answered soberly.

Their host nodded. “Yes, of course. We wouldn’t keep you any longer than needed. Please, by all means, don’t let me detain you.”

The Drifters respectfully bid their good-byes, and then vanished back into the cellar room, followed closely by their helpful host, and Denith behind him. By the time Denith could focus on what was happening in the darkness of the cellar, it was empty again. The man was covering the wooden hatch with a layer of hay and sawdust, until it was effectively hidden from sight.

Realizing Denith was still standing there rather directionless, the man turned to him again and resumed the manner of a helpful host. “I’m Edward. I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself before. I always get a little nervous when those chaps are around. I suppose you’re quite nervous too. This must all be very new for you, surfacing after having hidden from Lancer’s men all this time in those tunnels. But I suppose everything has a time and purpose, doesn’t it?” Edward looked at Denith to see what he might say.

Denith replied with a grunt, not really sure how to respond to the man’s question.

Edward sensed Denith’s hesitation. “It’s night time, as I’m sure you’ve probably figured,” he finally continued. “I don’t know what sort of schedule you’ve been keeping, but I suppose there’s no need to get into any explanations right now. If you like, I can escort you to your new quarters. Then perhaps tomorrow when you are refreshed we can talk a little more. How does that sound?”

Still fixing his mind to respond in the common

tongue, Denith finally smiled and managed a response. "That's fine. Thank you."

Edward visibly relaxed. "Very well then. I have a room prepared for you at my house. Actually, I live here. Well, not here in this shed," he said with a chuckle, "but my living quarters are off to the side—part of this farm. Please come with me."

Denith walked quietly alongside Edward. He didn't know what to say. Rather than sound like a fool, he thought it best to keep silent. They entered some comfortable rooms, passing through a dining room, a living room, and then walking up some stairs till Edward finally opened a door.

"Here. It's not much, I know, but I think you'll be comfortable. Let us know if there's anything you need. There's a little food on the table, and here's your bed. We can see about getting you some fresh clothing tomorrow—something a little more..." He eyed Denith up and down. "...a little more cheery, perhaps?"

Denith looked down at his clothes. He had adopted the clothing of the tunnel Drifters which, on account of the dim lighting in the tunnels, did not sport the most festive of tones.

"Thank you," Denith answered. "I do appreciate your hospitality."

"Never mind, never mind," Edward quickly answered. "It's our pleasure. I'll see you in the morning."



Faethé

## ABOVE GROUND

Denith awoke to a bright, cheery morning. He was not sure how long he'd slept, but his sleep had been restful and refreshing. He could not tell exactly where the freshness and brightness in the air came from, but it had the wonderful effect of lifting his spirits.

Or perhaps it was the fact that everything in the room had an aura of orderliness about it, with vivid colors that nonetheless complemented each other, unlike it had been in most common villages he had passed through in his previous journeys. It was easy to see that these people did indeed possess the ability to see color, and could use it skillfully.

He noticed a set of new clothes on the dresser, as well as a basin of warm water and a towel that had evidently been brought in while he slept. The clothes, like the room, were a pleasant arrangement of colors: a cream-white pair of pants, a bright red shirt, a black sash, and a sheepskin vest. When he had washed and changed, he took to surveying the rest of the sights around him.

From the single bedroom window, Denith could see that this farm was situated on a small hill to the side of the town, which was clearly visible below. It was not unlike his hometown in many ways—at

least so Denith's memory told him. But then, he had not seen such a town for so long that any collection of houses with walls and roofs would have been enough to remind him of home, as this place did.

Any further reminiscing, however, was cut short by a knock on the bedroom door.

"Enter," Denith called.

The door opened, and Edward walked in with a cheery greeting. "Good morning! Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, Edward. Thank you," Denith answered. "I slept very well. It was very refreshing. This is a delightful place!"

"Ah, I'm so glad that you like it. I see the clothes fit. You seemed close enough to my own son's size. Are they comfortable?"

"Yes, I suppose they are," Denith agreed.

"Would you like to go out for breakfast?" Edward asked, and then faltered. "Uh ... or would you prefer we bring you something to eat here in your room instead?"

Edward had barely finished his sentence before Denith answered, "I'd love to join you. I'm looking forward to seeing as much of this town as I can!"

"Right then. So as soon as you're ready..."

"I *am* ready!" Denith said, quickly strapping on his sword and trying to step into his boots at the same time.

Edward watched with some amusement and then, as soon as Denith was really ready, he jovially called out, "Then let's go."



Being as it was already late in the day, and Edward's own household was busy with other chores, Edward insisted on taking Denith to the local tavern for breakfast. "They serve excellent food," he explained. "Not that my wife can't cook, but you'll get to see more of the town this way."

Before long they had entered a small tavern.

“Let’s sit by the window,” Edward said, motioning towards a spacious table at which a few other men were already seated. “That way you can watch the townspeople as they pass by. I believe you would like that.”

“Indeed, I would!” Denith answered.

They walked over to the group of five men, and as they approached, the men stood respectfully.

Edward introduced Denith, “This is my friend, and our new guest, Denith.”

Each man, one at a time, introduced himself. Denith warmly clasped and shook each hand as it was offered.

Their conversation was casual, though Denith was quick to note that the men were very sharp. By way of casual conversation they had soon pieced together much of his life story. It appeared that Denith’s arrival here was no secret. The story that had circulated, which while vague was not entirely untrue, was that Denith had been in hiding among the Drifters from Lancer’s forces. Then when he had heard about this town, and how they saw the colors, and yet remained largely free from any interference by Lancer’s men, he decided it was the perfect place for him, and so the Drifters had brought him here.

There was no mention of the keys, or the tunnels, and Denith wasn’t sure whether these men didn’t know about these things or if they were just exercising prudence in not speaking about them. Instead, they seemed more keenly interested in Denith’s early boyhood and listened eagerly as he told them of his parents, his friends, life on the Southern Bluffs, and living in a world where color was unknown.

Then the conversation turned, and Denith found some time to do some eating as the other men spoke

of this town and its unique heritage. Most who lived here had known the colors from the time they were born. Some said it was their history of intermarriage with the Drifters that was the cause of it. But there were others who had come to the city not being able to see colors, having no Drifter background, and yet in time these people had also come to see them. Others thought that perhaps it was just in the air, although again there had been other common folk who had come, stayed, and left without ever understanding or seeing what these folks spoke of as color.

As they conversed, there was a small commotion at the entrance to the inn. Denith turned to see a small entourage of men enter. At least one of them seemed to be a figure of some prominence. He sported a large moustache on a weathered face, and wore a heavy cloak set with black furs around the shoulders. The other men with him were almost equally as hefty in size, and seemed to be a contingent of the man's personal guards.

They were all armed—something uncommon for any commoner, though Denith noticed that none of the men who sat with him so much as raised an eyebrow at them. Almost at the same moment he realized none of them had asked or even seemed to notice that he carried a sword himself. Not knowing whether it was improper to ask questions about such things in this setting, Denith chose to ignore the group for the time being, and turned his attention back to the conversation at hand.

“Far as we know, it's always been this way. Can't exactly say why,” one of the men was saying. “Of course, there are those who don't like to hear any talk of colors, but for the most part, we don't like them either. So we've learned to avoid them or keep our differences to ourselves. Especially with Lancer's men.”



Unlike those in other villages, these people were obviously aware of Lancer and his rule over the Commonlands. But they did not mention anything about the workings of the other world, or of the netherworld and its Evil One—things that the Drifters, and especially those in the tunnels, often spoke of. Denith tried as much as possible to piece together what these men knew from this conversation—and what they didn't. He did not want to find himself revealing secrets that could put anyone in jeopardy. So he was content for the moment to silently listen and learn what he could.

"The Watchers still come into town every so often," the man continued, "just sort of poking around, and picking up their tribute from the town court. But often we spare them the trouble, and deliver the tribute ourselves, to keep those men out of our lives. They let us be for the most part because they make a good profit off of us. If you ask me, I don't even think Lancer knows we exist. Our trade goes beyond what most cities do, and these men are happy to pocket the proceeds for themselves. But we don't mind, so long as they leave us in peace, which they have."

"That's why the otherwise skittish Drifters have found a welcome haven amongst us, and feel free to trade with us," Edward now joined in. "They don't come often, as there is not a lot we have that they need, but they do show up from time to time, and we help them in whatever ways we can."

Denith wondered if perhaps Edward was going to mention anything about the tunnel Drifters, but a certain look in Edward's eye told Denith not to be the one to bring up the topic himself.

"You may find we think a lot like the Drifters do," Edward continued. "We speak of the other world, though I do not know that any of us speak *with* it, as the Drifters purport to do. But we know

that we are blessed to partake of something that men in other places do not. Perhaps this is the presence of the other world, and perhaps it is some other strange phenomenon that we are not wise enough to understand. But that does not stop us from enjoying it.”

Edward suddenly seemed eager to wrap up their conversation. “But for now I believe we have all had our fill of stories.”

“Yes,” one of the other men said. “Indeed, we’ve lingered far longer at our morning break than we normally do. It is time we get to work.” The other men nodded, and one by one they bade farewell and left.

As they left the hall, Denith noticed that each one also respectfully acknowledged the table of men who had recently entered the inn, who were at the moment the only other men seated in the room.

Denith took this opportunity to survey the group a little more closely. He didn’t want to appear impolite by staring, yet at the same time he was intrigued by these armed men, who were obviously not Watchers, but who commanded a great deal of respect.

The older man became the focus of Denith’s attention.

Edward was quick to spot Denith’s interest in the group, and looked a little nervous.

“He’s the general,” he whispered in a hushed tone.

“General Lancer?” Denith whispered in shock.

“No! No,” Edward replied with a grin. “But keep your voice down. That’s just what we call him. He’s a fine man. They’re all fine men—fine warriors.” Edward then abruptly changed the subject. “So, have you thought at all about what we’re supposed to do with you?”

Denith was a little surprised. “Do with me?”

“Yes—what we should get you into doing while you’re here.”

“Oh, I see,” Denith said with a chuckle. “I can’t say I’ve given it a lot of thought. But I’d sure like to have a few days to explore the town a bit and enjoy the sights around here.”

Edward joined in his chuckling. “Yes, I can imagine! I suppose they didn’t have a lot of open space down where you came from, did they?” Edward added.

“No, not exactly.”

“And a young lad like you—you can’t spend all your days in isolation and hiding. You need time to stretch your legs and have a little fun doing it too, eh?”

Denith was unsure how to respond. He did not think that his time in the tunnels had been without an excitement and pleasure all its own, but he also did not want to offend his host. “I suppose so,” he answered.

“You may have noticed I did not mention the tunnels in front of the others. While there are some in this town who are aware of our connection to them, most are not. It is a secret that is better kept to only a few, for the tunnel dwellers’ safety as well as ours. We may be somewhat protected here, but one can never be too sure, or too careful. As far as what you can do here, well, we don’t get a lot of strangers—pardon the term—dropping in on us, as I’m sure you can imagine. So when we do, it’s a matter that has to be brought before the town council. We knew to be expecting you, but how to take it from here is still to be decided. But I’m a member of this council myself, and I don’t think they’ll mind giving you some time just to roam around and familiarize yourself with life above ground for a change.”

“Thank you very much—for everything,” Denith

answered.

"I have a son," Edward continued jovially. "We call him young Edward. Now that's an original name, isn't it? Anyway, I figure it'd probably be good for you to have a guide, and I'm sure he'd be glad to show you around."

"That sounds like a fine idea." Denith was starting to take quite a liking to Edward, friendly fellow that he was.

They stood up and slowly made their way towards the door. Edward deliberately took a path on the further side of the tavern, as far from the general and his men as he could. However, their exit was not as unnoticed as Edward might have hoped. Just as they were about to slip out through the door, a resonant voice boomed across the room, "My good Edward! How are you today?"

Edward stopped, his puffy face turning a bright red. The general was standing up at his table and facing them with a commanding air.

"I'm fine, General, sir, most fine. It's a delightful day today."

"Yes, Edward, that it is. I see our young guest has arrived. Has he seen much of our fine little town?"

"No sir. The Drifters brought him just last night."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Aren't you going to introduce us?" The general remained standing, beaming broadly. He was obviously quite pleased that he had successfully intercepted Edward, and seemed amused that Edward had tried to slip out the door without being noticed—especially because Edward, being who he was, was hard *not* to notice.

Edward turned and looked rather sternly at Denith, as if to tell him to watch his manner with this man. Edward then puffed his chest out and with his most elegant walk strutted across the room, closely followed by Denith, till they were both

standing in front of the general.

"This, Sir General, is Denith."

The general turned to Denith, and looked him up and down. His eyes lingered at the sight of Denith's sword, but he hid whatever surprise or emotion it had elicited. He thrust out his hand. "And I am General Celor, or just 'Sir General' to some. I'm pleased to meet you, boy."

A sudden chill ran down Denith's spine. *Celor? Did he say General Celor?*

"Is something the matter?" the man asked, noting Denith's look.

Denith quickly pulled himself together, "No sir, I'm sorry. I ... I suppose I'm just not quite myself yet."

"You were on your way somewhere?" the general asked.

"He was just returning to his room," Edward answered, hoping to keep the conversation short. "We weren't really sure what he was to do today. We thought that he could take a few days to see the sights. I was going to have young Edward show him around."

The general laughed. "Young Edward show him around? Ha! I can imagine the kind of places your son would show him. Well then, seeing as you're not being expected anywhere specific, why don't you join us for a moment, and tell us about yourself?"

So saying, the general pulled out another chair for Denith next to himself. Denith sat down, while Edward pulled up his own chair. As much as he wanted to leave, he did not want to appear reluctant to join the general's table and company.

Denith's heart was pounding now. His memories recalled the many conversations he'd had with his father about his Uncle Celor, and how the man had mysteriously disappeared without a trace so long ago. *Could this man possibly be...?* There was

something strikingly familiar about his features, his eyes, the shape of his nose.

"I've heard a little about you," the general said. "You seem to have led an extraordinary life of late, running with the Drifters and all."

"Yes, Sir General, that I have," Denith responded in what he hoped was a more coherent response this time.

"Please, just General will do," the general said, casting a rather annoyed look towards Edward, who tried to keep his face from growing redder.

"Uh, very well ... General," Denith answered.

"But the part that I'm the most interested in," Celor asked slowly, "is how you came to see the colors. You don't mind me asking, do you?"

"No sir, not at all!" Denith was quick to respond, though he suddenly found himself at a loss for words.

But the general was ready with his own questions. "Tell me how a commoner like yourself came to live among the Drifters."

"It's a rather long story," Denith began. "I grew up in the Borderlands, by the Southern Bluffs, where everything was always gray..."

"Ah yes, the Southern Bluffs. I know them well," the general said with a warm smile. "At least I used to."

"Really?" Denith could barely whisper.

"Yes, I spent much of my early life there," the general answered. He looked off into the distance, as if he was lost in some history of his own, forgetting that he was listening to another story. "I used to be quite familiar with those parts." He turned and looked at Denith. "Do you know of the Woodsman family?"

Denith swallowed, and looked down briefly before responding. "Yes," he said, in a voice still not much louder than a whisper. "My ... my father is a

Woodsman.”

This time the general could not hide his surprise. “Your father is a Woodsman? Tell me, what is his name?”

“Elden. Woodsman Elden.”

“Indeed,” the general responded. It was all he could say for the moment. “Well then,” he started again, “go on with your story.”

Denith was stumped as to how to continue. He did not want to appear impudent by asking too directly about the general’s own past. But it was also clear that the man had shown a keen interest in the Woodsman family.

Another thought hit him. If this was in fact his father’s brother Celor, he would know about the whispers, and the beings from the other world. So Denith decided to tell the man the whole story, of Hoden, Faethé, and the keys—all the while watching the general’s expressions for signs of recognition at the things he spoke of.

When the tale was over, the general gazed intently into Denith’s eyes. “So, the beings of the other world delivered this magical gift into the hands of young Woodsman Elden’s son?” he continued. “Well, well, well. Fancy that! That was how it had to be, I suppose.”

Edward was looking perplexed, wondering what the general meant. The young men who sat with the general were obviously well trained, as they did not show any surprise or emotion at any part in the tale or conversation.

Finally, softly, the general asked, “Then ... you know who I am?”

There was silence. Only Edward found himself stunned to realize that there was more to this meeting than he had originally thought.

After a moment’s silence, Denith answered, “Yes, I believe I do. You are Woodsman Celor, my father’s

long-lost brother, and therefore my uncle.”

The general nodded. “So you’ve heard the story?”

“Yes. My father told me.”

“Almost similar to your story, isn’t it?” Celor asked, again gazing into the distance as if he was looking into another world. “Only I couldn’t quite make the right choice the first time around. I suppose that’s why you were given the same opportunity.”

Denith remained silent.

“I thought that perhaps my brother, Elden, would someday be the one. He was so young when I left.” Celor’s eyes brightened. “Tell me—tell me about Elden. Did he marry? He must have, you’re his son. And ... my mother and father?”

“They passed on a good many years ago.”

“I thought as much, though I had hoped differently. We hear no news from those parts, you see. Even the Drifters from here seldom travel that far, and we common folk, as you know, aren’t given to much traveling ourselves. So ... what do people say of me?”

“There are many stories, none of them very good, I’m afraid.”

“And Elden, what does he think?”

“The rumor that worried him the most,” Denith said slowly, “was that perhaps you, being so despondent, had thrown yourself off the cliffs. But in spite of all the stories, he’s continued to hope that you had set out for a better life, and found it somewhere.”

“And so I did,” Celor responded gravely, “though I admit it took awhile before it was a better one. But that is a long story that may have to wait for another time. Suffice it to say that those of the other world have ways of bringing their plans together, sometimes in spite of our own dullness to their presence. We are only players in a much greater



plan that is even now unfolding.”

“I’ve heard that before,” Denith answered. “Though I have yet to discover what role they would have me play, and why I have been brought here—and to you.”

“Well, young Denith, I may have an idea. I’ve heard that you are a good and fearless fighter.”

“Well, I don’t really know about that,” Denith answered with an embarrassed smile. “I’ve had little opportunity to practice lately.”

“Then perhaps this is the time,” Celor said. “As the appointed Commander-in-Chief of my very own guard of warriors, I would be happy to undertake the task of seeing to your further training.”

Denith hesitated a little too long before answering, and Celor was quick to ask, “You’re not sure?”

“I don’t know,” Denith answered. “All I know is that I was instructed to come here. And here I am! I still don’t know why, or for what yet. But I’m waiting to hear.”

Celor nodded. “I understand. You’ll be told what to do. I can feel it. Just give it some time. In the meantime, please make yourself at home, for indeed it is. It is my home, therefore it is your home.”

The general looked sternly at Edward. “Only, Edward, I don’t think you should send him out with young Edward. He’ll end up getting into far too much trouble!”

Edward stuttered and spluttered.

“And another thing, Edward.”

Edward looked up with his most sober look.

Celor continued, “The things you have heard at this table must not go any further, do you understand? I do not want the men of the Council to hear of them, neither your wife, nor young Edward. I’ve no doubt that it will be discovered sooner or later, but it had better not be because of

you." He looked sternly at Edward.

Edward somewhat indignantly replied, "I promise, Sir General ... sir, that I shall not utter a word of any of this to anyone."

"You'd better not!" Celor said as a final warning.

Celor turned back to Denith and continued, "I'll send one of my men to be your guide. It may be more prudent than having you go around with young Edward."

"Thank you. I appreciate your offer and your concern, General," Denith answered.

"Hmm, yes, it is probably better that you do not refer to me as your uncle for the time being," Celor answered. "Well then, you'll be on your way?"

Edward, quick to catch the hint, jumped up. "Yes, yes, we were on our way. Come, Denith."

Celor held out his hand towards Denith, who clasped it firmly. Celor then placed his other hand on top of the clasped hands, and said, "I'm glad you're here, Denith. I'm sure we'll have much to talk about in the days to come. I'm sorry I can't spend longer talking at the moment."

Denith nodded, and their eyes caught in a gaze of kinship. It was a moment savored by both men—knowing they had found a kindred soul not just in heart, but in blood as well. It was a meeting neither had anticipated, but that had been planned and brought together by the forces that had led both of their lives to this point. It was a moment neither would soon forget.

"Take care," Celor said.

With that, Edward and Denith left the tavern, and walked back to Edward's house. They both mulled over all they had heard, for different reasons.

Once they got close to the house, Denith shot a sideways glance at Edward, wondering how he was faring under Celor's blunt remarks.

Edward caught his glance, and seemed to know

Denith's question. "General Celor ... he's a fine man. Indeed, you'll find few finer. We have two camps here, you must understand, and they are both part of what makes this town what it is. There is our side—the town council that keeps the city running. And then we have Celor's Guard, of which the general is the commander."

"How long has he been here?" Denith asked, curious to start piecing together as much of his uncle's history as he could.

"He came to our town almost three years ago. We're known in certain circles as a haven for those who've found themselves in Lancer's disfavor. Apparently Celor was such a man, and with his ability to see color that did not surprise us. But he said he had been directed to our city by the other world."

"The Whisperers?" Denith asked.

"I don't know," Edward answered. "I don't know much about the Whisperers, or any of those sort of things, I'm afraid to say. But I do know that your uncle spoke with an earnestness that impressed the council, and they allowed him to stay and implement his plans."

"Plans?"

"To raise an army, if he can. It's really a rather small outfit at the moment, Celor's Guard—and to be honest, I don't know that he'll ever see the 'army' of warriors he's hoping for. But he is a good fighter, and has trained his men well. In fact, most menfolk and even some of the women in our humble city here at least know how to wield a sword. Should Lancer's men ever find reason to attack us—something Celor is always thinking could happen any day—we could actually put up a decent fight."

Denith raised his eyebrows. "But you've been living all this time under their presence. Why would they find reason to attack now, or anytime?"

“That is always the question, isn’t it?” Edward answered. “But to hear Celor tell it, there are all sorts of forces involved in these things, and even if we could trust those who receive our benefits to remain silent, there are other forces that cannot be silenced.”

“Like the eeghaws,” Denith said absently, almost more to himself.

“Eeghaws?” Edward questioned, obviously unfamiliar with the term.

“You know—the creatures of the netherworld?”

“Like I said,” Edward answered, “I know very little about these things. But I can see that you and the general should get along quite well with each other.”

With that, Edward turned his gaze. They had reached the farmhouse. Without another word, he opened the door, and they went inside.



Denith spent the rest of that day enjoying Edward’s hospitality, and the vivacity of the colors around the farm, both inside and out. He had all but forgotten how many and varied the colors could be during his time in the tunnels—and quickly remembered how greatly he appreciated them.

In the evening he had the pleasure of meeting young Edward, who, he noted with amusement, appeared to be a bit of a rascal—though like his father it was obvious that he had a good heart. He was friendly and full of stories about the oddities of this town, and the great diversity of characters that inhabited it.

## THE GENERAL'S GUARD

It was early the next morning that Denith found himself seated at a table with young Edward.

"My father said the general is going to send one of his men to show you around. That's a shame!" young Edward said. "He'll probably show you the most boring places in this city, which aren't that hard to find, as there are so many of them. I, on the other hand, could show you..."

Whatever young Edward was about to say was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Oh, visitors," young Edward said, and with a glum look added, "Probably for you."

Before young Edward could make it to the door, his father was there already, and had opened it.

A tall, olive-skinned man entered the room, attired in a similar uniform to what the men in the tavern had been wearing, and which Denith realized was probably the standard uniform of Celor's Guard—a long yellowish tunic covered by a red leather vest of sorts with round metal plates fastened to it. A belt, sword, and cape completed the costume, along with a rounded helmet the man held on one arm. It was altogether a lot more colorful of a suit than any armor he had seen the Watchers wear.

“Good morning,” Edward said to the man. “I assume you have come for Denith.”

“Yes,” the man sternly responded.

With that, Edward respectfully motioned for the man to come in.

Denith eyed him curiously, even as he tried not to stare. The man almost looked like a Drifter, but his color and features reminded Denith more of ... *Keren?*

Denith now stood to greet the man. He was a good deal taller than Denith, and though he looked leaner, he was no less built than Denith. Edward ushered his son out of the room to leave the two men to themselves.

Instead of the customary handshake, the man placed one hand on Denith's left shoulder, and touched Denith's right arm with the other. “So, you're young Denith?”

Denith found the greeting odd, as the man did not appear too much older than himself. Still, he smiled and answered, “Yes, that's right. I'm Denith.”

“My name is Kurt. I serve under the general as one of his Guard. He sent me to show you around.”

“Thank you.”

They sat together and chatted for a while about what Denith had heard and seen of the town so far—which was pretty much limited to the tavern and the things he had heard spoken of there.

“I don't mean to be impolite,” Denith finally mustered the courage to say, “but is it possible that you are of Baron descent?”

“Indeed, I am,” Kurt answered, a hint of pride in his voice. “Does this surprise you? Though I myself am surprised you guessed this, and not that I was part-Drifter, which is what most folks in this place would assume.”

“I knew a young girl whose father was a Baron, and her features were similar to yours.”

"Indeed?" Kurt looked very surprised. "And where did you know this girl?"

"She lived not far from my home—on the Southern Bluffs."

Denith proceeded to tell Kurt all he knew of Amy, the Baron shipwreck, and of Keren's father. He stopped short, however, of mentioning the more recent events that had transpired between Amy, Keren and himself, and did not mention the keys either.

"An amazing tale, to be sure," Kurt exclaimed.

"And now, may I ask how you, a Baron, came to be serving in Celor's Guard?" Denith asked, not really sure whether he would receive an answer or not.

"Well, I'm afraid mine is not a noble story," Kurt said with a chuckle. "My father was a servant to a Baron master, and dabbled in a little stealing on the side. At first it was just petty thievery, though among my people, even petty crimes are severely punished. But he soon saw his chance for a better life—at least a richer one. His master, a merchant, had come across a great sum of wealth, and my father saw opportunity to make away with a goodly portion of it. But knowing that he would very likely be recognized and caught sooner or later if he stayed among our own people, he fled the Baron lands, crossing the seas and coming to these parts.

"At first he disguised himself as a Drifter, wandering around, trying to ingratiate himself—first with the common folk, and then with any Drifters he came across. It was without a lot of success, I'm afraid. To make matters worse, he was also set upon by Traders, who discovered and relieved him of most of his stolen fortune. Fortunately he was left with a few precious stones that he had sewn into the hem of his coat, which the robbers never discovered. Eventually he met a

commoner and settled down with her, and”—he smiled cheerily—“then I was born!”

Denith allowed himself a smile as well. “So where are they now? Your parents, I mean.”

“My father died when I was still a boy. The remorse of his crime weighed heavily on him every day of his life, but this did not stop him from giving what he could to my mother and me. He knew he could never go back or undo the damage he had done. My mother is still living off the small fortune he managed to leave us with.

“And how did I come to join Celor’s Guard? I suppose it’s in my blood. I’m a good swordsman, and when my wanderings brought me to this town, they also brought me to Celor’s Guard. It was all very natural. No one seems to mind my being part-Baron. They’re good folks here, and don’t look down on anyone for their heritage or background. They take you for what you are, and help you see what you have to offer.”

“I’m fascinated by the Barons,” Denith commented.

“As am I!” Kurt responded. “My father never spoke much of them. He never spoke much at all, for that matter. He had difficulty with your common language, and insisted on speaking his own tongue. My mother had to learn it too. I grew up speaking both, and my speech is still tinged with a Baron accent, though few people distinguish it as such. I let them continue thinking I’m part Drifter. It’s simpler than the long explanation that I’d otherwise have to give.” Kurt chuckled. “But now it is again my turn to ask you a question. I see you carry a Baron’s sword. How did you come by it?”

“Ah, that’s not exactly the question I was expecting to answer at this point.”

Kurt smiled, and waited expectantly. “I presume it has something to do with this young girl, Keren,



and her mother?" he asked. "Something told me there was more to that story that you weren't telling."

"Indeed," Denith answered hesitantly. "And that is because it is only a greater mystery than the beginning."

"Tell me," Kurt urged, "if you don't mind, that is."

Denith took a deep breath, figuring there was little reason the story could not be told. In fact, if anything, perhaps Kurt would be able to shed light on some of the events, seeing as he was part Baron himself. He proceeded to finish the story of Amy's mysterious disappearance, and Keren's finding of the sword, and bequeathing it to him, though he still made no mention of the keys.

Kurt listened intently. "That must have been most unsettling for Keren."

Denith blushed. "Yes, I think it was," he answered, looking down. "But unfortunately I don't know what became of her. That was the night I left."

Denith thought back to those days, and for a few moments allowed himself to relive the memories, and the feelings that accompanied them.

"You just left?" Kurt asked with some surprise, after Denith had stopped speaking for some moments.

"Well, actually, I was told to leave ... by the other world. There were many questions I needed to find answers to."

"Ah, yes, the other world. I have heard that Drifters speak of such things. Even Celor speaks of it at times. But I did not know that other common folk believed in it."

"They don't, and I didn't—until I found it for myself, that is."

"You *found* it?"

"It's another long story. Perhaps I will tell you

sometime.” Denith did not feel like telling that story again at this point. Kurt seemed to catch on, and switched to another topic himself.

“So this girl’s mother is now with the Barons, you think?”

“I have no way of knowing. The only clue they left behind was this sword on her bed.”

“Which you then took, and have kept with you?”

“Yes.”

Kurt remained silent for a long while. Then he abruptly stood up. “Come,” he said. “We are meant to be roaming the town. Let us do just that.”



Kurt was an enjoyable companion, and as the days passed, the two men became firm friends. Denith had little doubt that Kurt was reporting all that transpired between them to Celor, but he did not mind. He had no reason to distrust anyone here, though he still kept the knowledge of the keys to himself for the moment.

Denith soon realized he had much more in common with the men of the Guard than with young Edward, but he was still hesitant about making any commitments to joining them, as Celor had suggested. The whispers again remained silent for the time being, as if they were waiting for Denith to find his own footing in this new life before revealing the next step he was to take.

“There’s going to be a sword fighting competition at the pavilion. Come—you won’t want to miss it!” Kurt told Denith. He was clearly excited at the news himself. “All the guards will be participating, as will many townsmen and lads. We do it just for sport sometimes, to amuse the town. It’s a big event, and afterwards there’s a feast, dancing, women!” Kurt’s eyes beamed with delight.

“A competition? And is there a reward?” Denith asked, his interest piqued.

"A fine stallion—black, spirited, and trained by our finest trainer. All the best swordsmen are after it. It's certainly a handsome beast and a worthy prize. I've heard you're not a bad swordsman yourself. Maybe you should try for it."

Kurt looked into Denith's eyes. He knew Denith had been offered the chance to join the Guard, and that he had been hesitant to do so. He also knew it was very unlikely that Denith could win, as the finest fighters of the Guard would be participating. But he was curious to see how Denith would respond to a challenge.

"I don't think so," Denith answered, and turned to follow Kurt to the spectacle.

Many of the townsfolk had already assembled at the pavilion and there was a sizeable crowd. Uniformed soldiers and eager young men from both the town and several outlying settlements were gathered to one side, signing up for the competition. There were even a few Drifters among them.

General Celor himself would be presiding over the event and using it to spot the newest potential recruits for his Guard. The townsmen and boys who showed potential and resolve in the early rounds would be offered the opportunity to further train for the Guard, while the guards would be jousting amongst themselves to determine who would be promoted to the rank of commander. At present Celor's Guard numbered about fifteen commanders, each with about twenty guards under their command. Today, a new commander would be added to the ranks, and this competition would determine who that would be.

The competition began with a grand procession of colorfully arrayed musicians marching around the field that had been enclosed for the occasion. Celor looked on, highly pleased with the pomp and circumstance he had inspired among these

otherwise simple folk.

As soon as Kurt and Denith arrived, Kurt rushed over to sign up for the competition.

"Here, let's put your name down too!" he challenged Denith. "You'll get a chance to use that fine sword you always carry around with you!"

"No," Denith objected. "I'm hardly prepared for this. Besides, I don't know that I'm cut out to be a guard."

"Oh, I've heard differently!" Kurt laughed.

Denith shook his head. "I think I'll just watch."

"But you can do it!" came Kurt's quick rejoinder. "And you have a fine sword. It'll be fun—what do you have to lose anyway? There'll be at least ten competitions going on at any given time, and many hours of sifting till we get anywhere near the finals. I'll wager few people will even notice you. Come on—you'll either be humiliated quickly, or else prove yourself worthy to carry such an impressive weapon."

Denith was still hesitant, but it didn't matter. "There, it's done!" Kurt said, looking at Denith triumphantly. "I signed you up."

"But ... but—" Denith objected.

"Too late!"

The man who had been signing up the contestants slammed the book shut and roared at the top of his voice, "All those who've signed their names, come up and pick a number. You'll be paired up, fighting against the man who has picked the same number. You will find your opponent by going to the courts designated. Contestants with numbers one through ten, the first court. Eleven through twenty, second court...."

Denith had picked a number in the twenties and proceeded to his court. Kurt, already a guard, did not have to pick a number. He was automatically assigned to the guards' fields, where the more

seasoned warriors would begin dueling among themselves. Competing guards who won their tournaments would face other winning guards. Guards who lost their tournaments would become opponents for the winning contestants of the common folk. Last but not least, the winning guards would challenge the existing commanders, and though few ever defeated them, the ability to hold one's own against a commander for a given length of time was the only requirement to "winning."

At last, the most persistent guard would be dubbed commander along with the others, and receive the prize horse that went with that title. The remaining winners would receive commissions of being captains among their fellow guards, and thus there was some form of reward for just about everyone.

Denith's first opponent, a lad about his own age, presented him little difficulty. Each trial ended when either contestant lost his sword, or ended up in some other unguarded position. They used no shields, and there was to be no inflicting of actual wounds. If someone did get hurt, the offending contestant would immediately be disqualified. This rule in itself caused the contestants to approach each other with a good deal of carefulness, and to control their movements with the utmost of concentration. But Celor was adamant that the tournament remain a friendly event.

All that to say, Denith had soon unhanded his opponent's sword, and found himself assigned a new number, and waiting for his next opponent. It was invigorating to wield his sword once again, though he did not feel the same power and energy that had surged through him when he had fought the dark forces. Yet he found that the training and skills he had acquired from Baden quickly came

back to him, and in comparison to most of the other contestants around him, he felt quite accomplished in his swordsmanship.

As the afternoon progressed, Denith managed to outmaneuver all his opponents, though some proved more challenging than others. But with each new contestant, Denith became more attentive and nimble, and he felt his confidence mounting with each new victory.

Celor's attention remained focused primarily on the contests between the guards, and those who fought in the court directly in front of him. It was seldom that anyone from the general public, those who had been assigned to the numbered courts, made their way into the final matches.

But after Denith had moved up in the contest, and defeated or held his own against several of the losing guards, he was taken over to Celor's court. There he anxiously awaited his call to fight with the winning guards, who would all be vying for the prize horse and the title of commander.

Denith watched quietly, noting that these victorious guards would definitely be a greater challenge for him than the ones he had faced thus far. Their fighting was clean and skillful, and every movement was made with great precision and timing. It was obvious that any of these men were the more likely candidates to win the day.

General Celor was quick to note that Denith was waiting amongst the tournament's finalists. He watched with great interest as Denith stepped onto the court. As Denith unsheathed his sword there was a mixed reaction from the watching crowd, for it was obvious to all that it was a Baron sword.

Denith's opponent was a little surprised. "How on earth did you make it here, boy?" he muttered quietly, so only Denith could hear.

Denith refused to allow himself to be rattled by

the guard's taunt. He knew it would take a good deal of concentration to keep from being instantly defeated in this court of combat, and he was determined to make the fight as difficult as possible for whatever opponents he would face here.

And so it began. The fight was long, hard and clean. Exchanging blow for blow, Denith found himself hard pressed to keep up with the man's pressing advances. But Denith clung to his sword, and refused to let himself get pushed into a corner.

After a prolonged struggle, the timekeeper called an end to the fight, and—because the guard had been unable to defeat him—Denith was proclaimed the winner.

A ripple of excitement ran through the watching crowd, which quickly grew as other spectators and even contestants left their courts to watch. Although upon occasion common contestants had managed to reach the finals, they were always defeated—some quicker than others, but always defeated. But here was a man—a young man at that—who had risen above all predecessors.

Denith was quickly challenged by another opponent. Again, he firmly held his ground, and this time managed to make his challenger stumble to the ground. The crowds cheered, more wildly this time. Another opponent, another battle, and again Denith held firm, refusing to be defeated before the timekeeper stopped the duel. Again, by his persistence—and to the great chagrin of the other champion guards—he was declared the winner.

But finally he met his match in one of the three champion guards awaiting his chance to battle the commanders. The man had watched closely as Denith fought his previous three opponents, and studied his moves and tactics. So it was that, by quick maneuvering, and in a short time, the man deftly twisted Denith's sword out of his hand.

The crowd was clearly disappointed at Denith's quick loss. They were hoping to see a legend born that day—someone come straight up from the ranks of the common folk to become the next commander. But it was not to be, and in a way, Denith was thankful it was over. He was exhausted, and felt out of shape. He had seen quite enough excitement for one day.

Celor had also watched Denith's moves with great interest, and noted that, though perhaps inexperienced, he had a natural skill and talent that, if properly trained and harnessed, would likely far surpass the best of his men.



That evening, as the festivities began, General Celor sought Denith out.

"So, nephew," he said, "how was your day? You certainly surprised us all at the competition."

Denith shook his head. "I'm sorely out of shape—and out of practice too."

"It's vigorous business, isn't it?" Celor said with a laugh. Then, changing the subject, he asked, "Has Kurt been showing you around?"

"Yes. He's been a very pleasant friend and companion—most obliging! He's made me feel quite at home."

"I thought he'd be the man for the job. He's a friendly chap, and seeing you with that Baron sword, I thought there might be some kinship between the two of you."

After sitting a moment in silence, Celor asked, "So have you thought more about what you will be doing? You stand to earn quite a commission in the Guard. There's always a need for more soldiers in our ranks, and you've certainly proved yourself a worthy swordsman today. You would have every opportunity to perfect your skills among my men."

Denith looked thoughtful, but said nothing.



"We cannot fool Lancer forever," Celor continued. "It seems this town leads a charmed life, and in many ways it does. It has been protected from the influence of those who would make of it a colorless haven as the rest of the common villages are. But the time will come—and likely sooner than later—when these forces shall discover our little haven, and we shall have to rise up and fight—or at least rise up to defend ourselves—if we do not want to lose the gifts we have been entrusted with. But if we are not ready, then all this beauty, all this freedom, shall be destroyed."

Denith seemed almost oblivious to these words, and stared down blankly at the table in front of him.

Trying to guess what might be on his nephew's mind, Celor tried again. "I fear you must think of me as only a man of war. I do not know what your father told you about our childhood, but there is much else that we have not yet spoken of. There was a time when war was the furthest thing from my mind, a time when all I could think of was this other world, and how I could try to get back to what I was not ready to accept from them the first time." He looked at Denith, curious as to his reaction to his last statement, and then asked, "You still hear them, don't you?"

Denith nodded.

"It has been difficult to live with my failure," Celor continued. "I would be curious to know what those of the other world think of me now. But I have been thankful to find a home here amongst people who also believe—at least who can see the world as I do, in color. But they did not at first seem to realize their own precarious position. You see, I had spent a lot of time traveling, going hither, thither and yon throughout these lands, and I know—as I'm sure you do—that there is a much darker side to

Lancer's Watchers than might at first seem obvious. They are only the shadows of a darker force that controls them all, and while we may be able to keep the Watchers at bay, these other forces cannot be manipulated as easily."

At this, Denith glanced up. Celor's eyes lit up, though his face remained unchanged. Denith *was* taking interest in the conversation.

"There is still a story that I haven't told you. I believe you deserve to know the truth about your long-lost uncle, so I shall keep no secrets from you. For a long time after I left the Bluffs I kept to myself, trying to make sense of everything, and run away from it at the same time. I traveled far and long, and soon took on the guise of a Trader, simply to avoid the strange glances and questions that arose when I appeared as the purposeless commoner that I was. It wasn't long before I became like them—rough, coarse, restless, and roving.

"The voices ... they didn't disappear right away, but living the kind of life I had chosen for myself, they eventually did. I became a fugitive—from myself, and from the Watchers. I fought, robbed, and lived as an outlaw, hoping that a life of danger and recklessness might provide some escape from my feelings of failure, and the knowledge that the other world had forgotten me, as I had forgotten them.

"I never saw the colors until one day, many years later. I was in a tavern, and may have had just a little too much to drink. Then this stranger walked into the tavern. I mean, almost everyone in that place was a stranger to me, but this was a *strange* stranger. He was obviously not a Trader, which were the only type of men that normally frequented this place. In fact, the stranger almost reminded me of myself, in the days when I first set out on my own. It was a memory I didn't much care for, so I returned

to my drink and tried to ignore him.

"But for some reason, I kept finding myself looking at this stranger. There was something about him—almost as if there was an aura around him. I'd never seen anything like it, and soon concluded that it must have been my drink getting to me. Then he stood up to leave. I noticed a large sword strapped to his belt—a Baron sword."

Denith looked up, his shocked expression being met by Celor's bemused gaze.

"Yes, you see, I recognized that sword when Edward introduced you to me, and I knew then where it was that I had seen you before. It was the day in the tavern when I first saw what I would come to know as the colors.

"I wanted to follow you after you'd left, but when I got outside, there was no sign of you anywhere. I looked high and low along the road, to no avail. At first I thought perhaps the whole scene had been a figment of my imagination, and that I would wake up and find I had been dreaming. But instead, I found myself waking up from what *had* been as a dream.

"From that day on I started noticing color in the strangest places. I thought I was going crazy. At first it was just a touch here or there, but then it got worse and worse until I found I was surrounded by color. And that's when things started coming back to me—all that I had heard about the other world, about colors, about forces that held our world captive in their grip of darkness.

"Shortly after, I discovered this town, a place full of people who shared life as I had come to see it. I knew the other world had led me here, and that this had likely been for a reason. I discovered, probably much like you have, that while they saw color, they understood little of why or how. I am not saying I understand much more—though you

probably do. But there was one thing I had learned—and that was of Lancer's hate for those who spoke of such things. I am still surprised that Lancer knows nothing of this place, but it is only a matter of time before he does.

"And when he discovers it, he shall seek to destroy it, and the treasures and beauties that we as a people have come to see. It is for this reason that I have done what I could to train these men in the art of battle, and so I have hoped to make up for my failure, by doing my part to protect what I can of at least this small part of the other world."

"It seems to me that you've done an excellent job, uncle," Denith said. "It certainly is a fine group of fighters you've gathered and trained."

"Yes. But it is nowhere near as good or as big as it needs to be. And I'm afraid that, while we may be ready to fight in our own defense, we are as children when it comes to knowing the unseen ways and forces that govern the world around us."

Celor looked off into the distance, and for a time grew silent.

"You are a fine warrior, Denith, a very fine warrior. I was most impressed by the way you moved, the way you brandished your sword—becoming one with it in a manner most seasoned fighters would envy. I don't think it will take long for you to realize your full potential in this skill.

"But I believe there is a greater purpose for which you have been sent here, to us. Your gift, and the time spent with your Drifter friends, have given you an understanding of the other world that could be a vital part of our defense against Lancer's forces, or powers that may seek to use Lancer against us."

"I feel like a child myself when it comes to knowing the ways of the other world," Denith answered. "But why not just ally yourselves with the Drifters?" Denith asked. "They possess such

knowledge.”

“Yes, but they are so untamed, almost uncivilized in the ways of our kind of life. They make fine fighters, I’ll grant them that. But they are more practiced at fleeing for their freedom than fighting for it. I’m afraid their particular understanding of the other world is not a great help for people like us, though we may well need to depend on their skills and knowledge in times to come. I don’t know if I’m making myself clear—but you probably understand better than most what I am talking about.”

Denith didn’t feel particularly endowed with great understanding at that moment, though he hadn’t lost the thread of the conversation, and understood what Celor was trying to say.

“Let me put it this way,” Celor said, trying to sum up his conversation. “I know there is probably much more we stand to learn from you, and even from the Drifters, than you stand to learn from joining the Guard. But I cannot help but feel that this is why you were brought to us at this time—and hearing the tale of your keys, I am beginning to wonder, if not fear, that our time may be shorter than I had once hoped.”

Denith looked thoughtful before answering. “I have often wondered why I was given these keys. I really am nobody special. I was, and still am, just a simple commoner.”

“So was I once ... so was I,” Celor answered. “But we can no longer afford to be. The battle will soon be upon us, Denith, and if you care at all about anything I have just told you...”

“Then I should really consider joining the Guard—yes, I know,” Denith said, finishing the sentence. “Very well, I shall give it some thought,” he said.

“Excellent,” Celor said. “I’ll be expecting a final

decision, then.”



Denith lay on his bed pondering all that had happened, and the decision that lay before him—a decision that would set the next course his life was to take. He thought of Faethé’s words, that here he would discover the true nature of his mission, and his future.

The only things he had discovered so far were that he could exchange blows with the best of Celor’s swordsmen, as well as that there were others who could see colors, but who obviously did not know much about what they stood for, or even what their sight of the colors meant.

With these thoughts running through his head, Denith fell asleep, and soon found himself standing upon a great expanse of lush, green grass—greener than he had ever seen before. Denith was mesmerized, and looked around in great wonder. As his eyes slowly adjusted to his surroundings, he gradually became aware of more and more detail around him—rolling hills, clusters of trees, animals darting or scurrying about here and there, a pool of clear, blue water. It was a scene complete in every manner of perfection.

He turned his attention from the ground to the sky, which was a deep cerulean blue, much richer than the sky color he had become accustomed to. Again, as he looked longer, he became aware of more detail, almost as if it was being created as he watched. The previously empty blue sky was soon dotted with fleecy white clouds, deepened with ever-so-slight tinges of blue. The clouds began to mass, as if they were being driven by some central power, until they formed an unbroken blanket above him. The ground grew dimmer in its shadow, though no less beautiful.

Then Denith began to feel a gentle mist drifting

from the clouds, soothing raindrops that fell like a light snow, filling the air around him with a sweet scent of moisture.

As he continued looking up, feeling the gentle, wet mist upon his face, and watching its vapors swirl through the air on invisible currents of wind, the clouds behind him opened, and a light as bright as the sun shone through, though Denith had not taken notice of any particular sun here before.

But the moment its piercing rays struck the misty vapors, an amazing sight unfolded. An archway of scintillating color projected itself onto the canvas of mist before him. The translucent apparition was unlike anything Denith had ever seen before. "The rainbow!" he whispered reverently to himself.

Then, as if that was not incredible enough, the vision began to speak, its colors fluctuating from the words that it emanated.

"You wonder what purpose your keys are to fulfill, when this knowledge has already been revealed to you." The words echoed all around him.

Denith did not question where the voice was coming from. Its presence, as well as its almost casual tone of speaking, was simply an accepted fact, as can happen in dreams. Nor did it occur to Denith to question what was being said. It made perfect sense to him at that moment.

"I do not make such secrets too hard to understand, but I reveal them to My servants. And you are My servant, whom I have called and ordained to bring back the ways of truth that have been forgotten, as I have been forgotten—to do battle against those who have blinded themselves to My presence, thinking that by so doing, I would cease to exist."

"The Shadowed Ones?"

"Indeed, they are shadowed—darkened in their

understanding, and alienated from a life they would keep hidden from all. But to you I have given the keys to unlock the secrets they have kept, to open the doors they have locked in the hearts of your people.”

“But how is this to be done?”

“That you shall yet come to see, but do not worry. The path before you will unfold one step at a time, and the next step has already been revealed to you. Yes, you must take your place among Celor’s Guard. You must learn to follow before you can lead. It shall not be long before the battle will be upon you. Swords will be drawn. The charge shall come.”

As the voice spoke, the sky grew darker around Denith. The gentle mist suddenly transformed into a driving rain; lightning streaked across the sky, and filled the air with thunder. It momentarily drowned out the voice, but not the vision. The light still shone, keeping the vision of the rainbow alive, and making it glow all the more in front of its dark background.

*The light of truth will not be extinguished*, the voice continued, only this time it was a still, gentle whispering in Denith’s heart—not audible, but clear, even over the roaring of the storm. Another streak of lightning flashed, and thunder sounded.

Denith opened his eyes. He lay in his bed. The room was dark. A fierce storm raged outside, and pelting drops of rain clattered against the window. He had been dreaming. And yet, somehow, Denith knew he had not.



## IN THE FACE OF DARKNESS

Denith's basic training in Celor's Guard was rigorous, but he was a fast learner and soon proved his worth. He took his place among the thirty guards that were assigned to Sir Albert, the newly appointed commander who had defeated him in the contest. At his own request, and with Celor's approval, Kurt was transferred to the unit of ten men over which Denith had been made captain.

Their assignment was to secretly patrol the surrounding towns and cities, to learn as much as they could about the strength and the number of Lancer's troops in this region. They were not ready for direct confrontation yet, but when the time came, the more information they possessed about their opponent, the better off they would be.

"Are you ready for this?" Celor asked him.

"I believe so," Denith replied. "Dressing like a Trader and sneaking into enemy territory—it should be exciting."

"Exciting indeed," Celor said with a chuckle. "But be careful. You'll have to be ready to fight or run if you're discovered."

"I believe I've had a fair share of practice in both," Denith replied. "The only thing I'm not as sure of is how to act like a Trader."

“It is not all that difficult. Traders keep to themselves. They always travel in small groups, or on their own with servants. They don’t talk to anybody else but other Traders mostly, and when they go into a city or village, their business is always with a select few people. But since you won’t actually be going into any villages, merely observing them from a distance, there should be no problem. Traders are usually left alone, even by Lancer’s men. So long as you’re carting goods—which in your case will be your weapons, garments, and provisions—and don’t involve yourself in any business that’s not yours, you shouldn’t have any problem, or draw any undue attention to yourselves.”

And so Denith found himself back on the road, enjoying the sights of the fresh outdoors in much the same way he once had among the Drifters. Aside from observing what they could of the presence of Lancer’s men in various cities and villages from a distance, they also took to themselves the task of mapping out the regions surrounding them. There were few dependable maps available, as even most of those who traveled and traded did so along established routes, and had no need of maps. But with accurate maps of at least the immediate area, Celor’s forces would gain a much-needed advantage.



“We were not to get involved!” Kurt called to Denith. They were on their way to restock supplies for the rest of their group. But Kurt’s admonition went unheeded. Denith had already walked over to a girl who was sitting dejectedly by the side of the road, crying.

“Little girl, why are you crying?” Denith asked.

The girl, who looked about twelve years of age, barely glanced up. From the look of her clothes, she seemed to be from a poor family.

"Is everything all right?" Denith asked gently.

"I don't know," the girl replied, and then burst into tears.

Kurt, who had secured their horse and cart by the side of the road, now came over to Denith's side.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Denith asked again.

"You're Traders ... I didn't know you helped people."

"Well, maybe we're just different. Tell us what's wrong."

"My brother and sister and I, we were sent here to my brother's farm—my eldest brother, that is. I have two of them. We were to help with the harvest."

"I see," Denith said. "But now you're homesick?"

"No. We were supposed to prove that we could be responsible and mature, but instead it all went wrong."

"What do you mean?" Denith asked.

"When we first came, my brothers and sister didn't take things very seriously at all. They all fooled around and partied together. Then visitors began coming. They looked dark to me, though I couldn't figure out why. But I didn't like them, and my sister never let me stay around when they were there. I don't know what happened, but suddenly my brothers and sister didn't care about the harvest or the farm at all anymore. They just sat around doing nothing all day. It was like they'd forgotten about everything. Then the visitors came back one day, and there was a great argument. I don't know what it was about, but after the visitors left, my brothers and sister became very sick. And now I think they might be dying, but I don't know what to do."

She looked up at Denith with a tear-stricken face. "The time of harvest has almost passed, and the crops will soon be rotting in the fields. But there is

nothing I can do about it. I wanted to go back to my father, but I know he will only be angry, and..." The girl paused and burst into tears again. "I was afraid. I didn't think I could find the way on my own."

Denith was sobered by her story, and suspected the worst. "It looks like Lancer might be trying to recruit forces of his own," Denith whispered to Kurt. "I think this is something worth investigating."

Denith turned back to the girl. "You know, we have a little time. What if you took us back to your brothers and sister. Maybe there is something we can do to help."

The girl led them down a nearby dusty lane. At the end of the lane was a modest wooden farmhouse. They walked through to the back of the house.

"My two brothers are in this bedroom, and my sister is there."

Denith and Kurt went into the brothers' room, and looked at them both. They had fallen into an unconscious stupor, and a high fever racked their motionless bodies. They didn't so much as stir when Denith touched them.

The room was dim, and it was difficult to see exactly what was wrong with them, so Denith strode over to a window and flung it open, flooding the room with light and a fresh breeze. Only then did Denith and Kurt clearly see what this girl had apparently been unable to. The emaciated figures had lost all natural color, and their faces had turned a stone-like gray.

"The work of the Shadowed Ones?" Kurt questioned in a whisper. He and Denith had often talked of such things.

"Probably," Denith whispered back, "though Lancer may have his hand in this as well. When I fought his men once, many were like this, pale and without color. Perhaps these visitors of theirs were

somehow trying to persuade these young ones to join his Watchers."

Turning back to the girl, Denith asked, "Where are your parents? I believe they will want to know of this right away."

"They live to the east. It's a large city to the east, by the sea. You must know it. There are always many Traders there."

Denith looked up at Kurt, who nodded back that he knew of it.

"Tell us their house, and we shall try to get word to them right away."

"It's the Countsman house," the girl responded.

"That is what we ask for?" Denith queried.

"Yes," the girl replied. "I am of the Countsman family. My name is Elisa. My brothers are Nathan and Jered, and my sister Auriel."

"Very well," Denith said, jotting down the names on a piece of paper as the girl spoke them. "We shall see what we can do. Do you have food?"

"Enough for now," the girl answered.

"Then remain here," Denith said. "We'll be back." Then, just as he was about to leave, he asked, "Have you seen any sign of the visitors since this illness?"

"No. They've not been back since."

"Good," Denith said. "Stay here and keep an eye on your brothers and sister. We'll be back with help. I promise."



Sir Albert came into the room and headed straight for Denith. "I heard you've dispatched some men on an errand to a distant city," Sir Albert stated in a tone that showed he expected an explanation.

"Yes, that's right."

"And what is the urgency of this errand, that you would dispatch them without counsel from your commanding officer?" Sir Albert questioned.

"I'm sorry, sir," Denith explained. "I was going to

tell you, but it was a matter of great urgency. We came across some young people who had contracted some strange illness after having entertained some mysterious visitors—the work of forces I am now convinced are working with Lancer. It made their countenance like that of many of Lancer's men that I have seen. If their parents knew of it, they could see for themselves the evil deeds that Lancer and these dark forces are truly up to.”

“So you sent for them?” Sir Albert asked.

“Yes sir,” Denith responded. “After all, they are the children's parents.”

“Humph.” The commander was obviously not so pleased with Denith's initiative. “And what is this other plan I have heard rumors of?”

“Other plan?”

“Yes. I heard from one of the other captains that you're planning on taking out a contingent of our men for some outdoor training exercises.”

“Oh,” Denith said, suddenly understanding what Sir Albert was referring to. “It's nothing, really. Just a little change of scenery to keep them fresh and challenged. It can do wonders for your alertness.”

Sir Albert shook his head. “Well, all I can say is that you had better make sure it does not interfere with their regular duties.”

“I'll see to it, sir!”

“What was that all about?” Kurt asked as soon as Sir Albert had left the room.

“Oh, I thought that perhaps some of our men could help with the harvesting!”

“Harvesting?” Kurt said incredulously.

Denith quickly jumped to explain. “You saw the poor girl. She was so distraught. They stand to lose their entire crop unless it's harvested before the rains come, which could be any day now.”

“Let me see if I understand this correctly,” Kurt said slowly. “You have requested a full contingent

of men just to help bring in some small farm's harvest?"

"Yes, that's right."

Kurt opened his mouth to say something, but either thought better of it, or could not do the subject justice. He remained speechless for a time. Finally he said, "And you are planning to draft the men into such manual labor?"

"Oh no," Denith responded with a small smile. "I have already spoken to quite a few of them, and they are looking forward to it. It'll be a pleasant break for them, and one they surely deserve!"

And so it was that Denith returned, not only with harvesters for the field, but to take a closer look at the ones who had fallen under this mysterious spell.

Baden had once told him that for every force of darkness, there was an equally powerful counter-force of light. Denith was curious to discover what sort of power had overcome these people—and most of all, how it could be counteracted, knowing that this was probably not an isolated case.

The soldiers-turned-harvesters, under the direction of Elisa (a task she found most gratifying), were soon busy harvesting the field. Even Kurt was among them.

Denith, meanwhile, found himself in the room with the two sick brothers who had already begun to improve from the fresh air and light that had been allowed in through the windows, which Elisa had apparently left open during the night.

The eldest brother, who looked about as old as Denith himself, had recovered the most color, and looked as if he was peacefully resting. His younger brother had also regained some color, but remained in a deeper state of unconsciousness.

Denith poured a little cold water on a cloth, and dabbed it on the elder brother's face. He awoke instantly.

"Wh-where am I?" he stuttered, his eyes not quite focused yet.

"You're at home ... in your own bed," Denith said softly, not wanting to startle the man.

"Who are you?" the brother asked, sitting up.

"Just someone trying to help," Denith answered. "You must be Nathan."

The man nodded.

"Do you remember what happened to you?"

Nathan closed his eyes and held his head, as if he was feeling remnants of some lingering pain.

"Yes ... yes, I remember. It was the visitors ... the glowing ones. We were partying when they first came."

"Who were they?"

"Men. At first they just asked for shelter, and we invited them to join our party. They ... they had this strange glow about them. Then they kept coming back. We had many parties. They always brought something. Then they started asking questions, speaking to us about leaving our farm for a more exciting life. I protested. That's when they became very angry. I don't remember what happened after that."

"Nathan!" Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by Elisa's squeal as she entered the room. "You're well!"

"Elisa!" her brother responded with like surprise.

"I'm busy with the harvest," she announced proudly. "This man, he brought many helpers with him."

Nathan looked at Denith. "Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Denith. I have come to try and help you. There are dark forces at work here, and we are trying to put a stop to them."

"Dark forces?"

"Yes—perhaps these 'glowing ones' you spoke of.



I'm not sure. All I know is that whatever spell they cast on you was draining you of your color."

"Color?" Nathan and Elisa asked at the same time.

"Yes. I don't expect you to understand. But ... perhaps I can show you something that will help you to see it for yourselves." So saying, Denith pulled out the keys.

"What are those?" Elisa asked with animated curiosity.

"They are keys to another world," Denith answered. "Look closely now, and tell me what you see."

"I see ... that they are glowing," the girl answered.

"I don't see anything," her brother said. "They look regular enough to me."

Denith looked at the girl, and then at her brother, wondering what made the difference between them.

He did not have long to think before Elisa let out a squeal of astonishment that caught Denith and Nathan by surprise.

"I ... everything's different. What's this? Where am I?"

"You're in the same place you were standing in a few seconds ago. Only the way that you see it has changed."

"Oh Nathan, do you see it? Do you see it?"

"Um ... I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be seeing," Nathan replied.

"It's the colors," Denith said. "They have always been there, Elisa. You just could not see them until now. I'm not sure why you cannot, Nathan. But they are here—even though they have largely faded from you and your brother."

At this, Elisa turned to the bed where Jered lay, and gasped in shock at the contrast of his stone-colored form. "He is dark!" she exclaimed. "Like those visitors." Elisa turned to Nathan. "You said

they were glowing, but I knew they were dark, like this. I knew." Then she turned back to Denith. "You must help him! You must!"

"I ... I don't know how," Denith said.

"Make him touch those magic keys!" Elisa persisted. "That has to work!" She grabbed Denith's hand, and pulled him over to Jered's side.

"Here! Make him touch them!"

Denith was a little taken aback by the girl's forthrightness, but seeing her desperation to do something, he relented, and knelt beside the bed. As he did, Elisa stifled a small gasp. There, hidden underneath Denith's cloak, with a strap that wrapped around his shoulder, hung a sword—a curved sword. The cloak quickly fell back in place, but Elisa knew what she had seen. Oblivious to what had just happened, Denith took the ring of keys, placed it in one of Jered's lifeless hands, and then closed the boy's fingers around it.

Elisa stood by, gazing hopefully, expectantly. Denith watched, silently wondering whether this would have any effect on the boy's condition. He could not stand the thought of the girl's hopes being disappointed.

"Look, see ... it's working," Elisa proclaimed, pointing to Jered's hand.

Denith and Elisa watched as the aura of color that surrounded the keys began to envelop Jered's hand, and spread across his body. The stony gray was slowly being vanquished as Jered's natural color returned. Only Nathan could not see the change coming over his brother—until the last traces of shadow had disappeared, and Jered's eyes flickered open. He was awake.

It was a joyful reunion of hugs, kisses and tears as Elisa stumbled all over herself, updating her stunned brother in a torrent of words about what had happened.

Denith was stunned as well, but had little time to think about what had happened before Kurt came into the room, and stopped short at the sight of the keys that Denith held openly in his hands. It was the first time he had ever seen them.

He came up right beside Denith. "What is that?" he whispered.

"It's a gift," Denith whispered back. "Something that was given to me from the other world. I ... I still don't know much about them, but ... they put the colors right back into that boy."

Before they could say any more, Elisa had grabbed his hand again, and pulled him into the next room, where her sister lay. Kurt watched in awe as the procedure repeated itself.

"Does General Celor know about these?" Kurt whispered, as the Countsman children were busy embracing each other in joyful reunion.

Denith nodded.

"And is this why you were in hiding from Lancer's men?" Kurt had heard the story of how Denith had come to their village.

"It is why the dark forces were after me, yes," Denith answered.

"Then I don't recommend that we stick around this place too much longer," Kurt continued. "I have heard enough about these dark powers—and seeing this, I realize more of it may be true than I have allowed myself to believe. But somebody is bound to discover what has happened here, and we may find that we have gotten ourselves into more trouble than we bargained for."

Denith nodded again, then asked, "How's the harvest coming along?"

"It's going well. The men should be done soon. It's not that large of a field."

"Very well. Prepare to move them out as soon as it's done. I'll bid farewell here." With that, Denith

stowed the keys back in their hidden place of safety, and Kurt left, still trying to come to grips with what he had just seen.

No sooner had Kurt left the room when Elisa came up to Denith.

"You're not really Traders, are you?" she whispered.

Denith wasn't sure how to answer.

"Don't worry. I won't tell anyone," she said, putting on her most somber expression.

At this, Nathan came over. "I want to thank you, sir, whoever you are. I believe for now we shall be safer to all return to our father's house. But surely you deserve some remuneration for your help today. Where can we find you, to send our gift of gratitude?"

"Please, you do not need to send anything. Our help was willingly given."

"Very well," Nathan said, nodding.

But Elisa was hardly satisfied with Denith's evasive answer. Still, she knew she wouldn't get much further by asking questions, and was already hatching a different plan in her mind.



"Denith, you'd better come!" Kurt said, bursting into Denith's room.

"What's wrong?"

"A stranger ... he's talking with the general. I think it has something to do with those kids we helped."

"What do you mean? How could they have found us? We never told them who we were."

"I don't know how. But you'd better do some fast thinking. The general isn't going to be very happy when he finds out about this."

Denith quickly followed Kurt down to the tavern, and peered in through a window to see a tall, well-dressed man standing before Celor. It was hard to

tell what they were saying, and Celor had a polite smile on his face, which meant he could be thinking anything. A little unsure of what he was going to say, Denith stepped into the tavern.

"Aha, here is the man himself, if Denith is the name you are looking for," Celor said as soon as he caught sight of Denith.

"Good afternoon, sirs," Denith said to the men.

"Sir Waverly, meet Woodsman Denith. Denith, this is Countsman Waverly."

"Countsman?" Denith answered. "I am sure I have heard that name before."

"I am the father of the children you have helped," Sir Waverly said, turning to face Denith. "If you are the man I seek, that is."

"Do you know anything about this, Denith?" Celor asked, narrowing his eyes in a suspecting glare.

Denith decided to speak confidently. "Yes, Sir Waverly. I was indeed there when your children fell ill, so I did what I could to help them. I hope they are doing well."

"Indeed they are, young man!" Sir Waverly replied, as Celor looked on curiously. "Better than ever, to hear them tell it."

"That is a relief," Denith said. "But tell me, how is it that you found me?"

"Why, Elisa told me. That girl hasn't been able to stop talking about you since the day you left. She gave me directions and everything. I'm not much of a traveling man, you know, but I had to find out for myself if what she told me was true."

*She followed us?* Denith thought to himself, and could hardly help but smile. *A resourceful little one, for sure!*

"Sir Waverly is mayor of the trading city to the east," Celor interjected. "He came to convey his gratitude."

“Mayor?” Denith asked. “I didn’t know those children were from such an honorable family.”

“I know,” the Countsman answered. “And because of that I doubly thank you. It says much for you that you helped them regardless of their seemingly low heritage.”

“Well, I’m glad to help anyone who is in need,” Denith shyly mumbled.

“Yes, I can see that. And I believe that I may be able to be of similar help to you.”

“What do you mean?” Denith and Celor asked in unison.

“I may not know much about what any of this is about,” the man answered. “But I cannot deny the testimony of my children. I have heard strange things that troubled me, about dark forces and the sinister powers that come with the Watchers—powers that you have evidently learned to defeat. My daughter is convinced that you are the Warrior with the Baron Sword—a rather ignoble figure that’s nevertheless become quite a legend among the Watchers and Traders of our town. But rather than believe that you are a danger, she says that you have come to help us, to free us from some sort of spell that these ‘dark forces’ have cast over our people.”

Celor looked at Denith and raised his eyebrows.

“She does get imaginative sometimes,” the Countsman continued with a slight chuckle, “but if it is true, and if you have come to stand against the Watchers and these forces, well, I want you to know that I stand ready to help you in any way that I can.”

Denith and Celor both remained speechless for some time, and the man suddenly let out a nervous cough and looked a little embarrassed. “Perhaps I have said too much,” he said. “Gentlemen, I apologize for taking your time, and shall be on my way.” The

man bowed slightly and turned for the door.

“No, wait!” Denith said. “We ... we can use help. What did you have in mind?”

The man stopped and turned around, and spoke more gravely. “I don’t know how much of the many things Elisa has said are true, but my eldest son affirmed her story that you had indeed helped my sons and other daughter recover. Naturally I was curious to find you, both to thank you, and to find out more certainly for myself what happened on that farm. In the meantime, I have discovered that you indeed carry a Baron sword, and what is more, that the people of this town stand together in their resistance to the rule of the Watchers. I have heard about the army you are trying to raise to protect yourselves from them.

“What I would propose is that we form an alliance between our cities. I would have to speak to our council about these matters, but if they are shown the truth, I don’t think they would hesitate to agree with me that such an arrangement could be beneficial for us all. We could send you men for training, to increase your numbers, and supply you with such goods and materials as you shall need to equip and arm your forces. And in exchange, we would ask to come under the protection of your Guard, and that you protect us from the Watchers when they come. They do not have a strong presence in this region, and I believe that by working together we would have the time we needed to formulate any necessary defenses for their eventual retaliation.”

Celor remained in his place, stumped. This was all happening much too fast for his liking. But Denith knew that this turn of events was no mere coincidence.

“It is a fair proposal,” Denith answered, assuming the role of a diplomat as easily as he could play the

warrior—or the Trader. “We shall consider it carefully. Remain with us for a day, until we have discussed the matter among our own council. I am sure they shall be most pleased to hear of it.”



It took some discussion and persuasion, but Denith soon convinced Celor, who in turn convinced the council, that if the existence of their internal forces had been so easily discovered by these townspeople, how much longer could it be before General Lancer himself learned of it? If they were going to stand up against Lancer and his dark forces at all, it would be more prudent to do what they could to openly arm and prepare themselves as much as possible, than to risk being discovered anyway, and attacked while their numbers were still weak.

So it was agreed, and the alliance was made, though its secret would not last long.



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**THE DUEL**

The increase in troops had allowed Celor's men to patrol a wider area. They established various outposts around and between Countsman Waverly's city and their own.

It was while on such a patrol that Kurt and Denith heard shouts of commotion coming from a nearby outlying settlement.

"What do you think is going on there?" Denith asked.

"I'm not sure," Kurt answered. "Probably some dispute over something."

"Should we go and look?" Denith asked.

"Maybe not," Kurt cautioned. "I don't think we should get involved."

"I don't want to get involved," Denith said somewhat indignantly. "All I'm saying is that perhaps we should *look*. You never know, we just might *learn* something here, like we did last time."

Kurt, though obviously very hesitant, had little choice but to follow Denith, who had already hopped off the cart on which they rode and set off toward the small group of houses.

The commotion came from a courtyard in their midst, where a small crowd had gathered. A young woman, who appeared to be with child, was

cowering in the middle. An older woman was standing defiantly beside her, apparently attempting to defend her from whatever she was being accused of.

Denith elbowed his way nearer to where he could hear and see all that was happening.

An angry man was standing with a whip in hand. "Get out of the way, Mother!"

"I will not move," the old lady said.

"Get out of the way. It is only right that she takes this punishment."

"Punishment for what?" the woman asked angrily. "You can't whip a woman who is with child."

"It is her just reward for carrying a child without a husband."

The older woman had no answer. The man continued, "She has shamed this house, and as such must be punished. And it is my duty to mete out the punishment. She is nothing but a whore—plain and simple."

"Please," the old woman implored. "You can't whip her. It could mean her death, and the child's."

The man was unmoved. "If that is what fate has decreed for her, then so be it! I took you both into my house out of the kindness of my heart, and I return to find that this is how you have repaid me. And seeing as no man has claimed responsibility for her and her state, and she refuses to speak, the punishment is hers to receive."

Kurt, who had by this time joined Denith where he stood, instinctively reached up and placed his hand around Denith's arm. "Denith, don't get involved," he whispered.

Denith shook his hand off and without hesitation stepped forward into the circle. Clearly and loudly, for all to hear, he stated, "My good sir, I will claim responsibility for the woman and the child she is carrying. I'm sorry I couldn't make it any

earlier.”

The man was stunned. “You are her husband?”

“No, sir. We are not married. I only said she and the child are my responsibility.”

A wave of murmurs swept over the bystanders.

“But if you are not her husband, and she is not wed, the child is a bastard, and the punishment is hers.”

“But I have said that I will take responsibility for the woman and her present state,” came Denith’s unflinching response.

“In that case, stranger,” the man said with some glee, “it is *yours* to take the punishment.”

“No, no!” the young woman cried out. “It’s not him, please.”

“Hush!” Denith commanded sternly, turning to the woman. “Be quiet, girl, if you know what is good for you!”

The girl’s mother looked confused.

“So then,” the man with the whip sneered, “you agree to take the whipping?”

Denith thought for a moment. “I would be willing to do so, but I am a man of honor, and noble standing. It should be more fitting for me to duel for the honor of this woman instead.”

“A duel?” the man said in surprise. He looked Denith up and down. “So you are a fighting man, then? I suppose a duel could be arranged, though I shall have to find you a worthy match.”

“Perfect,” Denith answered. “A duel it shall be.”

“To the death?” the man asked.

“I’m not sure that this case warrants a duel to the death,” Denith answered, “for I fully intend to restore her honor.” Denith looked at the girl and desperately hoped she would not utter anything. But both her and her mother realized that it was in their best interest to remain silent, and so they did.

"Let us say," Denith continued, "until the first sword is lost, or the first blood is drawn. He who loses shall then take the whipping, and so justice shall be served."

"But *she* is the one who deserves it!" someone cried out from the ring of people.

Denith spun around to address them all. "I am sure we have all done things which are worthy of a beating. I doubt that there is one among you who could say you have always taken for yourselves what punishment you deserved. So do not be too quick to judge this woman. Her faults may be more obvious, but I'll wager that most of you have deserved beatings that have never been given, so it should not be strange that another should take the beating for this woman."

With that, he turned and glared back at the man with the whip. "I shall return to this place this very evening to face whatever opponent you shall have for me."

"Very well," the man snickered. "But you had better be there, or this woman shall receive punishment enough for the both of you, and be none the better for it."

The woman glanced fearfully at Denith, who returned what he hoped was a reassuring look.



Kurt berated Denith all the way to the nearest inn. "You fool! What an utter, absolute fool. You're going to kill yourself over this woman."

"I'm not going to die," Denith reminded him. "You know I can exchange blows with the best of them. And at the worst, I shall sustain a nasty whipping at that man's hand, and I think I can endure that."

"But why?"

Denith looked at Kurt impatiently. "Because it is wholly unjust, and this girl should not be subjected to such a whipping herself, no matter

what she has done.”

“But you know nothing about her.”

“I know she is with child and that she looks sickly. The punishment would likely have killed either the child or both of them, and no matter what she has done, it could not be worthy of death.”

“Celor is not going to be happy when he hears of this,” Kurt said with a sigh.

“Well then, perhaps he shouldn’t hear!” Denith responded sternly. “I for one will not tell him.”

Kurt could see that he was not going to be able to dissuade Denith from what he considered sheer foolhardiness. “I wonder what sort of opponent he’ll be able to find for you?” Kurt finally wondered aloud.

“I have a feeling that man had someone in mind, or he wouldn’t have agreed to my terms as easily as he did.”



By evening, a sizeable crowd had gathered at the small settlement. The news had spread surprisingly quickly for a people who by nature were hardly concerned with the affairs of those around them.

Denith went over to the girl, who was standing off to one side. “You are well?”

“Yes.” She searched Denith’s eyes as if trying to discover why he was doing this for her.

He returned her gaze, for a moment lost in the frightened look of her eyes.

Gaining courage, she asked, “Why are you doing this for me? I...”

“You don’t deserve such treatment!” Denith was quick to respond. “I don’t know what happened, but I do know that it could not be worthy of death, which is what that man’s beating would surely mean for you.”

“He hates me!” the girl answered. “He made many advances towards me, but I refused to lie with him.”

I can't stand the man. When he found out I was with child by another man, he was filled with hatred and malice, and was determined to see that I was punished."

"Is it a child of love?" Denith asked gently.

"No, sir. I'm afraid it was nothing quite so honorable."

Denith sensed there was more behind what she was saying. He reached out and took her hand, holding it tenderly and gently. "Tell me, that I may know what it is I am defending."

A tear stole down the girl's face.

"Is it difficult for you?"

She looked up. "I was raped by the son of our landowner. The child I'm carrying is his."

A look of concern immediately fell across Denith's face. "Why did you not tell anyone this? Surely you would be exonerated."

"If I did, the son would vehemently deny it, and we would all be evicted from this house and have nowhere to go. I didn't know what to do." She began weeping. "I tried to hide myself for as long as I could, but eventually I was discovered, and people began to find out about the child."

"Does your mother know what happened?"

"No. I couldn't tell her. She would be too quick to rise up in my defense and say something that would get us in the kind of trouble I have tried to avoid."

"And this man—have you seen him since?"

"I would not wish it. He is a mean man, and strong. I feared what he would do to me if he found out about the child. But now he has."

"What do you mean?" Denith asked.

"It is he they have chosen as your opponent—and he is an accomplished warrior."

"And he has said nothing about the child?"

"No, he's too proud. His family's honor would be at stake. Besides, I would not accept his pity," she

said somewhat defiantly. "But he will be more than happy to vindicate himself at your expense."

"It may not be as easy as he might expect. I am somewhat of a warrior myself."

"I do not know why you would choose to fight for me, sir. But I am honored just the same. I ... I wish you the best."

At that moment a cheer went through the crowd. The opponent had arrived.

The crowd quickly cleared a circle, and the man with the whip stood in its center.

"This duel is for the honor of yonder maiden," he said mockingly, pointing his whip in the woman's direction. "Whoever shall be first to lose his sword, or to bleed, shall take the woman's whipping. The other may do with the woman as he pleases. Let the duel begin!"

As the man spoke, Denith looked over his opponent. The man's face was pale and colorless, and his armor was that of a Watcher—and from the looks of it, one of considerable rank. Several other Watchers, evidently in his charge, stood around, eager to enjoy the spectacle. Their presence made both Kurt and Denith a little nervous. They had tried to avoid the Watchers thus far, but there was no backing out of the duel now.

"So," the man taunted Denith, "you're the young upstart that seeks a duel. I wondered what type of fool it would be to seek humiliation in this way."

Denith did not respond.

"Tell me your name, boy," the dark warrior asked.

"A warrior," was all Denith said.

"Well, Warrior, I shall be pleased to watch you receive a good whipping for what you have done to this girl."

Denith looked the man straight in his eye. "I believe it is another who deserves to be whipped this day." With that, he flung back his cloak, and

pulled out his sword from where it hung hidden behind his back.

The Watcher, who had kept his composure till now, suddenly faltered at the sight of the Baron Sword. It glinted in the sunlight with an unearthly glow, as if it knew it was about to be put to a noble cause. But not wishing to appear hesitant to fight—even against the near legendary figure of the Baron Sword—the dark Watcher drew his own sword, and the contest began.

The men parried for a while as they warmed up, both waiting for the other to start with any serious blows. After a short while, however, with the encouragement of the crowd ringing in their ears, they got down to business, and the clashing of swords began in earnest.

True to the girl's words, the man was an accomplished swordsman. But Denith had faced greater challenges than this one, and come out on top. His speed and agility, and the precision with which the sword almost seemed to move of its own accord, soon yielded him the upper hand, and shortly after, the man was swordless, pinned to the ground under Denith's sword.

"Kill me!" the dark warrior commanded.

"Oh no," Denith answered. "That's not what we agreed. Our contest was to determine who would receive the whipping for the girl's impropriety—if indeed it was hers!" Then, lowering his voice to a whisper in the man's ear, he continued, "It's odd, isn't it, how the things we do invariably catch up with us? In the end, even by the path of mercy, justice shall be served."

Denith's sword rang out crisply as he sheathed it with a flourish. "Get up," he commanded the man.

The man quickly stood up.

"You shall take your punishment as a warrior should."



Denith then turned to the girl's accuser, who was standing nearby with a long whip ready in his hand.

"Pray, give me the honor of administering the whipping," Denith commanded.

Surprised whispers ran throughout the gathered crowd. That had not been part of the agreement.

But Denith's indignation had been fully awakened, and he insisted, "I could have killed him. Instead I shall whip him. Give me the whip."

The man with the whip hesitated and looked at his champion, who was standing shamefaced in the midst of the circle. The Watcher knew there was no way he could escape the punishment without losing his honor. "Give him the whip," he commanded.

The man with the whip looked hesitantly at Denith, and then at the Watcher. Then he walked over and handed Denith the whip.

The Watcher took off his armored jacket and his shirt, and then turned and curled his arms around a nearby fence, bracing himself for what was to follow.

Denith lifted the whip high, and then brought it down sharply upon the man's back again and again. Between lashes he formed the sentence, "Remember this, dark one: If you are man enough to taint another's honor, you should be man enough to bear the consequences."

When the beating was finished, Denith handed the whip back to the girl's accuser. Without another word to the crowd, he walked over to the young woman.

"We should be going."

The girl looked up at him, puzzled.

"I'm taking you back with me. I said I would take care of you and claim responsibility for you."

"Yes, but you don't..."

He leaned over and whispered loudly enough

that her mother, who was standing beside her, could also hear, "I don't think it is safe for you to stay here any longer. You'll be safe with us. We'll find a place for you, your mother, and the baby."

"Oh, sir!" the girl's mother dropped to her knees in gratefulness. "You don't need to do this."

"I know I don't *need* to, but I want to. Please let me."

The crowd parted to allow Denith, followed by the young girl and her mother, to walk calmly through. Denith did not look to one side or the other. Kurt followed in the trail that was left. No one uttered a word.

As they reached the cart, the whipped Watcher called out to Denith, "Where are you taking them?"

"Far away from the reputation which you have by your deeds destroyed, I can assure you of that!" was Denith's only answer.

Several whispered murmurs arose from the other onlookers.

With that, Kurt and Denith helped the women onto the cart, and rode off, hoping that once they had found a new home where these women could settle, it would be the end of the matter.

But for the dishonored Watcher it had just begun. He had met the Warrior with the Baron sword, and lived to tell of it—and in that one encounter had discovered both his strength in fighting, and his weakness of compassion for those who could not fight for themselves. Surely there was a reward to be had here.

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**ATTACKED**

“A messenger is here, my lord, with a report from Colonel Santhor in the Borderlands,” a servant announced as General Lancer was dining. “He says it is urgent. Shall I bid him wait, or show him in?”

“From Colonel Santhor, you say?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“It’s about time. Show him in—at once!”

The man that entered looked like he had ridden through much of the night. He faltered for a moment at the sight of the luxurious spread on the table before him, and then gave a short bow.

“Well, on with it, then!” Lancer growled.

“Uh, yes, Lord General,” the man stammered, then cleared his throat. “To his Lord the General, a report from the Plains, as entrusted to my hand and knowledge by—”

“Yes, yes—skip to the report,” Lancer ordered.

“Uh, certainly, Lord General,” the man stammered again. “Your most excellent servant, Colonel Santhor, has discovered the whereabouts of the man with the Baron sword. He is a local troublemaker who has built a legend around himself in towns and settlements bordering the Dark Forest. He is in league with a larger group of warriors who have hidden themselves within an alliance of two

cities, to which our men have been unable to gain access. Your caretakers over these cities have been executed for treason, it having been discovered that they were secretly accepting payments from these cities without reporting them to your lordship.

"The cities are not fortified, but the number of their fighters is great. They have used their show of force to keep our men from entering their cities, and they have managed to spot our men even when they were disguised. Colonel Santhor is confident that your excellent lordship would want these insurgents subdued, and is making preparations for a full-scale attack to draw out and defeat the warriors who hold these cities hostage from your benevolent protection.

"He knows that you will be pleased to send him reinforcements to this end, and gives his assurance that once the reinforcements arrive, these cities shall be brought into proper subjection to your lordship's rule. Until then, they are being watched closely. That is the sum of his message."

Lancer remained silent after the messenger had finished parroting his delivery.

"Reinforcements, reinforcements," Lancer muttered at length. "That's the bottom line. They always want reinforcements, as if my troops grow on trees around here." He stood up and paced around the room. "Very well. Colonel Santhor left with a full contingent of men. Tell him I shall send over one more. And if this is not sufficient, then he does not deserve his title of Colonel. And I shall be counting on him to take care of this matter swiftly and effectively. That is the sum of my reply."

"Very well, my lord," the messenger said. With another lingering look at the table before him, and a short bow, the man turned to leave.

"It will not be sufficient, and Santhor does not deserve the title," a strange but familiar voice

whispered in his ear once the messenger had left.

Lancer jumped up and twirled around to see the short, white-cloaked stranger standing behind his chair.

“Ah, the mysterious little coward has returned!” Lancer said with a smug smile, his hand moving to the hilt of his sword. But then remembering that it had done him little good last time, he moved to cross his arms instead.

“You shall yet learn to appreciate my presence,” the stranger replied.

“Have you come to warn me again about the strange, mythological powers endangering my lands?”

“And would you believe it, even if I told you that this little insurgency is but the start of it?”

“If that’s the case, it shall be dealt with soon enough.”

“Colonel Santhor knows nothing of what he’s up against, and neither do you, for that matter. Your men shall be swiftly defeated.”

“And how can you be so certain?”

“Wait and see. Oh, they shall blame it on whatever they can, but they shall be defeated—and it shall happen again and again, until you realize that perhaps there might just be some truth to what I would tell you.”

“And what would you tell me?”

“You are not yet ready to hear it.”

“Ready to hear what?”

“You shall see...” With that, and right in front of Lancer’s eyes, the figure vanished. A strange glow lingered a few moments in his place, and then all returned to normal.

Lancer shook his head, a little troubled, and sat down to resume his meal. For a moment he wondered whether there might be something to what this strange figure had to say, but for now

there was nothing he could do about it, except to wait and see.



"News from the Drifters, General," a red-faced messenger exclaimed between panting breaths. "A great number of Lancer's men are marching on our cities from the west. They are but five hours off, and great in number."

"So it begins," Celor responded, rising wearily from his chair. "Now we shall discover what all this preparation has achieved. Let us hope it has been worth it."

The news spread quickly, and soon the commanders and their captains and warriors had gathered outside the main city, and began the march towards the oncoming soldiers, to place the field of combat as far from the towns themselves as possible. Small contingents of men were left to guard each city, where those of the adjoining settlements had gathered for protection. A number of Drifter warriors, who had somehow been summoned together quite quickly as well, joined loosely with each group.

It was not long before the two armies came in sight of each other. The commanders, at Celor's signal, ordered their men into a wide formation, creating an arched wall of guards that stood resolutely between their homes and the approaching attackers.

The column of Lancer's men, however, remained unbroken, and continued its steady march forward—directly towards the line of waiting guards. They were obviously not put off by this show of resistance, and did not show any intention of interrupting or even diverting their approach.

The guards, among whom stood Denith and Kurt, watched anxiously as both sides wondered who would be first to sound the command to charge.

But all they heard was the rhythmic thump of the oncoming column of stuporous soldiers. All else was bathed in an eerie silence.

Finally Celor had enough of this strange spectacle, and shouted out the fateful command: "Charge!"

At that, a roar arose from the wall of guards, who all charged forward, ramming into the front and sides of the approaching column with what little momentum they had gathered, inflicting heavy casualties among the first unprepared Watchers to feel their swords. The column quickly dissipated, only to encircle the wall of guards that had surrounded their vanguard.

The guards suddenly found themselves fighting on both sides. Although they suffered their own casualties, they were quick to notice that they were inflicting much heavier damage on their opponents, who did not appear to be nearly as skilled nor disciplined. And while the guards fought with all that was within them, their attackers seemed to relish throwing themselves to their death at the hand of the guards.

The guards took heart, encouraged by their quick success, and the fact that they were standing up so well in their first true battle. They pressed home their advantage and it was not long before the small remaining number of Watchers began to flee the battlefield in defeat. The battle was over.

With the threat averted, at least for the moment, the guards then took to the gruesome task of collecting and burying the dead that had been left behind. The enthusiasm of their first victory quickly faded as they labored over the dead and dying of both camps. To look into the pale faces and lifeless eyes of the men of the dark forces was like staring into pits of blackness, and it was hard to imagine that these creatures had ever had any life in them

at all. Even those without fatal wounds seemed to have succumbed to quick deaths, almost as if being dead was their natural state. Denith shuddered as he wiped his trusty Baron sword and sheathed it again. He had never lingered over the dead before, and certainly not any as dead as these.

After their gruesome task was completed, the guards headed back to their cities and homes—and the Drifters to wherever they had appeared from—in a triumphant but somber mood. They had relished the taste of victory, but knew that it was only one battle against an ignoble enemy, and that there would be many more battles to follow.



As Denith and Kurt approached their regiment's camp, they noticed a commotion near Sir Albert's tent. They quickly made their way over to find out what was happening, and found Sir Albert trying to placate an agitated elderly man.

"But aren't you the Warrior Guard?" the man was saying. He sounded tired and desperate. "There must be something you can do."

"I am truly sorry, my friend," Sir Albert responded, "but my men are tired. We have just returned from battle, there are wounded to be taken care of, and quite frankly I'm afraid the place you speak of is just too far of a march away from here. These men are in no condition to venture that far right now."

"But you don't understand!" the man persisted. "You are our only hope. They are destroying us."

"I'm sorry, but I find it hard to believe the Drifters would be involved in such a thing," Sir Albert said.

"I saw it with my own eyes, I tell you!" the man answered. "It was a whole tribe of them. They just rode into the village and started killing everybody, burning our houses. Nobody was prepared. They killed most of the menfolk, and took our women and



children captive. And the Watchers were nowhere to be seen. I am one of the few who escaped, and when I heard about your Warrior Guard, I knew you would be able to help.”

“The Drifters did this?” Denith asked, stepping into the conversation.

“Yes, I tell you!” the man said, turning to Denith. “I saw them myself!”

“And where did this happen, you say?”

“In a village west of here,” Sir Albert answered in the man’s stead, “but beyond the regions with which we are familiar.”

“I have traveled many regions before joining this Guard,” Denith answered. “Perhaps I know of it.”

“Perhaps,” Sir Albert answered, “but that does not change the fact that we cannot spare our men on such a distant venture. They just don’t have the strength.”

Denith came closer to Sir Albert, and whispered, “I don’t know what this is all about, but I know that the Drifters would never have done anything like this. I suspect this is the work of Lancer’s men, and if it is, and there is any truth to what this man says about prisoners, we have to do something.”

Sir Albert groaned inwardly at the thought. “As much as I would like to march on Lancer’s city itself, we cannot be everywhere at once, Denith. We have a responsibility to protect our own homes and the people who have come to depend upon our presence. Or else if we leave, and these cities are attacked again in our absence, all we have fought for today will have been in vain.”

Denith hung his head, realizing that Sir Albert spoke the truth.

The old man, however, had been encouraged by Denith’s show of concern. The commander was obviously not going to be much of a help, but maybe this warrior could do something—anything!

"Please!" the villager implored, reaching out and clasping both of Denith's hands in his, "Please! You have to help us! Think of those women and children. It could be your own mother and brothers and sisters. And they're going to be sold to Traders in distant places and never see their homes again!"

"We can't let them do that!" Denith said, trying to sound reassuring. He turned to Sir Albert again, to plead the man's case.

But before Denith had uttered a word, Sir Albert vigorously shook his head. "No, Denith! I understand that you feel sorry for these people, but there is little we can do. It would be foolhardy to go into another battle with our men, as tired and spent as they are—especially if it entails a long march."

The group of men grew silent for a moment at these words—a silence which Denith used to desperately seek the presence of the Whisperers as to what to do about this situation.

Sir Albert, taking the silence to mean that he had successfully made his point, was the first to speak again. "I'm sorry. I wish there was something we could do. You know that I too am desperately concerned for the plight of the common folk—that's why I'm here."

But Denith was ready. "You are right! And it cannot be easy to be accountable for the welfare of so many. Yet you are committed to your responsibilities, and it is easy to see that you have well earned of the title of commander, and the confidence that Celor has placed in you."

Sir Albert looked a little surprised and greatly pleased at Denith's words.

"So, knowing these towns are in your capable hands, I would like to offer a suggestion."

The commander winced, bracing himself for what was sure to come. He should have known better than to think Denith had been so easily convinced

not to pursue the matter.

“Very well, young Denith, what is your plan?” he asked with a reluctant sigh.

“I propose, sir, that we send out a smaller team of men to this region for, shall we say, a scouting mission. Now that we know that Lancer’s forces will be actively seeking to come against us, any insight we can gain into their strategies, numbers, and weaponry would only give us further advantage in our combat against them. And if by chance we come across the prisoners this man speaks of, well, then we could see what we could do for them.”

“Your plan makes very little sense to me,” Sir Albert responded. “The first patrol of Lancer’s men to spot you...”

“I have thought of that, sir,” Denith responded before Sir Albert finished his sentence. “We would not travel openly, or in uniform. We would disguise ourselves as Drifters.”

“We? Am I to assume that you intend to lead this mission?” Sir Albert asked sternly.

“Indeed, sir,” Denith said. “And I believe, with your permission, that General Celor would grant me leave to do so. Besides, today’s battle has only heightened my desire for more, not lessened it. I’m thirsting for the chance to discover what sort of rogues Lancer chooses to work with!”

“Very well,” Sir Albert finally answered, to the great delight of the elderly man who was still standing by. “But,” he warned, “you may only take such men as would volunteer for the mission ... and no more than ten of them, or the general will not be pleased that I have approved such a mission. And there is to be no cajoling, no promises of great adventure, no overpersuading for the purpose of recruiting them.”

“Ten men,” Kurt echoed. “I wonder if we’ll even be able to get *that* many.”

Though Denith had bravely proclaimed his intentions, Kurt knew that Sir Albert was right when he had said that the men were tired and in much need of rest after this trying first day of battle.

After a few moments of thought, Denith accepted the terms. Sir Albert was surprised that Denith hadn't tried to bargain for more.

"Ten men it shall be," Sir Albert affirmed. "If you can find them, that is."

"Thank you! Thank you!" The old man, who had remained silent throughout the debate, now profusely thanked Denith, Sir Albert, Kurt, and anyone else near enough to hear him.

Denith put his arm around the man. "I'm not promising that we will succeed, but we will do our best."

"And for that I am most grateful," the villager said. "Please, sir, if I may know—what is your name?"

"Denith."

"Thank you, Sir Denith, thank you!"

At that, Sir Albert looked up with a curious smirk at Denith, whose rank had not yet earned him the title of "sir." Denith blushed a little at the man's praise, until Kurt came to the rescue and gently led the man away.

"Well, *Sir Denith*," Sir Albert began, with a tone of mock subservience in his voice, "who will ask our men? You, or me?"

"Perhaps the request would be more appropriate if it came from you, sir," Denith said with a cheeky smile, "because I might get swept away with my own excitement, and indeed begin cajoling them with overpersuasion."

Sir Albert laughed. "At least you're honest. Very well then."

Sir Albert's men were gathered together. Already the news of the discussion had begun circulating

through the camp, and the men curiously braced themselves for Sir Albert's words. One never knew what to expect when Denith got involved with something.

Without a lot of fanfare, Sir Albert briefly filled the men in on what they knew, and told them of Denith's suggested scouting mission. Several of the soldiers groaned audibly when they heard this, while others secretly hoped they would be assigned to accompany Denith on this uncertain venture. But Sir Albert made it very clear that this was a voluntary mission, and that none of the soldiers would be looked on any less—and if anything, perhaps only for being the wiser—for choosing to remain at his current post.

“And so, do we have any volunteers?”

To Denith's delight, Kurt was the first to raise his hand. Moments later, to Sir Albert's surprise, as many as fifteen eager hands were raised. Sir Albert nodded to Denith to proceed with determining his selection.

Denith could not suppress his delight any longer. He fairly leapt forward. “Wonderful! Perfect!” he said. “Actually, I am not allowed to take more than ten of you. And since we will be traveling in disguise, as Drifters, I'm afraid I shall have to limit my selection to those with darker skin.”

In the end, Denith found himself with a group of seven volunteers, including Kurt. Then Sir Albert called both Kurt and Denith into his tent for a last word.

“Well, I don't know how I will tell Celor about all this, and what you are up to. But take care!” He turned to Kurt. “And make sure he doesn't do anything too risky. Keep him out of trouble, if that is at all possible.”

“Yes sir!” Kurt responded sternly.

Denith glanced sidelong at Kurt who, standing

at attention, pretended not to notice.

Sir Albert was not at all reassured by Kurt's reply, and a fleeting thought told him that Kurt's strong and confident manner was merely a charade. He shook his head and swung his hand in a casual salute of dismissal.

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**THE RUSE**

After several days, the scouting party arrived at the edge of a forest, where they set up camp for the night and were soon fast asleep. They did not know exactly where they were, as the old man was too weak to accompany them on their journey.

He had drawn them what he insisted was a reliable map to guide them, but when several landmarks were never spotted, they could only continue heading roughly west, hoping that sooner or later they would stumble across something that would lend them a clue as to where the man's ruined village was—and where the prisoners may have been taken.

Denith was suddenly awoken by the sound of a dull thud near to where he slept. Even though the sky was dark and the thin cloud cover let what little silver moonlight there was into the camp, it did not take long for Denith to see that there was a struggle going on. The other men were also quick to awake at the sound of struggle. Someone lit a torch. They looked in horror at the sight that met their eyes.

Two Toilers had pounced on one of the men who had fallen asleep a short distance from the others. He was obviously dead, and the sharp claws of these Toilers were now in the process of removing

his vestures and tearing at his body. The soldiers quickly came to their senses. The Toilers—scavengers and dull-witted creatures that they were—were apprehended before they could get any further. But for that one soldier, help had come too late. His lifeless body lay half-naked and bleeding on the ground.

It was hard for the soldiers to keep their hold on the Toilers. Their stench was great even from a distance, and for the circle of men that surrounded these creatures with drawn swords it was all they could do to keep from turning and running the other way. But they were incensed at the audacity of these creatures to attack one of their men in such an ignominious way.

The creatures cowered and slobbered as they tried to disappear into the hoods that were cast over their hairy, swine-like heads. They were whimpering with fright. It was hard to imagine that they possessed any will or intelligence to do what they had just done.

“Don’t kill them!” Denith commanded. “Not yet.”

More torches were now lit, and the beastly Toilers recoiled in even greater fear and horror.

“We should have thought to keep a fire lit,” Kurt said.

“Yes,” Denith agreed, “but I didn’t expect to find Toilers this far from the Dark Forest.”

“You know about these creatures?” Kurt asked.

“More than I want to,” Denith said somberly, “although this is the first time I’ve seen one this close.”

One of the short, cloaked creatures appeared more masculine than the other—if this species allowed for such distinctions. Both of them were despicable in their manner—groveling, sniveling, drooling. And yet these cowering creatures had been capable of the most calculated cruelties, with



no conscience or remorse for what they were or what they did.

As they huddled in fear of the ring of torches that now surrounded them, they could sense that Denith had an inner power. Soon they began bowing and groveling in front of him, almost as if they were pleading for mercy. The sight was utterly appalling. Denith could feel their filthiness of being within him, as if their minds were somehow linked to his own. To see them groveling and begging for mercy after having just murdered one of his men only made Denith detest them the more. Still, he kept his composure, knowing they had obviously sensed some form of authority in him, and he desperately wanted to retain it.

He motioned for them to stand up. They did so reluctantly, looking at each other shiftily as they stood. They continued with their slobbering and dribbling, moaning what he supposed were their excuses, but which came out as unintelligible gibber.

Then Denith noted the large sacks strapped to their backs. He motioned for them to unloose them and spread out their contents. The Toilers acted as though they did not understand what he was saying. Denith drew his sword and took a menacing step closer to them. They recoiled in fright and quickly took their sacks and emptied the contents on the ground in front of him.

Denith turned his face in disgust. This guard was obviously not their first victim of the evening. The revolted look on their attackers' faces elicited gleeful grins from the short, dark creatures. It was all Denith could do to keep his composure, and it took the greatest effort he could muster to keep the revulsion he felt inside from swelling up and spilling out.

"Denith, look," Kurt said, pointing towards the

remains strewn across the floor.

"I've seen it," Denith replied with disgust.

"No, look again," Kurt said. "The fetters and chains—there!" Kurt pointed to the spot. "They look as though they could have come from captured villagers."

"So these Toilers know where they are!" Denith realized, as a sickening wave of realization washed over him.

Denith stepped up to the larger of the two Toilers, and pointed to the chains.

"Where?" he said aloud, and then repeated the word again. "Where?"

It was hard to tell whether the Toilers could understand him or not. The only acknowledgment that they gave at all was that their fearful sniveling and whining grew louder when Denith raised his voice.

A strange thought suddenly came to Denith, and he recognized it was the whispers. *Speak to them as you speak to us!*

Denith argued with them inwardly. *What do you mean?*

*Think to them, came the reply. Like you do with us. They cannot ignore it. They are subservient to any power that is greater than theirs, whether of the netherworld, or of ours. They can feel such power in you. Use it. Speak to them.*

Though doubtful at first, Denith soon did as he had been instructed. He mentally repeated his question, looking into the Toiler's eyes. *Where? How did you find these people? Where are these chains from?*

Instantly the manner of these Toilers changed. Their façade of fear and shame dropped, and while they looked momentarily stunned, a sly look soon came to the face of the more masculine creature.

"So, you speak our language. This does not scare

us. We can speak yours. But that is still no reason for us to tell you anything," the creature answered in a low and guttural voice that all could hear.

The men were at once surprised and nauseated—surprised that the creature could speak at all, and nauseated by the even greater stench that escaped its mouth when it did.

"Then I shall give you a reason," Denith sternly responded. "If you don't tell us what we want to know, we shall kill you as you seem to delight killing your victims. But we shall do it as painfully and as slowly as we can."

The Toilers whimpered at the thought.

"Now tell me! I command you! Where did you find these villagers imprisoned and bound with chains?"

It was not long before Denith had learned all he needed from these creatures. They spoke of a camp of Watchers on the other side of this very forest, where prisoners were being kept. They emphatically added that they had not killed any prisoners themselves, but had been given the bodies of those who were already dead. But Denith knew their thoughts were far from innocent, though he also knew they spoke the truth. The vileness of their being disgusted him.

When he was satisfied that he'd learned all they needed from these creatures, he turned away.

"What should we do with them?" Kurt asked.

"Kill them," Denith ordered, without a backward glance.



Once the deadly deed was done, the guards gathered to counsel about their next move. After some debate they agreed to make their move right away, knowing that they would be better hidden from any sentries if they proceeded in the dark, using only the light of the moon to illumine their way. The moon hung low in the sky by the time

they came to the other side of the forest, where the camp was clearly visible. It was decided that Kurt and Denith would try to sneak closer to the camp. The others would remain hidden for the moment.

Once closer, Kurt and Denith were able to better survey the scene in front of them. The camp lay between a lightly wooded part of the forest's edge, a short distance away, and what appeared to be a road of some sort. The prisoners were grouped together in a stockade built partly into the forest. Most of them appeared to be asleep, though Denith and Kurt noticed a few people walking about. The stockade did not appear to be heavily guarded.

Kurt observed several crude wagons standing nearby—and surmised that they were most likely the vehicles that had brought the prisoners here. The two watched in silence for a good while, hoping to glean as much information as they could concerning this camp, and how many men manned it.

They watched closely as a horseman rode up. Though they strained to make out the conversation, neither could catch more than a few stray words that were exchanged between the horseman and a couple of other Watchers that he met with.

They also noted a middle-aged woman roaming around the camp. Although a commoner, she didn't appear to be one of the prisoners, as she was able to freely roam around the camp. But it was also obvious from her shackled feet that she was not entirely free.

“Stay here and keep an eye on me,” Denith instructed Kurt. “I'm going to try and get closer to that woman.”

Kurt nodded, and Denith set off, creeping as softly as he could. This woman most likely possessed a good deal of information on this camp and its prisoners, and if Denith could get close

enough to get her attention without startling her, perhaps he could learn something that would be of help in planning a rescue mission.

The woman was making her way over to the stockade. Denith drew closer to it himself. He could see the frail figures of women and children huddled close to each other within it, trying to use every inch of warmth from the rags that covered their sleeping forms.

He could see several other women prisoners seated together and talking with one another, perhaps keeping a friendly watch of their own over their friends and neighbors in the presence of their captors. The group was soon joined by the woman Denith had taken note of.

"I don't know if it's any use to tell you this," she confided to the women, "since it seems there's little you can do about it."

"And what is that?" a villager asked, when the woman hesitated a little too long.

"I don't think they..." She faltered, and then continued. "It looks like they are done with you."

"They're letting us go?" another woman asked hopefully.

"No. They're not planning to let you go, but they will be leaving, and they won't be taking you with them. They..." The woman stopped talking.

"When? How long do we have?" the stricken voice asked.

Denith heard a gruff man's voice call out, "Hey, wench! What are you doing there? Give them their water and get back over here!"

She quickly emptied the pail of water into a basin, but as she did she whispered loud enough for the villagers and Denith to hear, "Till the morning—then they're going to move out."

*The morning?* Denith thought with alarm.

He stealthily made his way back to Kurt, and

motioned Kurt to follow him back to the other men.

Once they were all together, Denith updated the men on all that he had seen and heard.

"I'm not sure what to make of it, but it sounded like Lancer's men are planning on killing the prisoners in the morning, before they uproot the place and leave. I suppose they don't want word of the truth of this to leak out to any other villages. Our reconnaissance mission may have to turn into a rescue mission after all," Denith concluded.

"That will be difficult," Kurt said. "I counted at least eighty soldiers within that camp. Trying to move out so many women and crying children—we wouldn't stand a chance!"

"At least not without a very good plan," Denith answered.

"It would have to be a *very* good plan," Kurt said in an unbelieving tone.

Denith sat silently for a good while, looking off into the distance. It appeared as if he was thinking, but inwardly he was again seeking for the whispers to know what to do. At last he returned his attention to the men. "I have an idea. It's somewhat unconventional."

The soldiers exchanged dubious glances.

"But I think it stands a good chance of working. We obviously don't have the numbers to take on the enemy man to man, even if we are superior fighters. We are on unfamiliar territory, which stands against us as well. So we have to find some way to even the odds a bit."

The men nodded; that much was obvious. Then Denith changed the subject totally. "Remember how those Toilers at first just whimpered and groveled, but then suddenly began speaking?"

"I do," Kurt said. "I wondered what had come over them to change so suddenly."

"It was because I spoke with them."

"I seem to recall that it was they who spoke first," another soldier chimed in.

"Yes, they did. Only it was after I discovered that I could communicate with their thoughts. I commanded them inwardly, and had power over them, and they had to submit to my will, to my thoughts."

The men looked at each other with a mixture of puzzlement and disbelief.

"So what are you saying?" Kurt asked. He was a little more familiar with Denith's knowledge and understanding of such strange forces.

"Something tells me there are more of these Toilers around here than just those two that came upon us," Denith continued.

"And?" Kurt asked, still not understanding where Denith was leading with all this talk of Toilers.

"So, rather than us fight these men, why don't we round ourselves up a horde of these creatures and force them to march in there for us. If we can't get them to fight for us, at least they would create a big enough diversion to allow us to hitch some horses to those wagons, load up the prisoners, and spirit them away to safety."

"That's the most far-fetched plan I think I've ever heard," Kurt replied, "even from *you*, Denith."

"How would that ever work?" another man asked skeptically.

"Lancer's men are obviously aware that there are Toilers in the area if they've already given them some of their prisoners. If we were to assemble a large enough horde of these Toilers, we could hide in the middle of them and approach the camp undetected. There are no rings of torches around this camp, so they are obviously not very concerned with keeping the Toilers at bay. In fact, they are probably quite used to the presence of Toilers, so it would be an excellent ruse."

“So you’re planning to gather yourself a full horde of Toilers, and keep them at bay by thinking to them with some powers you say you have?” the man asked again.

“I do remember those other Toilers were practically groveling at your feet,” Kurt remarked knowingly. “It just might work.”

The men looked at each other. If this could work, it was a good plan, and there wasn’t really any other alternative.

They made their way back into the forest to search for the first Toilers they could find. Once they came across a few, they hoped they could be led to more. After some time they began to smell an unmistakable odor, the telltale sign that they were in close proximity to the Toilers.

As much as they despised it, they followed the scent as it became stronger. The men tied kerchiefs over their faces to try and keep the stench from stinging their mouths and noses. Still they pressed on, and still the stench became stronger and more pervasive. Finally, it was so dense that most of the men began having difficulty breathing. Denith decided to stop. The Toilers were obviously here. They just had to find a way to get them out in the open.

The foliage around them was so dark it almost appeared black. The moon had by now set, and because they did not want to light any torches to scare off the Toilers, the guards stood in complete darkness. Twisted and gnarled trunks jutted out from all sides, making this night-infested forest as eerie as the Dark Forest could have ever been. They wondered how they would even see any movement if it did come.

“How are we to find them?” one of the men asked nervously, looking around as he spoke.

Denith motioned to the men to remain quiet.



"We'll wait," he said. "We won't have to find them. They'll find us."

He was right. Only moments after they had stopped moving, the foliage around them grew alive with movement—shuffling steps, snapping twigs, rustling leaves, and whispered chatter—until the warriors found themselves encircled by a ring of Toilers. Dark, glowing eyes peered out of deep hoods all around them, and they could sense the probing claws grasping in their direction as the circle of creatures drew ever closer, making no secret of their intentions to overpower their outnumbered prey.

Denith shuddered. He realized that whatever he was going to do, he would have to do it quickly. With one smooth movement he unsheathed his sword, holding it out menacingly in front of him. It glowed in the darkness much as the keys often did, though Denith did not stop to question why. There was no time. At the sight of the glowing object, the Toilers all took a fearful step backward, and Denith knew he had to seize the moment to take command.

*I command you creatures of darkness to stop!*

At once all movement around them ceased, and the Toilers grew silent. His message was getting through.

*You are not to advance upon us, and you shall do us no harm! If you do, the fury of the power of light shall envelop you and strip you of your dark coverings.*

A shudder swept through the group of Toilers. The men who stood with Denith watched the silent spectacle with awe.

Denith continued his silent instructions. *You are now under my power, and though I take no more pleasure in leading you than you will in following me, you have no choice but to do so. I have no fear of you. I am barely able to contain my revulsion for you*

*and all you stand for.*

Denith suddenly sensed that his message was reaching more Toilers than the group that was visible around them.

*Come out, all you of the netherworld, from your hiding places. Show yourselves, that I may take command of your despicable numbers.*

Suddenly the whole forest around them became alive—creeping, moving, shimmering with a black shine, as the Toilers crawled out from under branches, and behind the tree trunks, from under boulders. From every place where anything could be hidden, they appeared.

*You will come with us, Denith commanded them. You will not harm anyone without my word. You will do as I say. We are going to the soldier's camp.* Denith flashed images of the exact location they were bound for.

The Toilers began grunting excitedly. They knew the place well.

Kurt and the other men became a little nervous as the hungry and grunting Toilers shuffled excitedly around them. They had not heard any of Denith's instructions to these creatures, and wondered what was going on.

"It's all right," Denith quickly assured them. "Gather together. We're heading to the camp. Once we break out of the forest, stay low among them, and keep silent. We can't let Lancer's men suspect anything until it's too late for them to do anything about it."

If the stench had been unbearable before, it was beyond unbearable now. As the guards looked around, they realized they were totally surrounded by the dark creatures, so that even if they had wished to break free from the group, they would have been unable to. But they somehow felt safer sticking close to Denith, and the little circle they

found themselves in seemed to bring with it a protective shielding from these vicious creatures. And so, unbearable as it was, they continued along in the midst of the Toiler horde, whose total number they could only guess at.

Despite the size of the group of Toilers, they moved along silently and quickly. Denith and his men almost had to run to keep up with them, and to keep from being trampled by those who followed just as quickly and closely behind them.

As the whispers had told him, Denith found these Toilers to indeed be rather dimwitted creatures. They yielded themselves to any power that was greater than their own, whether for good or evil. And though their natural propensity tended towards evil and dark deeds, they now found themselves being helplessly used for a more noble purpose—though they themselves would never comprehend it. They would simply do as they were commanded. They had to.

From time to time as they traveled, Denith thought he caught sight of still others traveling with them, a hazy, ephemeral cloud of helpers drifting alongside them, on the outskirts of the small band of men, and above the horde of Toilers around them. He smiled, realizing that Faéthé and her other-worldly helpers were also doing their part in keeping the Toilers subdued.

The Toilers also sensed the presence of these invisible beings, which only added to the fearfulness of their already nervous behavior. Dawn would soon be approaching—and Toilers did not like to show themselves in open daylight. They did not have much time to do what they were going to do.



The prisoners as well as their Watchers shifted uneasily as they recognized the nearing presence of the Toilers.

"The stench—it's strong. There must be a lot of them," one of the soldiers commented.

"They're probably all around us," another answered.

There was uneasiness in the voice of the first soldier. "I don't think I've ever smelt the presence of this many!" he murmured. "I don't like it."

"Is something amiss?" the Watcher in charge asked, walking over to investigate the smell himself.

"It's the Toilers, sir," the first soldier responded. "Perhaps because they had success in their mission last night, they've come in the hopes of getting more victims."

"Well, well—how convenient," the officer replied with a pleased look on his face. "We may get a little fun out of this mission after all."

The guards looked at him curiously, not quite understanding what he meant.

"Let's give these Toilers what they're looking for," he continued, nodding towards the prisoners. "They will do an excellent job of finishing off the prisoners for us."

"Finishing them off, sir?" one of the men responded.

"You didn't think we could send them back to their villages when this was all done, did you? We have just received word that Colonel Santhor has discovered the stronghold of this Baron Sword, and he is calling all Watchers to regroup in the upper hills of the Edges in preparation for the next attack. The glory of catching him in our trap has for the moment passed us by, though I may yet get my revenge for that whipping. But Santhor may not be too pleased if he learns of what we have done here. No, I say we let the Toilers get rid of the evidence for us."

"I don't know," the second soldier said cautiously. "How do we know they'll stop at the prisoners? Once

they get worked up into a frenzy, they may turn on us next.”

“Nonsense,” the officer responded. “All we have to do is build a firewall around ourselves. Gather all the hay and wood you can find. Then they won’t dare get near us—and we’ll get front seats to this unforgettable spectacle.” The officer’s laugh made even his own men cringe.



From the slight incline he stood on, Denith looked down at the scene before them, wondering just how Lancer’s men would react to a horde of approaching Toilers. So far it had worked out better than he’d hoped. He could see the guards withdrawing from the prisoners, and torches being brought out from the main camp. A whole line of small fires and torches soon encircled the soldiers and separated them from the enclosure that held their helpless captives.

Denith shuddered with revulsion as he realized the fate these men were intending to leave their prisoners to. *Nevertheless*, Denith thought, *it’s the perfect opportunity for us to move in.*

The shivering, fearful group of prisoners were now completely unprotected, dreading the approach of the Toilers.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Kurt whispered to Denith.

“So do I!” Denith responded, and gave the order for the Toilers to advance.

One at a time, the Toilers made their presence known around the stockade, which was by this time completely encircled. Shrieks of fear went up as more and more of the creatures became visible to the prisoners, serving only to add to the confusion that began to engulf the camp. Even Lancer’s men were feeling very nervous.

Denith, in the meantime, was busy issuing his

orders to the Toiler horde. They were to form a thick wall between the stockade and the watching soldiers, making it impossible for them to see what was happening inside.

Once the Toilers were in place, Denith's men made their way to the wagons, and under the noise of the din around them, hitched up what horses they could find before moving the wagons towards the stockade.

The whole scene was one of carefully planned confusion. The Toilers ran back and forth amongst each other between Lancer's men and the prisoners. Their shrieking, hissing noises compounded the shouts and shrieks and crying of children that was coming from the prisoners. But the soldiers, to their great disappointment, could not see a thing of what was happening.

As still more Toilers swooped down on the camp, rushing around and even crashing through the barriers of the stockade on their way to join the wall of their fellows, the frightened screams and wails of the women and children grew, and the soldiers were sure a great massacre was taking place. But the Toilers did not so much as touch the prisoners, though they were running in wild and frenzied patterns all around them. Denith's men, in the meantime, were trying to calm the very skittish horses enough for them to be tied to the waiting wagons.

Once this was done, and the men managed to direct the carts towards the remains of the stockade, the prisoners were quickly convinced to climb on the wagons for safety. Within minutes, the first cart was loaded up, and the prisoners on it marveled at the sight of the hedge of Toilers that were massed between them and their captors—and at the way to freedom that was open behind them.

As for the soldiers, although they knew the

Toilers would not pass through the fire, the madding horde of frenzied creatures right in front of them sent shivers down their spines, even while the first wagon rumbled unnoticed on its way to freedom.

Denith knew they did not have long to get the rest of the prisoners loaded up. The Toilers were getting worked up into a frenzy that threatened to soon get out of his control. He could sense his grip on their minds lessening by the moment as their inborn desire for carnage mounted.

As the frightened soldiers stoked up the circle of fires around them, Denith felt the fear and pandemonium on the part of the Toilers heighten. It was not long before the control he had been able to wield over them thus far would be broken, and they would start claiming whatever victims they could get their claws on.

As the remaining wagons were being loaded, Denith moved stealthily around the circle of Toilers, followed closely by Kurt, who stayed by his side. For the first time Denith realized just how great a horde he was commanding. The Toilers had now completely encircled the circle of fire that surrounded Lancer's frightened men, as the soldiers desperately hoped that there would be enough wood to keep the fires burning until daybreak.

Denith knew he would have to do something fast, or else the horde might turn and attack the prisoners and his men, and looked for a way to give these Toilers the victims they craved. He saw his chance as two soldiers approached a dying portion in the wall of fire to add some wood. Signaling Kurt, the two men rushed forward, swords in hand, and in quick blows had laid the two soldiers low, but not before their frightened cry of alarm had been raised.

Within seconds, the inner camp of soldiers erupted into confusion, and soldiers began converging on the spot where Denith and Kurt stood.

With not a moment to lose, Denith and Kurt took off their cloaks and beat out the fires where they stood until there was a good gap in the wall of fire. The approaching soldiers froze, and the Toilers needed no order from Denith to tell them to swarm through the breach and do as they pleased with Lancer's men.

Having held themselves back in anticipation for as long as they had, the Toilers were all the more vicious in their frenzy. There was no hope for the soldiers, who soon broke into a terrorized scramble for their weapons.

In the midst of all this, Denith distinctly heard a woman's scream from among the soldiers. He remembered the servant woman who he had seen among the soldiers. He grabbed a nearby torch from the ring of fire, and held it high as he ran in the direction the scream had come from. Denith found the woman huddled fearfully at the edge of one of the tents. He suddenly realized who she was.

"I know you," he said, grabbing her arm and lifting her to his side.

The woman screamed out in fear and terror.

"Please, I mean you no harm," Denith yelled above the din. "I know who you are—you're Gwyn, the milkmaid!"

As soon as he said her name, the woman stopped struggling and looked up at his face.

"Do you recognize me?" Denith asked.

"No," Gwyn replied hesitantly.

Then Denith held the torch down closer to the ground. "Do you recognize these boots?" he asked.

She gasped in surprise, holding her hand to her mouth. "It's you! The boy with the keys?"



“Yes—but right now we need to get out of here,” he said, noting that the path behind him had already been closed up with more Toilers who had poured in through the breach. They would not be able to make it back out that way.

Gwyn said nothing, but pointed dejectedly to the chains around her feet. “I can’t run anywhere with these. You’re going to have to leave me. Go.”

“I won’t leave you!” Denith protested.

“But it’s locked! There’s no way you’ll find the keys before you’re attacked yourself.”

“Keys!” Denith realized suddenly. Without hesitation, he dropped to his knees and pulled out the ring of golden keys that was always with him. “It just might work!” Immediately, in the midst of the darkness and confusion, a great peace overwhelmed him, as he once again distinctly felt the presence of those who were with him, helping him in unseen ways. He inserted the key most likely to fit, and before he had even turned it, the chains dropped from Gwyn’s feet.

With the calm peace that had now come upon Denith, a renewed sense of purpose came as well. He suddenly thought of something.

“We’re going to have to get out of here quickly, before the Toilers turn on us,” he shouted to Gwyn over the noise and sounds of real carnage that now surrounded them. “But tell me, is there anything here—papers or logs, anything that would be of help to us in learning more of Lancer’s plans?”

“Yes,” Gwyn answered back. “The captain has a small chest in his tent. If there is anything to learn, it would likely be in there.”

Kurt was by now at Denith’s side once again, torch in hand. “The last of the prisoners are on the wagons. We’re ready to move out!”

“Good,” Denith shouted back. “I just have some last-minute business to finish here. Hold the last

wagon until I get there. Here, take this woman with you. She can help us find our way out of these parts.”

“Very well. But hurry,” Kurt answered. “It won’t be long until the Toilers finish with the soldiers, and I have a feeling that you’re going to have a hard time keeping them from turning on us after that.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Denith answered. “I’ll be as fast as I can.”

With that, Denith handed Gwyn to Kurt, and made his way in the direction of the tent Gwyn had pointed out. He quickly grabbed the chest, and filled it with whatever other papers he could find lying around. Holding the small chest on his shoulder, he ran back in the direction of the stockade.

He got to the last wagon none too soon. The Toilers, in their frenzied bloodlust, had lost their normal fear of fire, and were charging towards the last small groups of Watchers who sought refuge among their torches and burning branches. The remaining Toilers looked around for their next prey, and caught sight of the last wagon now pulling out of the encampment. After a moment of stunned hesitation, they began surging towards the cart.

Denith stood up and with all of his might commanded them to stop. The Toilers stopped short for a moment under the spell of his command. But that spell was broken just as quickly, and the Toilers then broke into a mad dash towards the wagon.

At the same moment, a bright light suddenly grew up around Denith, and enveloped the whole wagon in its glow. Then it turned into a fireball that released itself and slammed brilliantly into the approaching Toilers. The blast of light was much too great for the Toilers to handle. Suddenly blinded by whatever supernatural power had just hit them, the Toilers turned into a sightless mob of stumbling

## THE RUSE

creatures who, in their great fear, began lashing out at each other, as the wagon picked up speed, and darted away to safety.



## A WARRIOR RETURNS

Much fanfare awaited Denith and his band of men when they returned to their town where Celor awaited them. News of their victory against Lancer's men and the rescue of the prisoners had gone before them.

Denith learned that these prisoners had all been taken from a number of villages. He was even more surprised to learn, from the personal journal that he had found in the captain's chest, that this was the same man he had fought and defeated in the duel. From what he could tell, the deception of dressing his men as Drifters and looting villages had been nothing more than a ploy to try and attract the "foolishly compassionate warrior with his Baron sword" who this man obviously wanted to capture for himself. But Santhor's note had cut short those hopes, *and his trap became a trap for his own men instead*, Denith thought with a wry smile.

His next surprise was finding out how Gwyn had ended up among this same camp of soldiers. As she had explained it, shortly after Denith left, strange things began happening to her. At first she started noticing odd patterns and hues in different things around her. Then she had begun seeing things that weren't really there, until one day, she saw her

husband again. He had explained many things to her.

It was when she started speaking of these things to others and trying to explain to people what she could see and what she knew, that some dark-looking men had come and kidnapped her, and eventually she was delivered to this camp of Watchers, to be a servant to them. This time, when Denith had unveiled the keys again, she had been able to see them in all their beauty. And now the colors were even more vivid than the ones she had slowly and gradually been seeing before. It was almost similar to the story Celor had told, and Denith marveled at the mystery of the workings of these keys, and the ways of the colors they revealed.

Denith then sought to find places of refuge and homes for the villagers that they had rescued. In whatever towns they stopped along the way, the rescued villagers would speak of what the Watchers had done to them—their deception of dressing up as Drifters to invade and pillage the villages—and how it was the Warrior Guard that had come to their rescue. It was not long before the Warrior with the Baron Sword entered the picture as well, and the fame of the Warrior Guard spread far and wide in the regions through which they traveled to get back to their homes.

Gwyn herself chose to stay back in one of these villages along with some other women she had befriended during their captivity. But for as many rescued villagers as they managed to leave behind, they picked up even more interested and angered villagers who convinced their councils to let them join the Warrior Guard so that their towns and settlements could come under its protection.

So it was that Denith entered the town from which he had left with only seven men with now more than two hundred behind him, all eager to

begin their training, and to learn the way of the Warrior Guard.

Celor greeted him as the group came to a halt in the village courtyard. "Well, well, Denith, that's certainly quite a train of men you have following you there. What are we to do with them all?"

"From what we've been able to learn, it looks like General Lancer is seriously gathering his troops to come against us again. So I figured we may as well start amassing some more of our own as well."

"I see," Celor answered. "And how do you propose to train them all? My men are already quite stretched in their duties of guarding their outposts."

Denith hesitated for a moment. That thought had not occurred to him. But an inspiration suddenly struck him.

"What about Baden?"

"Baden?" Celor asked. "Who's Baden?"

"A friend of mine ... he was with me in the tunnels. A Drifter. I wonder if he's still there?"

"A Drifter training our men?" Celor questioned skeptically.

"He trained me," Denith retorted. "You yourself said you were impressed with my skills when you first saw me fight."

"Hmm, yes, I suppose so," Celor answered, with an enigmatic smile on his face.

"What?" Denith asked.

"Well, with all these new men and recruits—along with the many others who have gathered here in your absence—I'm thinking it might be about time to appoint a new commander to help manage them."

Denith raised his eyebrows.

"What do you think, Denith? You have proven yourself an able commander over your band of men, and a worthy warrior. Will you accept the commission of being a commander to a whole contingent of these men? I'll put you in charge of training them.

Kurt can help you. Something tells me he'd make an excellent captain—and perhaps this Baden friend of yours as well, if we can find him. What do you say?"

"But don't I have to face one of your commanders in combat first or something?"

"Well, don't tell Sir Albert this," Celor answered, dropping his voice to a whisper, "but I think you've already outdone him—as well as all of our expectations of you. My nephew or not, frankly I'd say you deserve it."

Denith looked a little embarrassed at the idea, but before he could say another word, Celor had turned to the crowd now gathered in the square, and raised his voice so that all present could hear.

"On behalf of all the people in our town," he began, "and all the men and commanders of the Warrior Guard, and those they fight to protect, I want to welcome this brave young man back into our midst. He left as a scout. He returns to us as a true commander of our warriors!"

"Three cheers for Sir Denith!" With that, Celor held up Denith's hand, and the people erupted into a jubilant roar of cheers and chants.



"Baden!" Denith cried out gleefully at the sight of his friend.

At the earliest possible opportunity, Denith had made contact with the tunnel Drifters and inquired after Baden. He was still among them, but had gladly agreed to surface when he heard his old friend had called for him.

It looked to Denith like it was just about time for Baden to surface. He looked quite disoriented and obviously felt very much out of place above ground once again. Denith chuckled. He knew how the man probably felt.

"Denith!" Baden managed to greet him. "I've



heard things have been going very well for you!”

“Yes, that they have. But the battle lines are being drawn, and it looks like the greatest adventures are still ahead of us all. The war of the worlds has only just begun.”

“I know. We have been hearing of it—though I think I’m going to need some time to adjust to life in *this* world before I start thinking about fighting another,” he joked.

“You’ve been tucked away down there almost a full year longer than I was. I don’t know how you did it!”

“Well, you know how it is down there—time hardly exists. There is much I have learned, as you did. I must admit, though, I’m equally thankful to be coming up again. I don’t think I’ll mind living out in the fresh air and sunshine again.”

“Yes, well, you certainly look like you could use some. I’ve never seen a pale Drifter before,” Denith joked.

“There were plenty of them down there. Or is your memory failing you already?” Baden retorted.

“I guess it was hard to see who was pale and who wasn’t. You could hardly tell if someone was a Drifter or not.”

They both chuckled.

So Baden was reunited with his old friend, who showed him around and updated him on all that had happened, and the state of the ever-growing Warrior Guard, as it was now officially known. It did not take Baden as long to adjust to life above ground as he’d feared it would. The outdoor life was in his blood, he quickly realized, and he was very much in his element among the people of Celor’s town. Kurt and Baden also became firm friends, and the training of the men Denith and Kurt had brought back with them was soon in full swing.

In time, Denith’s unit was ready, and they were

given their own sector of villages and settlements to patrol and defend against Lancer's emissaries and armies. As Celor had suggested, Kurt indeed made an excellent captain. Baden, however, declined the commission. He preferred the freedom of not being tied down to any rank or command. He continued to train the troops, but the responsibility of commanding them himself did not appeal to his nature. So the post went to one of the other men who had accompanied Denith on the now-famous rescue mission.

For his part, Denith knew the battle had only just begun. They had driven back the Watchers—at least for a time—but that had been the easy part. Even the Watchers themselves were for the most part not aware of the greater powers whose purposes they served—the same powers that long ago had stripped the common folk of their color, and left them in a world of gray. The people had been convinced to take up arms against the Watchers easily enough. But breaking the hold of the darker forces of shadow and restoring the world of color to those who had never known it was going to be a different story—and Denith had a good idea where that story was going to begin.



“As you all know, it has been many, many years since the Shadowed Ones came to this land, and infected the hearts of the common man with their ways. You were a peaceful people, dwelling within the borders of your Enchanted Woods, living in peace and harmony with those of the other world who dwelt around you, and walked these lands freely.

“Then what exactly happened we do not know. But we know that there were those who became discontent with the ways of this other world, who sought to free themselves from these ways, and to

carve out for themselves a world of their own, where they were master. And these desires were placed there by the figure you call the Evil One—one of the other world's own, who turned against them, to discover the ways of darkness and shadow, and create a world where he could be lord, and rule without the interference of the beings of light and color.

“And so his emissaries, the Shadowed Ones and those who listened to them, walked among the settled ones, the common people—a people who lived contentedly in a colored world, but gave little thought to how it came to be so. These were easily influenced by the presence of the Shadowed Ones, and in time came under a spell that would leave them in a world where the colors were seen no more.

“But the Shadowed Ones discovered that the Drifters were not so easily persuaded. Their free ways and their curiosity about the other world and the world around them had given them a heritage that would not so easily be taken away from them. I shall not speak of the many battles that were fought against you by those who today are called the Watchers, and the hatred and forces that were stirred up against your people, that drove you from your forest, and made it the dark place it is today. But still they could not take the colors from you, because you cherished this gift and knowledge of the other world, and did what you could to preserve it.”

The convened council of the tunnel elders listened intently to Denith's speech, which he spoke largely from his heart, and from the many things and histories he had learned while among them.

“Today these forces, much like the people they control, have settled into the world they have created for themselves. Few remember how the world came to be the way it is, and even the Watchers have little idea why they fight you, or why

you have been their enemies since time can remember. But there are some who have not forgotten—some who are starting to awaken, and realize what is happening to this world they have made their home.

“Once long ago, after I was given the keys from the other world, and discovered they could lead others to the gift of sight in color, I thought the power behind this gift lay in the keys themselves. But since then I have come to understand that the secret of these colors is not found in the keys alone, but in the belief, if ever so faint, that they are truly there, and that this other world really does exist, and is in fact all around us.

“It is this that my people need to be taught, if they are to be won back from the forces that have sought to keep them from turning to the ways of the other world. I cannot go everywhere with these keys to unveil the secrets that they hold. This is not even their purpose. But what we need is your stories, your songs, your teachings, your messages, those things you hold within the safety of these tunnels that speak of the truths and things of the other world, that could open the eyes of my people to the fact that there is more to the world than the lives they have been living, and the things they can see and touch and smell.

“If their hearts and minds can be opened to these truths, then in time, like those of the village with whom you have dealt, they shall come to see the colors, and perhaps in yet more time, to see those of the other world, just as they used to walk among them.”

With that, Denith paused, and looked around to see the reactions of the sage-like Drifters around him.

“We have long waited for the time known in our writings as the Age of the Whisperers,” one of the

elders said. "Is it this you speak of?"

"I don't know," Denith answered. "I do know that Charine spoke of these things, and told me that the keys would help bring these things to pass, and that it was only beginning. Now I believe I know what she meant. I do not pretend to understand why these keys were given to me, or what they mean, but I do know that they are not needed for the colors to be seen. Perhaps they are meant to be a weapon against the power of the Evil One, a presence that will put fear into the hearts of his emissaries, and show them that a greater power is with us. Or perhaps they are only a symbol of this power, and the truth that others can discover for themselves, with a little help, and someone to point them in the right direction.

"And this is where I call upon you for your help. You know and understand the ways of the other world. The teachings and stories that are told around Drifter campfires must be spread among our people. The Warrior Guard can keep the Watchers at bay, but if the people only see it as exchanging one set of soldiers for another, it will be in vain. The influence of shadow in the people's minds and hearts must also be driven out, and that cannot be done by weapons of steel or warriors on horses. Only the knowledge of the truth can truly set them free, and this is what they must be given, in forms that they can understand.

"I can think of no others who are better equipped to help in this than you, my friends, from whom I myself have learned so much. These tunnels guard your secrets, and the power of the other world continues to shield your presence here from the knowledge of the Shadowed Ones.

"I ask you for the words and writings, and especially the stories, that can be given to our people, that they may learn of the things that the

whispers have revealed unto your people. I believe it is said among your people that for every force of darkness, there is an even more powerful counter-force of light. These words that have come from the other world itself shall be that light for my people—like the keys have been to me and others—and bring them slowly into the knowledge that shall free them not only from men like Lancer, but from the dark forces of shadow that have ruled their lives without them even realizing it.”

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## SEEDS OF WAR

General Lancer was not in a particularly good mood. He paced back and forth in his council chamber. Ever since the first attack against these villages, and then the report of another contingent of men that had been torn asunder at the hand of the Toilers, things had only gone from bad to worse. All communications with the Toilers had been severed, which meant there had been little intelligence for Lancer or his men to go on in their continuing battles against the uprising of the villages among the Plains, and now he had just heard that Colonel Santhor had ordered a general retreat. It was to regroup whatever forces could be gathered for a greater attack, Santhor insisted, but that did not make the word "retreat" any more welcome to Lancer's ears.

"Can I trust my men to do nothing at all?" Lancer muttered to himself. "Where is that white-cloaked creature with his many words? Seems to me about time he should show himself again."

He mulled a little more, and continued his pacing.

"I'm ready to listen!" he suddenly shouted out at the empty walls around him. "Where are you now?"

The door quickly swung open, and one of his men

entered. "You called, my lord?" he asked hastily.

"No!" Lancer bellowed, sending the man scurrying back out the door.

"No." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I'll show you who's in control. Things beyond the intelligence of the Toilers, or my own men—ha! *You wait and see!* I'll show you intelligence. I'll show you who rules these lands. Mestar! ... MESTAR!"

The man who had entered earlier opened the door again. "You called, my lord?" he asked, a little more hesitantly this time.

"Yes! I called—of course I called. Are you deaf?"

The man shrunk back at Lancer's outburst, and fearfully lowered his head.

"Well, don't just stand there! Get my cloak, and a purse of coins. Then saddle my horse and load it with provisions. I am going on a journey."

"Y-yes, my lord," the man answered, still rooted to his place in fear.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Go!"

The man needed no further prompting. He turned and shot out the door as fast as he could. *That man needs to watch his temper,* Mestar thought as he made his way to pass on Lancer's orders. *No wonder he scared off the Toilers.*

Lancer walked over to a great woodcarving on the wall—a map of the Commonlands. In a moment of fury, he drew his dagger and plunged its tip into the heart of the Plains, which the Warrior Guard now controlled. "I will not be defeated so easily," he whispered. "*You wait and see.*"



If Lancer disliked coming here, he hid it well behind the cloak of necessity that had prompted him to make this visit. The large, hollow mouth of the cave was overhung with dark vines and eerie, creeping tendrils. The stench that pervaded the place instantly revealed the nature of its



inhabitants. It was not long before one of them emerged to greet Lancer.

The creature was stooped low, but managed a suspicious upwards glance at Lancer.

“What brings you here, Lord General?”

“I have come to see Lord Urkhin,” Lancer stated as briefly and demandingly as he could.

The Toiler fought to suppress a smirk. Only several days before, Lancer had come here with a large troop of his men and made a public and adamant statement that the Toilers would never be relied on or their counsel sought after again. It had mattered little to the Toilers. The loss was Lancer’s, and the Toilers knew it. Now Lancer had come to repent of his impulsive declaration, though his words would likely never admit this. But his presence was admission enough—a fact that assured the Toiler watchman that Lancer had indeed come alone, as it appeared.

“Wait here,” the creature said curtly, and disappeared back into the mouth of the cave. Lancer put on a face of displeasure and impatience at this watchman’s lack of respect for his rank, but it went entirely unnoticed.

It did not take long before a small horde of figures appeared, filling up the entrance to the cave, and pouring out from it, surrounding Lancer from all sides. Then the Toiler lord himself stepped from the cave, standing a good deal taller than the other Toilers, though still shorter than Lancer himself.

Whatever cordial greeting Lancer may have contemplated offering Lord Urkhin was cancelled by the humiliation of this reception, so that all he could say was, “Remove these creatures! I must speak to you in private.”

The Toiler lord let out a guttural groan that was understood by his underlings as a sigh of pity for the man before them. With a nod of his head, they

backed away from Lancer and retreated to the mouth of the cave, though they did not disappear inside it just yet.

"You expect us to forget your offense so easily?"

"*My* offense?" Lancer bellowed. "It was *your* creatures that mercilessly attacked my men!"

Lord Urkhin groaned again. "How can I make you understand?" he answered, trying to put on a patronizing and congenial tone—at least as much as his raspy voice would allow him. "It was this Baron-sworded Warrior. His strange powers incensed those Toilers to do what they did! But no, you cannot bring yourself to believe this. You do not like hearing about those who have powers greater than what you wield or can command. It is pitiful, really."

Lancer turned his gaze away as the Toiler lord continued his tirade. He remembered how much he had detested this creature when they had first met. He remembered his surprise that these beasts had any coherent social structure at all, much less a common hierarchal one. But he had soon realized he could not secure his own power over the Commonlands without gaining the cooperation of these creatures, and he had spared no expense in trying to win their favor—even agreeing to respect and guard all lands of the Dark Forest as their exclusive territory. It was not a decision he regretted, though amities between them had always been forced at best.

Now once again Lancer had to admit his dependency on these foul creatures, though he did not like it one bit. He bit his lip, and inwardly regretted his outburst of a few moments ago, though he could have hardly helped himself. With a look of impassivity, he turned back to Urkhin, interrupting the creature's flow of words that had continued extemporaneously.

"Lord Urkhin, I am ready to listen, though on a

decidedly different matter than what you are droning on about now. Can we get to it?"

The Toiler, stunned at Lancer's suddenly more contrite and still commanding tone, fell silent. He thought a moment before giving his answer.

"Follow me," he finally said. Then, with a motion of his hand, he sent the other Toilers scurrying away into the darkness of the cave.

Lancer stooped to follow Urkhin into the cave. A host of bat-like creatures near the top of the cave began fluttering about nervously, many making their way out of the cave upon sensing the foreign presence that was coming into it. A large eeghaw screeched eerily in Lancer's ear as it flew past him towards the cave's opening as well. Before long, Lancer and Urkhin were seated in a dank and relatively silent room.

"So what is it you want to say, Lord General Lancer?" Urkhin began.

"You were right about one thing you said out there," Lancer candidly answered. "I do not like to hear of those who command greater powers than myself. I have been as troubled as you about the presence of this Warrior with the Baron sword."

"He does not trouble me greatly," Urkhin answered.

"But you said he commands greater power than you."

"I did not say he commanded greater powers than *me*. That we do not know. I was not there. His powers were great enough to usurp control over my Toilers, yes. But that should not really surprise either of us. I believe you have experienced similar frustrations with your own men."

Lancer ignored the subtly worded taunt, and instead moved on to what he had really come here to discuss.

"Tell me about the colors."

"The colors?" Urkhin answered, taken aback by the unexpected topic.

"Is there any truth to them?"

"You're asking me?"

Lancer looked away again, hesitating. Then he continued in a whisper. "I have been visited by a strange figure that I do not know, but whose presence continues to haunt me. It's as if I can feel him watching over me all the time, but never showing himself. He gloats at my defeats, and taunts my mind with questions of things I do not know. I ... I know you have certain powers, and I hoped that perhaps you could help me to understand such things."

Urkhin remained silent for some time, his thin, furry lips twisting themselves into all sorts of strange patterns that revolted Lancer as much as he could not keep himself from being distracted by them.

"Would you hear of their myth, or reality?" Urkhin finally offered.

"What is either?"

"The myth lies in things that are said of old. Reality is what you will find in your lands today."

"Then tell me about their reality."

"The reality is that there are those who see things differently than normal men do. They call it color. What it looks like is hard to know. They describe one thing as being blue, another as being green, the sky as having a shade that is different from the grass and the trees. It is most confusing, and when one listens to them, if he does not have a good head on his shoulders, he can easily find himself becoming confused about what sort of world he lives in. It is a strange state such people live in, and even stranger things they speak of."

"You are speaking of the Drifters?"

"And others."

“So you’re saying these colors are things that they see?”

“Or the way they see things—sometimes even things that are not really there. That is when it gets confusing. They think they live in a different world, and they conjure up their own rules and even rulers for that world. They become disaffected, and a law to themselves, so that they would hardly respect the authority of a man like yourself.”

“Which I hardly need to be reminded of,” Lancer muttered wearily. “So they all see these colors?”

“Yes, at least to hear them speak of it.”

“But how?”

“That is something I have never fully understood myself—except to think of it as being some strange disease that plagues them.”

“But where does it come from, then?”

“What is your fascination with these colors?”

“I have heard that this Baron-sworded character is bringing them to my lands, spreading ... this disease, as you describe it ... amongst my people.”

“He wants to infect them, as he has been infected by the Drifters whose company he unwisely kept.”

“But how is this possible? How can I stop him?”

“Kill him.”

“That we have already tried.”

“Then you have not tried hard enough.”

“There must be something else that can be done against these colors.”

Urkhin shrugged. “Perhaps, but that would hardly be a concern of mine.”

“You think it is no concern of yours!” Lancer growled. “Your creatures cannot fight for themselves. They can tear down and destroy, but they cannot intelligently defeat any personal attack against them. Already you are fearful about a few diseased Drifters finding their way into your forest ... I understand that now. How will you feel when the commoners too

become diseased, and start spreading these colors far and wide? If this Baron Sword has so easily taken command of your sort before, what is there to stop him from destroying your entire race—and you with them—when he has finished infecting mine?”

Urkhin paused, again twitching his lips into grotesque forms as he licked them.

“Perhaps you are right,” Urkhin said at length. “Unfortunately, as I said, I do not know much about this state, or how it comes, or how it is spread. But perhaps there is a way that you can use this disease against itself.”

“What do you mean?” Lancer asked.

“Listen. I shall tell you.”



Denith lay wearily on his bed. It had been another long day of tending to the many details and responsibilities of being a commander. More often than not he found himself tending to less thrilling duties of managing supplies, reading and responding to messages, settling disputes between villagers, and making sure the blacksmiths had all the resources they needed for the upkeep of the men's armor and weapons.

There had been little news of any of Lancer's men in their area for several months now. Perhaps, Denith thought to himself, they knew they had been defeated, and had decided to ignore the Warrior Guard, rather than continue to lose so many of their men in battle.

But he somehow knew that this was not the case. It sounded too easy. More likely they were regrouping and gathering a larger force somewhere far away. It was difficult to know. All they could do was wait, and see to it that they stayed alert.

With those thoughts still on his mind, Denith fell into a dream-filled sleep. He was back in the

lush, green field of grass he had visited once before. His senses were instantly heightened, and he remembered the place distinctly. The surrounding trees and forests were all the same, and the sky was clear and blue, with fleecy white clouds towering above the distant horizon. What he did notice that he hadn't seen before was a small path upon which he was standing. He decided to follow it. For some reason it reminded him of the path along the cliffs back home.

Perhaps it was this memory that brought along what happened next, though Denith had no way of knowing for sure. But he had not walked long when Hoden stood before him again on the path, appearing to have been waiting for him. No words were spoken, but Denith could clearly understand what Hoden was somehow saying.

"Ah, there you are at last. Come with me. I have something I've been wanting to show you."

With that, the elderly man turned around and continued along the path ahead of Denith. Denith followed without a word, wondering what he would be shown this time.

By and by, they stood before a large building—a building such as Denith had never seen before. Its walls were of pearl, and it was many times higher than any structure Denith had ever seen in his travels through the Commonlands.

Hoden said nothing, but walked on till they passed through an arched passageway in its side. Then they turned up a small flight of steps, which, without windows or even any visible form of lighting, was brightly lit, as if the walls themselves were translucent, channeling the light from outside into every nook and cranny of this building. When the steps ended in a hallway, Hoden and Denith followed it to the end, then stepped through a door and came to a halt.

Denith looked around, knowing this was their final destination. The room appeared to be some sort of gallery, filled with shelves of books, and paintings that decorated the walls. Hoden stood by the door and motioned for Denith to look around. Denith didn't know what he was supposed to be looking at—or for—but he had the distinct impression it was something of note.

His attention was drawn to the various paintings around this magnificent, high-domed room. If he gazed at them for any length of time, he noticed they came alive. Figures would start to move; landscapes would change their hue with the rising or setting of the sun; animals would come to life. Each picture was like a window into a new dimension.

Then he came across a darker painting. It showed an arched doorway covered in shadows, and had a portentous look to it. He peered at it a little longer, wondering how this one would come to life. Suddenly he found himself standing within it, and in front of the doorway portrayed in the picture.

He looked around, curious but alert. The ominous impression of the painting had become a dark, imminent feeling within him, and he placed his hand on his sword. No sooner had he done so than a dark figure stepped out of the shadows.

The figure spoke. But in a strange contrast to how Hoden's words could be heard, though they had not been spoken, this figure's spoken words could *not* be heard, though his mouth moved. But the man's intentions were nevertheless obvious as he drew his sword, and held it menacingly towards Denith.

Denith was ready, and within moments, their swords clashed. Denith's arms felt heavy, as if they were being prevented from moving as freely as they had before. It was as if he was fighting in an unfamiliar body, or in a dimension where time was



not the same as his own. Everything, including himself, seemed to be moving in slow motion. In this unfamiliar environment, and to Denith's great consternation, the dark figure began gaining the upper hand.

Finally, Denith found himself beaten down, crouching on the floor beside an old oak table. The stranger swung his sword down hard, but Denith rolled to the side as quickly as movement would allow, and the stranger's sword buried itself deep into the wood of the table.

Then Denith saw his chance. The figure was struggling to retrieve his sword with both hands. The sword swung free, and its weight lifted the stranger's heaving arms high into the air, leaving his front unguarded. In one swift movement, Denith rose to his feet and plunged his sword deep into the dark figure's heart.

Then it was over, and Denith found himself standing back on the grassy expanse where he had first appeared. He felt a little disoriented at first. His arms felt heavy and tense from the strain of his struggle, though his sword was now back in its sheath. As soon as he had regained some semblance of composure, he looked around again, and spotted yet another path, which he decided to follow.

It caused him no surprise to find Faéthé standing on this road. She also spoke no audible words, but Denith understood them just the same.

"There is much still to come, little Denith. The battle is only beginning."

"That dark figure, the battle, it was only a vision of things that are still to come?"

"There are many battles ahead, both with Lancer and his men, and the darker forces. They shall do all within their power to stop the power of the keys, to sever the link they have given you with our world, and to destroy the work that we have begun through

them, and through you.

“Whatever you do, Denith, keep these keys with all diligence. Lancer himself does not understand the truth of the colors, but when the Evil One discovers the power of the keys, he shall convince Lancer to seek them out and destroy them just the same. And while they cannot be destroyed, they can be hidden, and their influence against the kingdom of shadow lost.”

“Was it the Evil One that I met in the forest?”

“Yes,” Faethé answered. “And he has seen that he has no power over you, so he shall seek out others to battle you in this realm.”

“General Lancer,” Denith whispered.

“He shall come for you, but shall not prevail against you. He shall desire the keys, but they will not be his. And in the end, his own eagerness to win shall cause him to lose. But the end of the battle shall not come for some time. There are still other things to be done....”



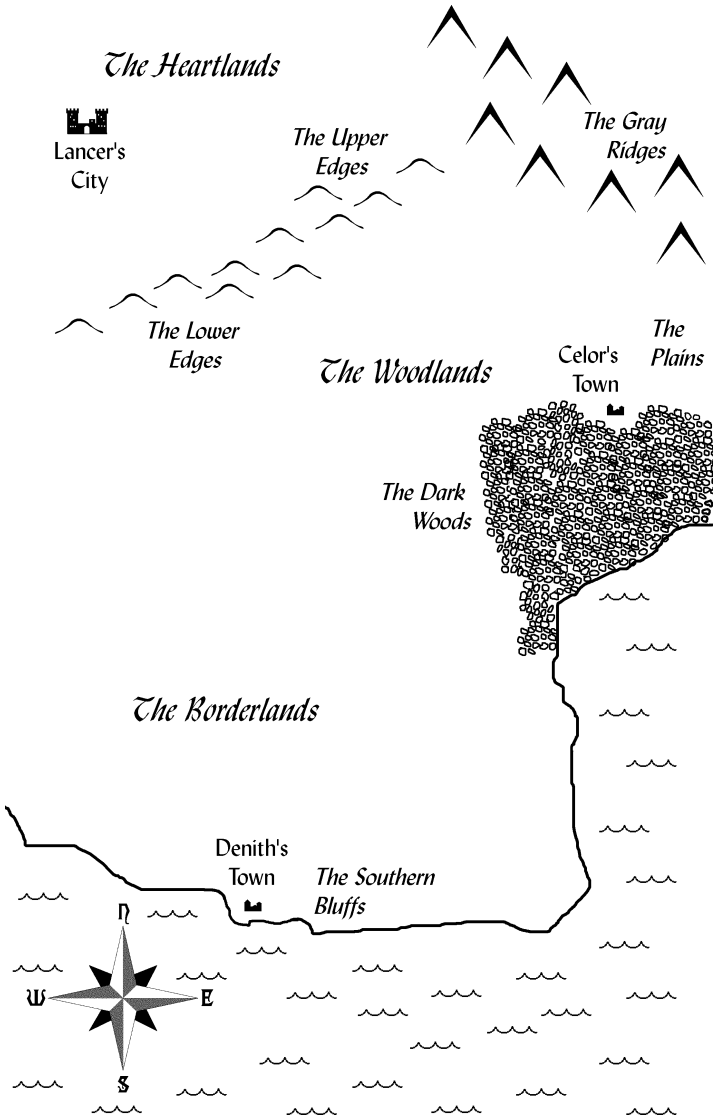
Denith woke with a start. His head felt heavy and light at the same time. His eyes were blurred, and struggled to focus on the world around him. His sword hung unsheathed on the wall in front of him, as its sheath rested upright beneath it. On sudden impulse, he reached beneath his pillow and pulled out the pouch that held the keys.

Reverently he pulled them out, and held them in his cupped hands before him. They glowed with an unusually piercing aura, and projected beams of light in every direction. A few of these caught on Denith's sword, which glistened in their light. He knew one thing for certain: The battle was not over yet.

*To be continued...*



# THE COMMONLANDS





Common miles



1 common mile = 1000 paces