



The Seven Keys

Warrior Lord

A decorative border with a repeating Celtic knotwork pattern, consisting of interlocking loops and lines, surrounds the central text area.

BOOK II

WARRIOR LORD

Three years have passed since Denith joined the Warrior Guard and was reunited with his long-lost uncle, General Celor.

The people of the Protected Territories now live in peace, shielded from the reign of Shadow that oppresses the rest of the Commonlands.

But the Shadow is still there, watching, lurking, waiting for the perfect moment to launch its attack on those who have dared to defy its rule and challenge its power.

The Seven Keys

Book II

Warrior Lord

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

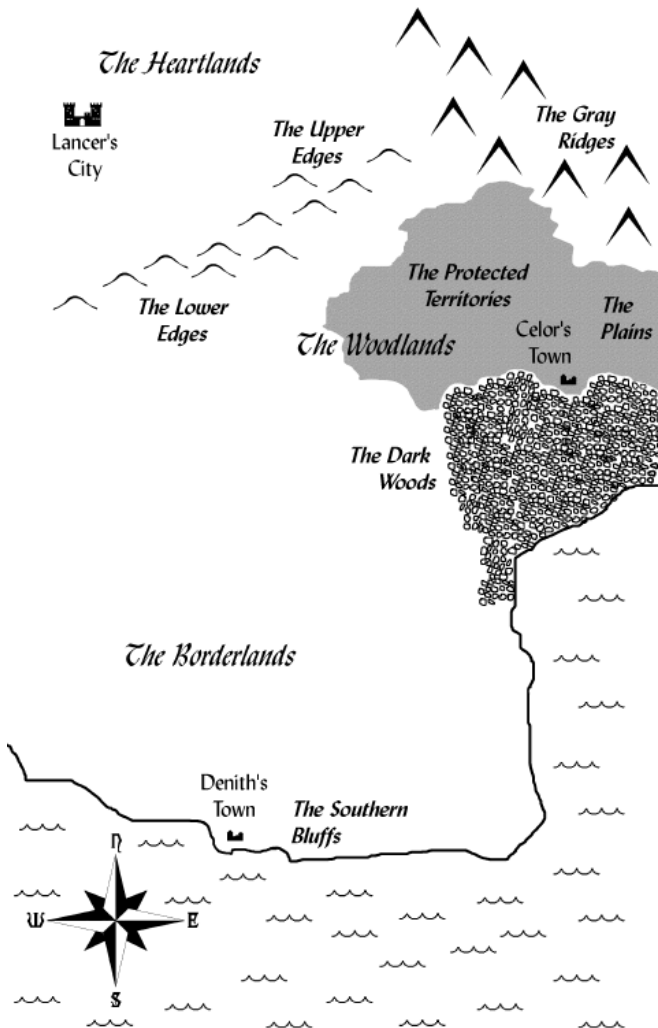
Cover and illustrations by Hugo Westphal

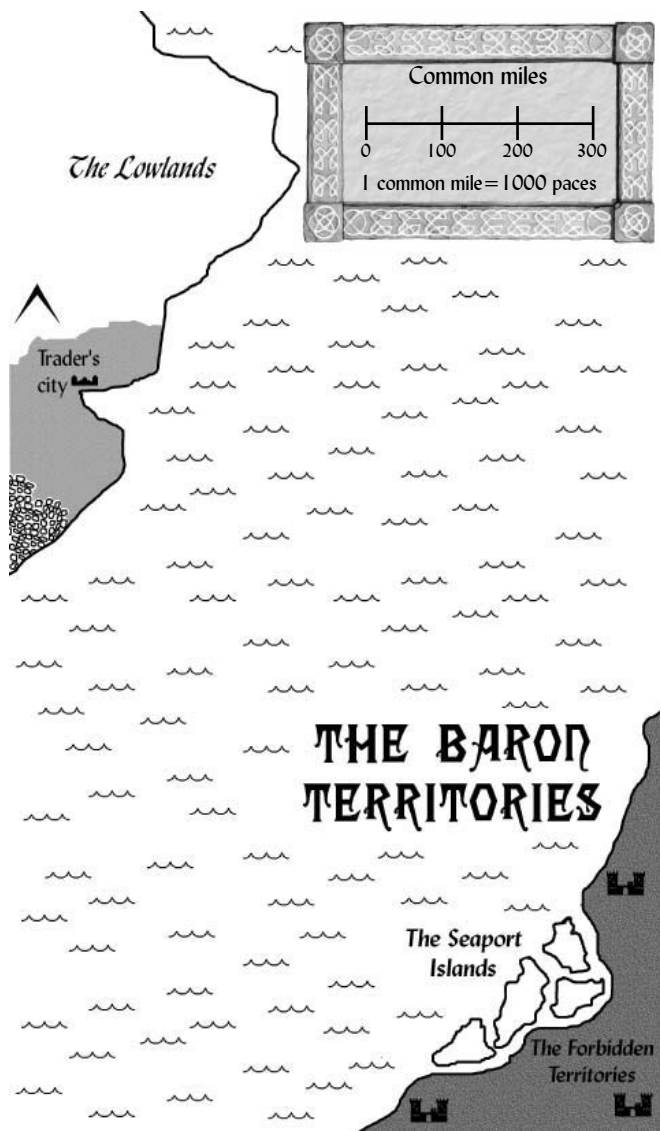
Copyright © 2001 by The Family.DFO.
Printed by Than Printing Company Ltd., Thailand. Not for resale.

CONTENTS

| | |
|-----------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>In Between</i> | 1 |
| Chapter 1 - The Road Home | 5 |
| Chapter 2 - A Child's Father..... | 27 |
| Chapter 3 - At the Enemy's Gate | 43 |
| Chapter 4 - Informed..... | 61 |
| Chapter 5 - Councils and Plans..... | 77 |
| Chapter 6 - Across the Waters | 91 |
| Chapter 7 - Memories | 123 |
| Chapter 8 - The Next Path..... | 143 |
| Chapter 9 - Discoveries..... | 159 |
| Chapter 10 - A Lord and a Lady | 175 |
| Chapter 11 - Beginnings | 207 |
| Chapter 12 - Another Voyage..... | 221 |
| Chapter 13 - The Surprise | 241 |
| Chapter 14 - A Time of Trouble..... | 261 |
| Chapter 15 - Relief..... | 283 |
| Chapter 16 - Battle of the Forces | 295 |
| Chapter 17 - the Trial of Triumph | 321 |
| Chapter 18 - Dedication..... | 339 |
| <i>Epilogue</i> | 349 |
| <i>Adaenda: Legend of Shadows</i> | 353 |

THE COMMONLANDS





IN BETWEEN

Three years had gone by since Denith joined Celor's forces, and the passing months and seasons had brought much adventure—as well as work—for Denith and the Warrior Guard.

The many truths and histories that Denith had once learned among the Drifters of the tunnels were now being taught amongst the common people of the Protected Territories¹, as the regions under the Warrior Guard's protection had now become known. Things that had never been spoken of before were now being talked about in the streets, and discussed around dinner tables.

Once, the presence of color had been little more than an imaginary notion to these people, an element of bedtime stories that was dismissed once one grew old enough to understand that fanciful labels such as yellow, blue, green, and red were but arbitrary names given to the everyday, colorless shades that made up every object, every vista of the world around them. But now a sense of excitement and discovery rippled through the villages, towns and settlements of the Protected Territories. Perhaps there was something to the idea of “colors” after all. Perhaps they were only waiting to be discovered. Perhaps a touch of them lay hidden beneath the hills, or in the valleys, waiting for

¹See “Addenda – Legend of Shadows” on page 353

the right moment to be revealed to some unsuspecting but eternally romantic soul. And once they could be discovered, the whole world would become a different place.

If nothing else, it was an intriguing thought.

At the same time, it was a thought that began slowly changing the way that people saw themselves and the world around them. The unique sense of belonging and identity that living in the Protected Territories gave them was a concept almost as new as the concept of color still was to most. For all they had known before, every Commonland village was identical to the next. Each had the same sort of people, the same sort of trades, the same sort of houses. Everybody ate the same sort of foods, wore the same sort of clothes, spoke about the same sort of things. Now they had something different, something not found in any other regions of the Commonlands—a fledgling concept of independence that was starting to define who and what they were.

The knowledge that everything was the same no matter where one went had fostered an acute indifference to travel, and a general disinterest in any affairs outside of one's own town. Thus, all knowledge, ideas, arts or inventions that could have been freely shared and developed among these people had stagnated instead, so that the commoners had always lived in their relatively primitive state. They knew no other way of life, and had no desire to seek one—until now.

The Warrior Guard had spent the greater part of the last two years consolidating their presence in each village that had accepted them, and establishing the borders of their Protected Territories. Their numbers had only allowed them to expand so far, and they found that other outside villages near to the Protected Territories had already been influenced to view them as

deluded renegades, whose words and promises were but fanciful dreamings of those who had fallen under some strange spell of the Drifters.

Even so, the dark forces themselves had pulled back, and there were no further direct attacks from the Watchers, or even reports of any of Lancer's men or Shadowed Ones in the area. It seemed they had contented themselves to simply let the Protected Territories be, so long as their influence did not spread any further. While the Warriors and commoners remained alert for any signs of danger or attack, most soon returned to peacefully tending their own homes and lives.

General Celor kept himself busy managing and administering the now much greater force of the Guard, and found little time to spend with his nephew—especially on matters of no consequence to the Protected Territories. Celor did not speak much about his past above what had already been said, seeming intent on keeping the burden of its failures to himself. Rather, he kept his mind on the tasks at hand.

Denith likewise continued tending to his duties. When once he had been called upon to wait, ponder, and listen to the whispers in the tunnels, he had made that his life. Now, being called to be a commander and Warrior for his people, he gave that role his utmost. In fact, so engrossed was Denith in his newfound life that he seldom thought of his own past—his parents, his hometown and the many events that had led him to this role in the first place. For the moment, he was content to be following the road the whispers had led him to in the beginning—a road that was soon to take a new turn.

THE SEVEN KEYS — WARRIOR LORD

- 1 -

THE ROAD HOME

Winter was once again coming to its close. It was a time when Denith almost instinctively stopped to ponder and reflect on his life, and where it had taken him thus far. In the last three years his reflecting had never come to much, so he'd not spent much time at it, but this year it was different.

He felt within himself a growing desire to return to the Southern Bluffs and to see his parents again. He did not know whether he should allow himself the luxury of entertaining such desires, as he had many responsibilities within the Guard, and the Protected Territories. But as hard as he tried to dismiss the thought, he couldn't.

As was apt to happen whenever Denith pondered things deep within his soul, his countenance was troubled. Baden was the first to notice—or perhaps he was only the first to have the courage to broach the subject with his friend, since he was not under any official rank in the Warrior Guard himself, and so not subject to its rules and protocol.

“You’ve been troubling yourself with thoughts again,” Baden began.

Denith grunted.

“It’s a cyclic thing with you, isn’t it? At the end of

every winter it's like you have to go over your life in infinite detail and come to terms with it. But what's taking so long this time?"

"I don't know," Denith answered. "I've been troubled. I've been thinking of my parents and wondering after them. I've been gone several years now, and they have not heard from me in all this time. The season will soon be kind for traveling. I would very much like to see them again."

"Well, maybe you can. Have you asked?"

"No. I don't know what General Celor would say about it. I've been called to duty here, and I've not flinched at anything I've been asked to do, but I fear he might see such a request as a sign of weakness. What would you do?"

"I don't know. My own mother has been dead for years, so I haven't exactly thought of her much."

"That's not much of a help," Denith said with a frown.

"What if you were to suggest sending a scouting mission to those parts?" Baden suggested. "Yes, I think that's a perfect idea. We've heard little of Lancer's doings for a good while—and to tell you the truth, I have been more nervous than calm about that. We have no idea where he is at the moment, or what he's doing. If you were to go with the purpose of discovering Lancer's doings, you could use the trip to see your family at the same time. I don't think Celor or anyone else would think poorly of you for wanting to do that. Some of the commanders may not understand it. Most of them are a little on the brutish side, and have little regard for things of such nature. But I don't know that anyone would see it as a weakness. Besides, you seem to forget that you are walking the path the other world has set before you, and that path may lead differently for you than it does for the rest of these Warriors."

“What do you mean?” Denith said, surprised by such a thought.

“I worry for you, Denith,” Baden replied. “I worry that you have spent so much time in this Warrior Guard that you have become too much like them, and have forgotten where you came from and what you were doing before this. I doubt that you are meant to totally leave the one while you cling passionately to the other—to forget all the preparation that has gone before, and just live blindly for the present. It is only by seeing the past and the present together that one can learn how he is being led into his future.”

It wasn’t unlike Baden to lecture, and Denith knew he spoke sincerely.

“I suppose you’re right,” Denith answered, and then chuckled. “See, you should not be so quick to berate me for my thinking, when it is obvious I have much to be thinking about. If you would know, it is precisely thinking of the things that have gone before that brought on this desire to once again see my parents. There are so many things I have learned in all these years.”

“And so many things you seem to have forgotten,” Baden retorted. “What about the whispers? What about the keys? You seldom seem to talk about those things anymore.”

Denith looked down. It was true. He had become so embroiled in the day-to-day tasks of being a commander that seeking out the whispers of the other world had not seemed as dire a need.

Baden laughed softly.

“What are you laughing about?” Denith asked, slightly irritated.

“You don’t seem to realize how people see you. You are already thought of as quite a strange fellow. I don’t think anything you say would come as a surprise at

this point.”

“Strange fellow?” Denith was getting more indignant with each comment.

“Well, you’re always off doing good and rescuing someone and going out of your way to get involved with this person or that person. I mean, we all know you’re different!”

“Different? But you were just saying I was too much *like* them!”

“Yes—you’re a Warrior like the others, and a fine Warrior too. You’re just a different Warrior, and that’s what I’m trying to tell you. Even though you try to be like them, you’re different. I can tell. They can tell. Even Celor can tell. He’s given you great leeway in the things you set out to do—things he would not likely have tolerated from any of the other men. And if you ask me, it’s done the reputation of this Warrior Guard a lot of good.” Baden paused. “Look, why don’t you seek out the Whisperers, and ask them about this. If they agree that it’s the right thing to do, then you can have full confidence to at least present the idea to Celor. There couldn’t be any harm in that.”

Denith saw Baden’s point. He could always trust the counsel of his good friend to be honest and true, if not always the most predictable.

Seeking out the first available opportunity, he did as Baden had suggested. It had been a while since he had listened for the Whisperers, and he wondered whether they would still be there when he went to listen for them.

He closed his eyes and focused his thoughts, as he had learned to do in the tunnels. Instantly he could feel them again, at the very edges of his consciousness. He could hear their melodies, sense their conversations, and feel himself being drawn into their world. A wave of peace washed over him, and with it came an

apparition of Faethé standing before him.

“Faethé, Faethé, what should I do? You have always been such a good counselor and guide, though it has been a while since we have spoken. But now I have need of your wisdom and guidance once again, for a choice lies before me and I know not which way to turn.”

At those words Faethé seemed to break into a smile, as if this acknowledgment was something she had been waiting for.

“I’m sure you know my thoughts and imaginations even better than I know them myself, but I have a longing, a desire to see my parents, to visit my hometown again.”

“I know,” Faethé’s gentle whisper responded. “It is a part of the plan—for we have put this longing and this desire in you at this very time, and have made it so compelling that you would turn to us, and listen once again for our whispers.”

“So you’re saying *you* want me to go?”

“Yes. It is indeed time for this path to be followed, and you must do so soon. But while you are yet listening, there is something more that we have to tell you.”

There was a silence. Denith strained his ears to hear her whispers, wondering what secrets they were going to reveal.

“You must not leave us for so long again—you must remember that we are here to guide you in the path that you should take. For without us, you will not know where to tread, and your way will become muddled and unclear. Even when the path leads in only one direction, without our presence you can lose your sense of purpose along that path, and once this sense has been blurred you can more easily be persuaded to make turns that would be to your detriment.

“But this new turn we ask you to take is a path that will further open your eyes to the purpose that yet lies before you. Take care, young Denith, for there are those who are intent that this purpose be defeated. And if they cannot accomplish this through open battle, they shall try with more subtle means. So you must continue to heed our words, to seek our wisdom, to not leave us aside. We are your guides and without us you will not know the way to take. But with us you *can* know, and proceed with the full assurance that we are with you, helping you, strengthening you, and protecting you.”



“Something has been troubling you, hasn’t it, Denith?” Celor asked.

The question caught Denith off guard. On the encouragement of Faethé’s words, he had sought out Celor for the express purpose of asking him about leading a mission towards the Bluffs, though he had not yet planned how he would break the question.

“I didn’t know it was that obvious,” Denith responded.

“It’s written all over your face,” Celor answered with a laugh. “But tell me, what is it?”

“This may sound strange to you, but it’s my parents. For some reason I have been thinking of them often. I would like to let them know that I am well and that I am doing something they can be proud of—that they need not worry about me. I know it is perhaps not the kind of request you would expect from a Warrior...” Denith hesitated momentarily and then continued, “but I have heard the whispers, and they have told me this was a part of their plan.”

Denith did not know how Celor would take to this idea; however, he need not have worried. Celor had great respect for the whispers from beyond.

"I'm sure something could be arranged," Celor answered with a strange smile. "We could perhaps send a messenger that way."

Denith looked down.

"But ... that's not exactly what you had in mind, is it?"

"No, sir. Though I suppose that would be enough. But I was hoping that I could..."

"See them?" Celor asked.

Denith looked up. "Yes! I should like to see them, if I could."

After a moment's silence, Celor asked, "And if you did, would you tell them of me?"

"I ... I am not sure. I will do as you wish."

Celor was slow to respond. "Very well. I shall arrange for you to go. In fact, your friend Baden has already asked me for leave to travel that same direction, now that the men are all trained and, in his words, can learn little more from him. He mentioned something about it perhaps being time to send a scouting mission in that direction."

"Baden told you he wanted to go on a scouting mission—to the Bluffs?" Denith asked in disbelief.

"Indeed he did, and now that I see you have a desire to head the same direction, and that the whippers have told you to ask, I'm inclined to agree. That way you would get to see your parents, and at the same time check out what sort of things are happening in those regions."

"So you're saying I can go?" Denith asked.

"But of course," Celor answered. "Who better to accompany Baden on a scouting mission? I shall send Kurt with you as well. He is a trustworthy soldier who I believe would prove of invaluable help to you along the way, and could easily be disguised as a Drifter, if needed—which with you often seems to

be the case.”

Denith looked slightly embarrassed.

“Only I must ask,” Celor continued, “that you do not speak of me when you see them. I ... don’t feel it is the right time yet—not for me, or for them.”

“As you wish,” Denith respectfully responded.

“So be it,” Celor said, slapping his hand on his knee. “I assume you’ll want to start your preparations right away. The season will soon be good for traveling, and you’ll probably want to leave as early as possible. You will have to be careful, though. In fact, I might recommend the disguise idea myself this time. There is no telling how far you would get in Warrior uniforms without bringing suspicion on yourselves.”

“Yes, Uncle,” Denith answered, breaking into a wide smile at Celor’s suggestion.

“We could send the three of you on horseback. It should be pretty safe as long as you keep to yourselves. Travel quickly, along the main roads when you can. Then you shouldn’t have any trouble.”

“Except for the inns,” Denith reminded Celor. “They don’t allow Drifters. We may have to sleep out in the open, and I have learned from experience that it can be dangerous.”

“I believe you should probably find a welcome place among any Drifter camps along the way,” Celor suggested. “Baden must know a good deal about finding them. I am sure with your reputation and your whispers you’d be readily embraced as brothers.”

“Very well. We shall make our preparations. And, General ... thank you.”

Denith gave a crisp bow of respect before leaving the room, as Celor inwardly chuckled to himself at the strange ways of his nephew.



It was with great anticipation, as well as somber-

ness, that the three men prepared for their journey. It would take almost two weeks on horseback, and they knew the trip would not be without its perils. The tunnel Drifters told Baden the location of the nearest large Drifter camp along their route. Once they reached it, they could be pointed to the next one.

Celor waited by the tavern to see them off. The travelers looked every part the Drifters they were to play, and their steeds were worthy and handsome animals.

“Well, I must admit,” Celor said with a chuckle, “you’re the finest-looking bunch of Drifters I’ve ever seen.”

Baden laughed. Neither Drifters nor Warriors were exactly known for their genteel ways.

“Remember,” Celor cautioned, “take care to avoid Lancer’s men if at all possible. The Shadowed Ones walk among them, and they are sharp. They will be quick to realize you are not just ordinary Drifters. We do not want to alert any of the dark forces to this mission if we can at all help it, and that means avoiding any contact with soldiers, and even the villages if you can. You should be able to acquire and learn all that you need from the Drifters along the way, until you reach the Bluffs.”

With that admonition they set off. The burst of spring made for a pleasant journey, and its soft weather lingered while they traveled.

As Celor had predicted, they learned much along the way from the Drifters they stayed with. While the persistent loss of their forces against Celor’s better trained and more disciplined Guard had kept the Watchers far from the borders of the Protected Territories, they were all the more abundant elsewhere in the Commonlands. And where Lancer was strengthening his own position, the more elusive Shadowed

Ones, servants of a greater darkness, were also making deeper inroads into the lives of those unable to discern their influence.

Commoners, and especially Watchers, were becoming increasingly pale of appearance, losing whatever natural color they had to a faint, stone-like grayness that covered their bodies like a disease, and grew more distinct with time.

Denith recalled the strange illness he had encountered years before with the Countsman children, and how the keys had been able to cure them. But he had never fully understood the nature of that dark illness or how these children had become infected with it. That it was the work of the Shadowed Ones was clear, but how they worked, or why, or what they were trying to accomplish, or even who they were, remained for the most part a mystery to him.

Denith wondered about the fate of his own parents, and whether the peaceful, beautiful place he had once called home had also been overrun by this strange disease. What if it had affected his parents? They did not have the benefit of the keys to keep their eyes open to the colors, nor the teachings of the Drifters that had helped Denith to understand the deeper meaning behind them. Or if they *could* still see the colors, had that made them targets for Lancer's men like the Protected Territories had once been—only without the protection?

He tried not to think about it, but couldn't help feeling troubled.

Baden, meanwhile, kept his ears open for news of his own kin. Drifters were by nature hard to track, even for a Drifter. But Baden remained hopeful that somewhere, somebody would have the clue he needed to lead him back to his tribe.



Denith reined in his horse and stood on the crest of the hill that overlooked the valley. He carefully studied the road that veered to the right, leading to the small village where his parents lived. He smiled. Everything was just as he remembered it. The beauty was still there, and he breathed deeply of the familiar aroma of sea air and forests, as hundreds of memories came flooding back to him. He was content. It was even better than he had dreamed it would be.

It felt as if he'd only left yesterday—though he quickly remembered that an age and more had passed since the day he had bade these parts farewell. He quietly pondered all that had transpired during the years that had passed, since the time he had left his boyhood behind and stepped across the threshold of manhood. All he'd learned, all he'd seen and done—everything had helped to shape him into the Warrior who was now coming home.

But coming home to what? Denith still wasn't sure. What little news they had managed to glean from the Drifters only told them that no Drifters were known to have been near the Bluffs for some time. Because of this, and also because they were still dressed as Drifters, Denith decided to take a longer trail that would lead to the Woodsman cottage from the cliff side, bypassing the village. He did not want to risk running into any Watchers who might have been stationed in the village, or stirring up a commotion there, before he knew what he would find—or not find—at the cottage.

Baden and Kurt kept a respectful silence. They waited till Denith turned and, with a quick nod, signaled his intent to go on.

They rode leisurely down the hill, enjoying the serene simplicity that surrounded them. Kurt had never visited these parts before, and was awestruck

with the beauty around him. He'd heard much from Baden about the common folk who lived here—the simple people who led largely dull lives. But even Kurt could easily see why people were loath to leave such a place. Its natural features were as perfect as if they had just been formed.

It was late morning by the time their horses were making their way down the dirt path that led to the Woodsman cottage. Denith's senses were heightened to such an extent that the world around him seemed to be moving in slow motion. Every step closer to home seemed to bring with it an avalanche of thoughts, feelings, emotions, images, and memories.

Denith wondered whether his parents would recognize him in his disguise, and if so, how they would respond when they saw him. He could see the cozy little cottage coming into view through the trees. Before long they were close enough to distinguish someone working in the little garden to the left of the house.

It must be Mother, Denith thought, although as they got closer he realized the woman was far too youthful to be his mother. Then he saw a small child run out from behind the house and go up to the woman working in the garden. She paused, wiped her brow, and then knelt down to speak with the child.

Denith could not clearly see who it was, but it did bring the fear that perhaps something had befallen his parents, and that they were no longer here.

Still, he determined, I must find out!

As the two figures caught sight of the approaching horsemen, they stood still. The child timidly hid behind his mother's skirt. The woman remained unflinching, her hands on her hips.

That stance, it's so familiar ... Within moments Denith was close enough to tell, and he suddenly realized who this young woman was.

"Keren!" The word escaped his lips, though too softly for her to hear. Indeed, it *was* Keren standing in the garden with a small boy clinging to her skirts.

By now the three men were approaching the wooden gate at the front of the cottage yard. They dismounted just as the front door of the cottage opened. An older man stepped suspiciously forward onto the porch.

Denith's eyes instantly riveted on the man. He looked older, grayer, and had a few more wrinkles around his eyes than Denith remembered, but this was unmistakably...

"Father! Father, it's me, Denith!"

"Denith?" Elden replied with a rather perplexed expression. He walked down the small stairway of the porch to greet his unexpected visitors.

"Yes, Father, it's me!" Denith opened the gate and came up to where his father stood.

Elden looked searchingly into Denith's eyes, and then broke into a broad smile. "Denith! It is you!—All dressed up and looking like a Drifter, for what sake goodness may know, but there's no doubt it's you!"

Elden reached out his arms to embrace Denith, then drew back to look at him once again. "What a fine man you've become!"

Baden and Kurt were standing respectfully just outside the gate, not wanting to intrude.

"Who's there, Elden?" a voice called from the inside of the house.

Denith looked up expectantly at the sound of the familiar voice.

"Miria, Miria, come quickly!" Elden shouted back. "It's Denith! He's come home, Miria! Come quickly."

Denith heard a commotion inside the house, instantly followed by his mother bursting through the front door. She raced down the steps to greet him, but stopped short at the sight of the oddly dressed man

that stood before Elden.

“Don’t worry, Miria. He’s dressed up all funny, but it’s our Denith all right!”

Denith quickly took off the headband that held his hair in place, hoping that this would make it easier for his mother to recognize him. But she already had.

“It is you, isn’t it? It’s really you! You look so very different, but it’s you! Oh, Denith, I can hardly believe it. You’ve come home.” She flung herself into his arms.

Denith held her tight, too overcome with emotion to say anything for the moment.

Elden was the first to interrupt the moment with a tap on Denith’s shoulder. “Denith, you must introduce us to your companions,” he said, beckoning the two men who still stood outside the gate to come closer.

Kurt and Baden walked up and stood alongside Denith.

“Father, Mother, these are my very good friends. This is Kurt, a fellow companion in many journeys of mine, and this is my dear friend Baden, the only true Drifter among us.”

Kurt had instantly taken Elden’s outstretched hand, and then Miria’s. Baden hesitated somewhat. He was a little unsure about how these commoners would react to meeting a “true Drifter.”

Elden didn’t flinch or show any sign of distrust. “Welcome to our humble abode, gentlemen,” he greeted them, clasping their hands in a token of acceptance that put the two strangers at ease.

All the while Keren stood transfixed in the garden, overcome by the shock of seeing Denith again. In her heart she had long given him up, thinking he was gone, never to appear in these parts again. Yet there he was! She felt like turning and running as far away from him as she could.

The little boy had by this time let go of his mother's skirt and let his curiosity get the better of him. He stood at the corner of the house and peeked around at the group of strangers, not saying a word.

Elden quickly caught sight of the little boy and held out his hand towards him. "Come, Barthol!"

The little boy, reluctant at first, soon raced over to stand safely behind Elden. Denith watched quietly. The little boy, in turn, couldn't take his eyes off the group of men.

"Denith," Elden said soberly, "I..." He hesitated.

Miria clasped her hands over her mouth, and watched silently.

"I wish there was another way to tell you this, and that it didn't have to be in the company of so many..."

Baden and Kurt looked at each other, and took a few respectful steps back.

"...but it has to be said," Elden continued gravely. "Denith, this is your son, Barthol. Barthol, this is your father."

"My son?" Denith asked incredulously. All at once he remembered the last night he'd spent with Keren, and quickly looked away. Then, turning back to his father, he asked, "Are ... are you sure?"

"Can you tell me for a fact that he is not?" his father asked.

There was silence.

Baden stole a glance at Kurt, and raised his eyebrows. But Kurt made no response, not wanting to embarrass his friend, and desperately wishing that he hadn't been standing there at this moment.

"Yes, I suppose he could be mine," Denith finally replied.

Baden's eyes widened even further.

"Well, Keren was certainly convinced of it. She came

to us the same morning that you left, telling us the story of Amy's disappearance, about how she'd gone to find you and tell you about it, how you had gone back and stayed with her the night, and then vanished the next morning. She was surprised to find out you had never come back here either. We felt sorry for the poor girl and invited her to stay with us for a while, and help around the house if she needed something to do. It was some time later that it became obvious to your mother that Keren was with child. Since she'd not left the property from the time she'd come to us, we had little reason to doubt her when she told us you were the father. And then, after he was born..." Elden turned and looked down at the child. "Well, he does bear some resemblance, don't you think?"

Denith looked down silently at the boy, who was now eyeing him suspiciously.

The boy, hearing all that had been said, turned to Elden. "I don't like this man. I don't want him to be my father!" Then Barthol turned and ran into the house.

Elden sighed. "Well, I suppose it will take a bit of getting used to on everyone's part. But we couldn't turn Keren out once we realized she was going to have your child. We took her into our family and she has remained with us ever since. It's not always been easy, but I think we did the right thing—for her, for the child, and for you. There, now that's over with."

Keren had remained standing in the midst of the vegetable garden. She had overheard enough of the conversation to know what had transpired, and that Denith now knew about Barthol. Still, she was unsure what to think about his sudden and unannounced homecoming. She wished she could shrink smaller and smaller and hide between the vegetables she was tending. But all she could do was stand there, one

awkward moment after another.

Elden patted Denith's shoulder. "You'd better go see the boy's mother. I imagine she's as shocked as we are at your sudden return, and you'll probably have a few things to settle together."

Denith had not bargained on this. He had thought, with great longing, about what a joy it would be to meet his father and mother again, not realizing that it was a somewhat more extended family he would be greeting.

"This is not as I thought it would be, Father," Denith whispered.

"I know, Son, I know. I am sorry I had to tell you so soon. I would have liked to have met you out where we could have discussed these things in private, but when you appeared out of nowhere, and so suddenly, you put us all in a rather awkward position. Why don't you go and see Keren? We'll take your friends into the house." With that, Elden turned to Baden and Kurt. "You must be thirsty. Come, rest from your travels."

Miria, by this time, had already retreated into the house and was busy preparing some drinks, and setting three more places at the table.

Denith turned and slowly walked towards Keren. She looked much the same as the last time Denith had seen her, and he now wondered why he had not recognized her sooner.

"Hello, Keren," he said softly when he stood in front of her. "It's good to see you again!"

"I thought you'd never come back—like your uncle," she finally managed to whisper. "I'm sorry about the shock this must be. I didn't know what to do."

Denith smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring manner, though he felt anything but assured himself. "I'm sorry, I never meant to ... I mean, I never thought this would have..."

“Happened?” she said, finishing his sentence for him. “Neither did I, but obviously it did. It’s not been easy, Denith. I admire your parents for taking me in. They put their own reputations at stake. An illegitimate child begets an illegitimate child, they say—and now I have proven it true.” She shook her head and continued, “That’s all most people can see when they look at me. But your parents, they’ve seen beyond that. They stood up for me, and took me into their house as their own daughter, and our son as their own grandchild. It’s brought with it a measure of tolerance for me. I owe them much for that.”

Denith reached out and took her into his arms, hugging her warmly, and feeling very sorry for all the pain and hardship he’d caused. He suddenly felt a little foolish for his eagerness to return.

Still, he thought, the whispers did say I was meant to come, so there must be some rhyme and reason to all this.



Baden and Kurt were seated comfortably around a table in the main room by the time Denith entered, dragging behind him a very reluctant and highly embarrassed Keren.

“I have someone I want you to meet,” Denith said, totally unashamed.

Kurt and Baden both stood as Denith and Keren approached the table.

“This is Keren, a dear friend of mine.”

Kurt and Baden both stood and nodded in acknowledgment of her presence.

“Keren,” Denith continued, “this is Baden, and this is Kurt.”

Elden quickly pulled out a couple more chairs so they could all be seated together. There was an uncomfortable moment of silence. Neither Baden nor

Kurt were prepared to start a conversation.

In an effort to break the silence, Denith looked over at Kurt and said "I think you and Keren will have much in common! You are both part Baron."

Kurt then remembered the girl Denith had once told him about. "Ah, so you are the mystery woman of whom Denith spoke!" Kurt replied, turning to Keren, and hoping to make her feel at ease by putting in a good word at the same time. "I have heard much of you, and of your story from Denith. Your mother must be a fine woman. I say that because I know. Truly, anyone who could live with a Baron for any length of time would have to be a fine woman."

He chuckled at his own joke, though nobody else joined in. Kurt quickly stifled his laugh.

"I'm sorry," he continued. "You'd have to have known my father to understand what I mean. Excuse me for my lack of discretion."

After that, the midday meal passed for the most part in an awkward silence. There were a few attempts at conversation, mainly about the people of the town and other local happenings.

When the meal was done, Keren excused herself to tend to her son, and Miria left to clean the kitchen and to start preparing the more elaborate meal she would present her guests with that evening.

When the menfolk were thus alone, Elden felt a little more comfortable about pursuing the question that was really on his mind. "So tell me! I sense that a lot has happened to you these past years."

Denith smiled as he thought back on the many nights he'd spent sitting by the fire, chatting with his father. The fact that Kurt and Baden were sitting right there didn't make him any less comfortable. "Yes, Father, I have much to tell you."

Elden listened intently, barely saying a word and

obviously thrilled with Denith's account of his adventures. With Baden and Kurt filling in details Denith missed, Denith spoke of his life as a Drifter and the things he had learned among them. He spoke of Toilers in the Dark Forest, of joining the Warrior Guard, and of how he had risen to become a commander among them. As Celor had requested, no one made any mention of Celor's name. Elden, however, did get a chuckle out of hearing how his son had earned the title of "Sir" by becoming a commander.

"If it's all the same to you," Elden joked, "I think I'll stick to using just 'Denith' so long as you're here."

They continued to talk all through the afternoon, and barely noticed the passing of time. The women came in and out of the room at times, but did not seek to intrude or impose on the men's conversation. After some time little Barthol discovered the gathering, and quietly crept in and sat himself down on a rug behind his grandfather's chair, intently listening to all the tales that were being told.

Denith had seen him come in, and wondered whether the tales were suitable for such a young child. Keren seemed to have the same concern, and tried to lead him out of the room from time to time, without any success. He always returned after a few minutes, and went back to his cozy place behind Elden's chair. Not wanting to continually disrupt the conversation, they soon gave in to the young lad, who sat as quiet as he could, wide-eyed at the tales of soldiers and swords, of dark forces and colors, Warriors and Watchers.

At last, when all had been told, Elden sat in silence. The conversation had given him much to think on. But now it was time for dinner, and Elden set aside his thoughts to enjoy the table full of delights with the rest of his house.

When it was all over, Barthol was the first to be

THE ROAD HOME

herded off to bed in the room that Denith had once slept in. Seeing as it was a rather late hour to be making any other arrangements, Denith was quick to offer that he and his friends would sleep in the living room on the bedrolls they had brought with them.

It was not long before they were all asleep. It had been a big day for everyone.

THE SEVEN KEYS — WARRIOR LORD

- 2 -

A CHILD'S FATHER

The three men were up early the following morning, as was their custom. They were in the kitchen long before anyone else appeared. Denith had just set the kettle to boil when Keren entered the kitchen, not suspecting that anyone would be there before her.

She stopped at the sight of the three men sitting around the table. "Oh, I'm sorry!"

"Come on in," Kurt invited her. "We're just fixing a morning drink."

"I can do that for you," Keren responded.

Denith sat in his chair, and after a brief greeting said nothing more. He merely watched. Baden in turn watched Denith watching Keren.

Kurt was doing his best to engage Keren in conversation; however, women in these parts were accustomed to remaining distant, if not silent, when it came to conversing among groups of men. Keren did her best to avoid all Kurt's attempts at conversation. What responses she did offer amounted to little more than a quick nod before she turned back to her task. Even after she had finished preparing the men's morning drink, she still continued to busy herself about the kitchen with all manner of tasks of no seeming consequence.

Finally Kurt looked at Denith. “Can you help me, man, and get this woman to sit down? She’s not our servant!”

Denith laughed. “True, she’s not. But I have to say this brew she’s made us is far better than anything I could have set before you.”

Keren hesitated, and looked a little startled. The compliment suited her well, but she was unsure how to respond or what to do next.

Denith came to her rescue. He stood and reached out for her hand and said, “Come, sit down and join us while we talk. I realize it is rather unusual for these parts, but where we come from it is not considered unseemly for a woman to sit and talk with the menfolk.”

“But ... but, what if your father comes?”

“If Father comes, we will explain it to him as well,” Denith answered gently. “There, sit down. Enjoy your drink. We’re in no hurry to go anywhere, and I don’t suspect you are either—so, let’s chat. Did I already tell you that Kurt’s father was a Baron?”

Keren’s eyes lit up as she turned to Kurt. “Ah yes, so I remember. Tell me, how did your father come to the Commonlands?”

Pleased that he had finally gotten her attention, Kurt told her the whole story. “So, truly,” he finished, “I would think your father was a much more honorable man than mine!”

“I don’t really know how honorable my father was,” Keren responded. “I never met him, he left before I was born.”

“That’s right. I remember Denith telling me. So you know *nothing* of your father?”

“Near to nothing,” Keren responded. “I only know what my mother told me of him, that he washed ashore after some shipwreck, but that his companions had

fled before he could be returned to them. She never spoke of these things much, not even to me.”

“That’s when the Barons attacked the Watchers who had gone down to the ship,” Denith reminded Kurt.

“Whatever became of your mother? Have you heard from her?” Baden asked. He was also familiar with Keren’s story.

“No, never a word,” Keren answered, her eyes growing a little moist. “I don’t even know if she’s still alive or not. I told myself that if she was, she surely would have tried to contact me—unless she was being held in a Baron prison or something.”

“What reason could they possibly have for that?” Baden asked.

Keren shrugged her shoulders.

“Have you been back to your house?” Kurt asked.

“No ... no I haven’t,” Keren answered. “I left the day after it all happened, and I’ve never been back since. I couldn’t go back.”

“Then how would you know that she *hasn’t* tried to contact you?” Kurt asked.

“No one has asked for me!” Keren replied.

“Do you think they’d know where to ask for you?” Baden questioned.

“You’ve *never* been back to the house?” Denith asked.

“No!” Keren replied, a little embarrassed at the fact. “I couldn’t. I ... I wanted to bury my past, and live out my life here. Everything was just so messed up that I didn’t know what to do or where to go. You showed us the other world and gave me hope—but then you were gone, Mother was gone! I was left with...”

“You were left with my son,” Denith continued. “I’ve not yet thanked you for taking care of him.”

Keren looked down.

Baden smiled. "Hush, Denith. I fear that the girl is not used to talking about such matters so openly."

Denith was quick to agree. "I'm sorry, Keren."

Just at that moment Elden strode into the room, and it was with much surprise that he saw Keren sitting at the table. Keren quickly stood as if to go about her duties.

"No, please sit down, Keren," Denith said. "Father, will you join us? Here, let me pour you some tea." Denith himself stood up and busied himself getting his father a cup of the brew Keren had earlier prepared.

Elden hesitantly sat down, both he and Keren looking most uncomfortable with this new arrangement.

As much as Baden wanted to interfere and instantly explain Denith's actions, he wasn't sure that it was his place to do so. All he could hope for was that Denith would soon put his father and Keren at ease, and break the silence that had followed his last words.

"Excuse me, Father, I'm sorry," Denith finally apologized as he sat next to Elden. "I believe I bring customs with me that you are not used to. It's only in these parts that women are expected to not mix with the menfolk. Where I've come from, and even among the Drifters, it is not unusual for women to sit and converse together with the men. I don't mean to impose new customs, Father, but I don't see why we shouldn't be able to sit together like this when we are all friends."

Denith knew that his father had never been particularly hesitant to embrace new ideas, especially if the reasoning behind them was sound. As he had expected, Elden broke into a large smile.

"Then please, let us do as you are used to," he answered. "I wish to learn more of the ways that you

speak of. We have been living like we have much too long.”

Keren also gradually relaxed. Miria was in turn surprised when she walked in and found everyone sitting around the table, talking and joking together as old friends. She, however, declined the invitation to join them for the moment, saying she had to tend to little Barthol who had just awoken.

“And so,” Elden asked, “you are now a part of this general’s Warrior Guard?”

“Yes!”

“And that is where you’re intending to return to?”

“Yes. At least that’s our plan,” Denith answered.

Keren’s eyes fell, though Denith failed to notice.

“I have an obligation, Father,” Denith continued. “We’re here on a specific mission to learn as much as we can of what is happening in these parts. But I don’t think any of us are in a hurry to leave here very soon.”

“Well, you’re certainly welcome company,” Elden answered. “I must say that strange things have been happening here. I’m hardly the one to understand it all, but perhaps you know more of these things.”

“What things, Father?” Denith asked.

“Well, it’s hard to explain, but it’s almost like the people in the village are ... starting to lose their color. Perhaps it’s just me. Your mother and I have become rather used to the colors here. But whenever I go to the village, it’s like the colors are duller—and the people too. Some of them, I swear, have hardly any color left in their faces—almost like they are ill.

“The first time I noticed it was when I happened to bump into a group of Watchers about a year back. They were leaving the village, and as they drew closer I saw distinctly that they had no natural color to them

whatsoever. I thought it odd, and must have been staring, because one of them snapped at me and said, ‘What are you looking at, old man?’

“I quickly hurried on, and nothing more came of it. But after that, every time I went back to the village, I noticed others who looked like they were losing their colors as well. But if ever I’d ask them if they were all right, they’d always look at me kind of strangely and ask me why I’d asked. They can’t see the change that’s coming over them, and they continue as if everything is normal. It’s rather eerie if you ask me.”

“I know,” Denith answered. “We have heard of such things happening in other places as well, though I don’t know that I understand much more about them than you do. I do know that there are dark forces behind this, and I can only guess that their purpose is to bring people closer to their world of shadow and darkness in a way similar to how the keys bring people closer to the other world of light and color.”

“Then I imagine these forces must be at great enmity with one another,” Elden added.

“For sure!” Denith answered, adding, “Lancer and his Watchers guard the regions where darkness is becoming darker—even if they don’t know it—and our Warrior Guard protects the regions where the light and colors are beginning to flourish once again—even if we don’t understand everything about it all either,” Denith finished.

Baden now broke into the conversation. “There are many mysteries to the other world—and to the dark forces that rule the netherworld, and much of this one with it. Even through the Whisperers we have only come to understand a fraction of all that happens in these worlds, and how these things affect our world and lives.

“Both of these worlds have their own secrets. We

were hoping, in this journey, to learn at least some of what Lancer and his Watchers have been up to in these regions.”

“I had no idea that the Watchers were that ... evil,” Elden almost whispered.

“The Watchers are only a small part of the dark forces that have foisted their colorless reign on the common man,” Baden explained. “There are other forces, much more sinister, such as those who are behind this strange illness that is infecting the Commonlands, who are the greater danger. But they are also much more difficult to recognize. Only the effects of their presence can be seen, and by that time it is often too late to pin down who they were, where they came from, or where they have gone.

“We call them the Shadowed Ones, and fleeting as shadows they often are too—serving only to show that a greater figure of darkness stands behind them.”

“But come,” Denith said, changing the subject to a more pleasant matter, “we have not come here to discuss shadows and spooks. We are here to enjoy the hospitality of home, family, and friends, and for my part, to relive happier memories of my childhood and enjoy the beauties of a land I called my home as a child.”

“And that shall always be your home, no matter where you are,” Elden chimed in.

“Thank you, Father,” Denith answered.

“And now,” Elden said as he stood up, “while you busy yourself enjoying the haunts of your youth, I’m afraid I have some work to tend to.”

The others stood up with him.

“Of course, Father,” Denith answered, then turned to Baden and Kurt. “Come, I will show you the cliffs, and the spot where I met Hoden, and where I was given the keys.”



For the next few days Denith, Baden, and Kurt rested, and did little besides enjoy the picturesque scenery that Denith had grown up around. Baden and Kurt watched Denith's interaction with Keren and Barthol with great interest.

While Denith remained somewhat distant from Keren, not wanting to involve himself too deeply in any matters that might court commitment from him, he spent much time trying to gain the friendship of little Barthol. He offered the boy rides on his horse, engaged him in conversations, joined him in his games and play, and did whatever he could think of to gain the boy's acceptance, and to—hopefully—become the kind of father figure Barthol could love, if not look up to.

It wasn't until an unexpected visitor arrived at the Woodsman cottage one day that news of Denith's return began to spread through the village. Many became interested in finding out what had happened to the young man who had so mysteriously disappeared years earlier, and suddenly the Woodsman cottage found itself graced by many visitors, all curious to see for themselves if the rumors and stories that were beginning to circulate were indeed true.

But Denith quickly made himself scarce, retreating into the solitude of the great outdoors. Kurt, while remaining respectful of Denith's need for privacy, took it upon himself to keep a watchful eye on Denith from a distance.

Baden, on the other hand, found greater pleasure in staying about the house and being an object of interest for all those who came to visit. He had never been able to observe such a variety of commoners this closely. The visitors, in turn, had never seen a Drifter this close either. While many were reticent at first,

they soon warmed to Baden's presence.

Baden began taking a liking to being the center of attention, even if he did not greatly appreciate the many chuckles his pronunciation of certain common words drew from his audience. Still, he took advantage of any visitor's curiosity to impress them with somewhat exaggerated stories of his exploits and adventures, both as a Warrior with Denith in distant lands and places, and as a Drifter and chief of his own tribe.

But Denith preferred his times of solitude, and often found himself drawn back to the cliffs that overlooked the sea—the place where it had all begun. It was there that he found it easiest to converse with the other world, and to seek instruction as to what he was to do next. His first concern was with all the attention that his presence here was getting. It could very easily bring trouble upon not only himself, but his family as well, if the wrong people became suspicious.

And so he was surprised at first when the whispers instructed him to freely share all that he'd done; to speak of his adventures, but most importantly to talk about the things of the other world with all who were coming by to visit the cottage. He was not to show or mention the keys just yet—a secret his parents had kept to themselves, and that Baden had wisely refrained from mentioning so far. Rather, he was to use the people's interest in his journeys and the tales of his adventures to speak to them about the realms and truths of the other world, just as such thoughts and truths were now being spread across the Protected Territories by the Tunnel Drifters and their messengers.

And so Denith began to spend more time at home, where he patiently spoke with those who came to visit. He found that some were more interested than others.

These would return, asking questions, wanting to hear more and even bringing their friends to hear about and question for themselves the things concerning this other world. Others—inevitably those with less color in their faces—seemed content only to hear a new tale of some adventure, to enjoy the story, but not think any further on its meaning or the implied truths behind the things Denith told them.

But as time passed, Denith became more and more uneasy. The more people came to listen and learn, the more he worried what would happen to these people—and himself—if the Watchers or the Shadowed Ones discovered his presence. But whenever he questioned the whispers, he was assured that no trouble would come to him or these people. It would be safe until it was time for him to move on. And when that time came, he would be told. Only then would it be dangerous for him to stay longer, though the villagers would remain safe. The seeds of truth that were being planted here would remain safely buried until the time was right for them to burst forth. And when this time came, they would burst forth with such vigor that the dark forces would be powerless against them.

Soon after, Baden was instructed by the whispers to begin the search for his own kinsfolk. For all he had been able to discover, his tribe had indeed headed towards these southern coasts for the summer. Beyond that, nothing else had been heard of them in some months. A week after his departure, Baden returned with news.

“I have found what has become of my tribe,” he announced to Denith with a somber face. “The camp was overrun by Lancer’s men some time ago. The menfolk were all killed, and the women taken to a large camp.”

“Are you sure?” Denith asked. “A whole tribe

raided? How could that be—and how is it that none of the other Drifters knew of this?”

“We are a common, but not always a united people. Most of us keep to ourselves. It is hardly unusual to hear nothing about a tribe for several months, or even years. It’s our way.”

“So how did *you* stumble across this information?” Denith asked.

“There is an old common woman, a friend of ours who lives not far from here near a place where we have often camped. Apparently one of our women managed to escape during this attack, and not knowing of any other place to go, she came to this woman’s house.”

“And where is this Drifter now?”

“She left as soon as she had regained her strength, apparently to find help. That was the last the old woman heard of the girl—or of anyone from our tribe, for that matter—until I came to her.”

At this moment Kurt came in and sat himself down beside them. Denith quickly updated him on the news.

“I’m sorry,” Kurt answered, his face downcast.

“What about this camp?” Denith asked.

“From what I have been able to discover, it’s a four-day ride from here, to the east. I have not yet been there myself. I thought it better to report what I have discovered thus far. I don’t know if there’s anything that can be done.”

“A full-scale rescue operation is probably out of the question—at least for the moment,” Denith answered. “There are only three of us, and we have no way of getting reinforcements here anytime soon.”

“I still think we should go there and give the camp a look,” Kurt answered. “As much as I’ve been enjoying the restfulness of this place, I think we’ve accomplished about all we can here. Didn’t the whispers tell

us that this journey would lead us to discover many things? So far we have not discovered very much. But something tells me we may stand to learn a great deal at this camp.”

“What do you mean?” Denith asked.

“For one thing,” Baden answered, “our women are sure to have overheard things. There are some who understand the common language, though this is not generally known, and they are instructed to keep it a secret, and to make no attempt to speak the language. Even if we cannot rescue them, we can at least find out what they know.”

“That could be risky,” Denith warned. “Before we left, we were cautioned to avoid any contact with Lancer’s men if at all possible.”

“I know, I know!” Kurt said. “But at the same time we have to find out what Lancer’s men are up to—and you can’t always do that from a distance”

“Kurt is right,” Baden agreed. Then he paused, and added, “Why don’t you see if perhaps the Whisperers have something to say about all this?”

“Very well. I shall ask,” Denith replied.

It did not take long for the answer to come, instructing Denith to seek out this camp and make contact with the Drifter women as Kurt and Baden had suggested.

Only you must be careful when you make your choice, they cautioned him. There shall be two sisters who are known to Baden. Do not speak with the elder one. This will be difficult for Baden to accept, for his heart has yearned after this woman’s beauty, and he will want to speak with her. But her loyalty is not as true as Baden believes it to be.

Instead, seek out the younger sister, a shy girl who has suffered much at the hands of the soldiers. Because of her hatred for the men and what they have done

to her and her family, she will be the one to talk to, though Baden will try to persuade you differently. But it is important you speak with the right girl. While both will tell you the truth, only one will keep her promise of secrecy.

Denith was startled at the directness and detail of this message from the Whisperers. He found them disturbing. He knew Baden was a man of much force, and once he had an idea, he was very hard to dissuade otherwise. He knew that he could tell Kurt in advance what the whispers had said. But Baden ... what to do with Baden? He would not be so easily convinced.



Denith himself now faced a time of decision. They would shortly be moving on, and he knew there was no way of knowing when they would return. He realized he could not leave without first settling the matter of Keren and his child.

Keren, always perceptive, had already sensed that there were changes in the air. Seeing Denith approaching her, she knew it was time for her to bring up a topic that Denith had been avoiding thus far.

“Is everything well, Keren? Where is Barthol?”

“He is with your mother. I’m sorry that he’s not been very friendly towards you.”

“He doesn’t seem too pleased with me as his father.”

“It’s a shock. I never told him about you. I didn’t know if you’d ever come back. To be honest, I gave up thinking about you myself. I don’t believe he knows what to think about all this. I’m not sure *I* know what to think about it. And now, for all I know, you’re just going to walk off and disappear again.”

“I’m sorry I’ve made it so difficult for you.”

“You *are* leaving, aren’t you?”

“I must continue my mission.”

“I know, and I have been bracing myself for your departure. But I have one question for you, Denith. What of the child?”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Denith responded softly.

“I understand that you feel a sense of responsibility towards this mission and your general, but you also have a responsibility towards your child.”

“I suppose I do.”

“So are you going to make me an honest woman?” Keren whispered so softly that Denith could barely hear her.

“What do you mean?” Denith answered.

The softness of her voice and her familiar demure countenance contrasted strangely with her answer. “I mean that with all of your tales of goodness, loyalty, and helping those in need ... what of me?”

Denith grew silent. Keren’s forthrightness surprised him, and he momentarily found himself at a loss for an answer. “I haven’t really thought about that,” he finally confessed.

“I think you should think of it, Denith—if not for my sake or even the sake of your son, then for the sake of the people who have been watching you. With all that you have told them, are you man enough to come forward and claim this boy as your child, and his mother as your responsibility?”

Denith remained silent for a while. He knew Keren spoke the truth, yet he did not know how to respond. “It’s a very complicated matter, Keren. I am not my own.”

“And if you were your own, would that make your decision any simpler?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think it’s a question of whether you are your own or not. I think it’s a question of your honor. That should stand on its own!”

"So what would you like me to do, Keren?" he asked, somewhat impatiently.

She gazed off into the distance. "I would have liked it if you had never returned in the first place," she replied dryly. "My life was simple, uncomplicated. I could have brought my son up and hopefully taught him to live a good and honest life. But instead you came, and now everything is much more complicated. Suddenly my son knows he has a father, even if he is not too pleased with him. Suddenly I know my son doesn't have to grow up thinking he's a bastard child, and living with the same condemnation that I've had to feel every day of my life. Suddenly he has hope for a future, perhaps even a prosperous one. And suddenly I've discovered that this is what I want—at least for *him*."

In the lack of any response from Denith, Keren continued, "Are you afraid of that, or of me? Are you afraid of what this will mean for your life, and what it'll do to this freedom you keep speaking of?"

"No, I'm not afraid of losing my freedom, or even of fulfilling my honor. But it may take time. I cannot take you with me now. It is too dangerous. And I do not know when or how I will ever come back here."

"Then promise me, Denith. Make a vow that you will be coming back for me, that I am yours and you claim me to be such. Claim that you are the child's father. If you can do that for me, then we can wait, however long it will take. And even so, it's not so much my honor that I am concerned about, but rather the life and future of our child."

"Very well," Denith replied. "I shall fulfill my honor, and claim the child as mine, and you for my own. I do not know when I can return for you, but I promise you that I shall—to be your husband, and my son's father."

THE SEVEN KEYS — WARRIOR LORD



Keren

- 3 -

AT THE ENEMY'S GATE

It was with much reluctance that the men bade Denith's parents, Keren and young Barthol farewell.

Keren's last words were, "Keep your promise, Denith, for the sake of the boy. We'll be waiting for you."

Those words burned in his heart. He knew he had pledged a promise that he would have to keep, yet he felt some apprehension about it. He felt no romantic attraction to Keren, although he was fond of her and enjoyed her company, and he was assured that she would be a good wife and a good mother. Still, in the deep reaches of his heart, he'd always longed for love and passion, to find a fellow soul mate. *But*, he thought to himself, *perhaps it is never to be that way!*

The three men said little as they journeyed. Baden and Kurt seemed to instinctively understand the turmoil in Denith's mind, and they were content to remain silent until it was obvious he had reached an inner acceptance of the path he suddenly found his life following.

After four days of travel, interspersed with minimal conversation between the three, they neared the place where the enemy camp was located.

Being careful not to make themselves obvious, they

kept themselves hidden among the forest as much as possible, keeping a close watch for any soldiers or patrols that would indicate where the camp itself might be. They eventually came to a small, forested hill overlooking a clearing, from which they could look down on what was obviously an encampment of Watchers.

It was late afternoon, and the camp was busy with much activity. From this distance it was difficult to see what they were doing, although they could tell that there were indeed Drifter women in the camp, most of whom seemed to be kept within a large, walled enclosure that had several makeshift houses inside it.

The three Warriors quickly formulated their plans. First, two of them would go down to more closely spy out the camp, and find out what they could about how well it was guarded, and by how many men. Then they could determine the best way to go about making contact with the Drifter women. So, while Kurt remained with the horses, Denith and Baden crept down closer to the camp.

They had soon hidden themselves close to the perimeter of the camp. They had to be careful. Drifter women, like the menfolk, were sharp and would be quick to note any unusual movement nearby. But Baden was no stranger to remaining hidden and silent—an art Denith had also learned during his time with the Drifters—and so they remained undetected.

After some time, they noticed a group of Drifter women being herded towards the enclosure carrying piles of clothes and material that had evidently been washed nearby, perhaps in a creek. Wherever they had come from, it could likely prove a good place to make contact with the women.

Baden and Denith waited a short while longer, and soon another group of women was being herded

from the enclosure in the direction the last group had just come from, with more bundles under their arms. Baden and Denith waited a short while longer before following the group. When they came to the spot where the women had stopped, Denith and Baden took cover in some nearby foliage, and watched and waited.

The women gathered on the embankment of a small river, washing the bundles they had brought with them, treating them with a powder to turn them a light, pasty yellow. Unfortunately, they were being closely watched by the small contingent of soldiers that had accompanied them, which made the prospect of contacting the women here unlikely, at least for the moment.

“That’s our girl,” Baden excitedly whispered. He pointed to a strikingly beautiful Drifter woman, who seemed to stand out among the more elderly ladies she was accompanying. “Her name is Denise—I know her well!” Baden smiled. “She’s from my tribe. She’s brave and unafraid, a feisty little thing. She will be sure to know what’s going on, for I happen to know that she speaks the common tongue almost as well as I do.”

Denith made no response. Instead he surveyed the rest of the group. If this was the girl the whispers had spoken of, perhaps her sister was in this group as well. He looked about carefully and then, at the edge of the group, spied another, younger-looking girl who seemed to be keeping more to herself.

“Who’s that?” Denith asked.

“Ah, that’s Denise’s younger sister, Maya. I don’t see any others from our tribe in this group, though.”

Baden offered no further commentary on Maya. Instead he turned his eyes back to Denise. “I don’t know how we can get in contact with Denise, but she knows me well. If I were to show myself, she would recognize me instantly, and know what I was here for.

Perhaps there's a way we can seek her out at night, while the others are sleeping."

"Shhh!" Denith hushed him, not wanting Baden to pursue that line of thought, and wondering how he could best convince Baden of what the whispers had told him.

"Let's go back to Kurt," Denith whispered, "I think we've seen about all we're going to see here."

Quietly the two men made their way back to where Kurt was waiting, and then the three of them moved deeper into the forest.

"How was it?" Kurt asked. "Did you see anyone you know?"

Baden was quick to respond, "Yes, definitely. Denise is our candidate. I know her well and I'm sure she'd recognize me right away. She would have learned much during her time there—she's always had a way ... you know, around men. She's the perfect one, I tell you!"

Kurt glanced apprehensively at Denith.

"There was another young girl there, Denise's younger sister, Maya. She would also recognize you, wouldn't she?" Denith asked.

"Perhaps, though I barely know the girl," Baden countered defensively.

Denith decided not to pursue the question of which girl they would contact for the moment, and instead they moved on to the topic of how they would go about it.

"From what I was able to observe from here," Kurt explained, "the enclosure itself is not too heavily guarded, though there are many soldiers about the camp. The enclosure where the women are kept is locked with a fairly secure bolt, to which one of the officers carries the key. When it is locked, the enclosure is practically ignored. They probably don't think

the women capable of escaping it.”

“So what do you suggest?” Denith asked.

“Well, we have yet to see how well it is guarded at night, but if it is not, perhaps we could try to sneak towards it after nightfall and unlock the gate,” Kurt suggested.

“What do you mean, ‘unlock the gate?’” Baden retorted. “How would we get ahold of the...” He caught himself, and looked at Denith.

“What? My keys?” Denith asked.

“Exactly,” Kurt replied. “They’ve been known to open any lock you’ve tried them on before, haven’t they?”

“Well, yes,” Denith answered. “But it was always in cases where it was of utmost necessity.”

“And I don’t see any reason why this would be different,” Kurt answered. “In any case it’s worth a try, and would be our easiest option if it worked.”

“So then, this evening?” Denith asked the two men.

“This evening!” they both responded.

“And if it works, all we have to do is find Denise,” Baden said with satisfaction.

Denith took a deep breath, knowing that now was the time to broach the subject of what the Whisperers had told him.

“I’m not so sure about Denise,” Denith began.

“What do you mean?” Baden replied. “I don’t think there’s any question about it!”

“Well,” said Denith slowly, “she may seem to be the most logical choice, but the whispers told me otherwise.”

“What are you talking about?” Baden protested.

“Remember when you suggested I ask the Whisperers if they had anything to say about this trip? Well, they did. Aside from telling me that it was indeed time to go, I also received a somewhat disturbing message. I did not want to mention it to you at the time, but I did

tell Kurt, so that he could provide assurance should it prove to come true, as it now has.”

“Prove what to come true?” Baden asked impatiently.

“I was told there would be two sisters in the camp—and that you would be the most interested in the elder one, a girl you would know well. But the whispers warned me that she was not the one to approach, and that she could not be totally trusted. Instead, they said we were to talk with the younger sister, the quieter one.”

Baden was dumbfounded. He turned to Kurt, who nodded gravely, and then back to Denith.

“I don’t believe it!” he finally said. “How could anyone doubt Denise? She’s a good girl—with truer Drifter blood than you’ll ever understand! You may not have known it, but we were very close, and shared many secrets together. I’ve never known her to be anything but dependable and loyal.”

“That may have been the case before, but for some reason the Whisperers told me that she no longer holds the same loyalties that she once held towards you and your people. I wasn’t told why, but I do know that I was warned of her well in advance of this mission, and as such I must insist that we follow the instructions the Whisperers have spoken!”

“I disagree!” Baden replied angrily, upset that his judgment had been called into question. “Perhaps you misheard the whispers this time, my friend. I know my people. You have to trust my judgment. I’ve lived with them, worked with them, and known them all of my life! You have to trust me. That young girl, she knows nothing. She doesn’t even speak the commoners’ language. What could she know? It’s foolishness to even consider that option!”

“We could vote on the matter,” Kurt said, unmoved by Baden’s passion.

“An excellent idea,” Baden retorted. “And it would

be two against one! But you don't know my people!"

Denith tried to reason with Baden. "Why don't you ask the Whisperers for yourself, then?"

"I don't need to ask them!" Baden was becoming increasingly annoyed, both at the fact that he was obviously outnumbered, and that his assessment of a fellow Drifter was being called into question by these two outsiders. After all, Drifters took great pride in their loyalty to one another.

Denith realized they had little time for arguing, and knew Baden was not going to be easily convinced. Baden was a man of force and impulse. He needed time to get used to new ideas, unless they were *his* ideas.

Baden turned his back, crossed his arms, and stomped indignantly to a corner of the camp, saying nothing more.

When the pause in their discussion had grown uncomfortably long, Baden turned around.

"What are you standing there for? I thought you had a girl to go talk to!"

"And what about you?" Denith asked.

"Well, you obviously don't need me with you, do you? I'm well able to take care of myself here. I hope you two can say as much going into that camp. Besides, someone's got to watch the horses," Baden answered, a note of frustration lingering in his voice.

Denith turned to Kurt. "Let's go, then," he said.

Kurt shrugged his shoulders, and followed Denith. A short distance further, however, he stopped.

"Are you sure about leaving Baden behind like that?"

Denith let out a sigh he had been suppressing.

"I would have rather had him with us than watching the horses. Baden knows as well as you or I do that our small camp is hardly in danger of being overrun. The Watchers have no patrols here that could discover our camp, as close as it is to theirs, and there isn't likely to be any threat from the Toilers either, or we

would have smelled them by now.

“No. Baden is staying back because he wants to, and we don’t have the time to convince him otherwise right now. He’ll come to his senses once he’s had a little time to simmer down. In the meantime, we can’t afford to sit around and wait. The soldiers at this camp may not be aware of our presence, but somebody is. I can feel it. Now that we’re on the move again, we can’t afford to sit still. If we continue to follow the whispers as—and when—they speak, it will hopefully always keep us at least a few steps ahead of whatever else is out there waiting to catch up with us.”

“Well, you’re the expert on these things, I guess,” Kurt said.

“All I know is what the whispers have told me,” Denith answered. “I just hoped Baden would have seen it that way too.”

Kurt thought for a moment before answering. Finally he said, “Baden will always be Baden. I think you’re just accustomed to so easily switching back and forth between being a Drifter and a commoner that you forget that Baden is a Drifter through and through. I know these Drifters, even if not as closely as you. But I know what they’re like on the outside, and those roots of their culture and personality can often be hard to change or overcome.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Denith said with another resigned sigh. “In any case, we have greater concerns before us right now, and we would do well to keep our mind on those.”

“Yes, Commander,” Kurt answered with a smile as he turned back to the trail that would lead them to the edge of the enemy camp.



Stopping atop a small rise from which they could easily look down on the encampment, they watched what appeared to be the last group of Drifter women being led back into the enclosure. The gate was locked

and bolted behind them. The rest of the camp settled pretty quickly, with most of the men retiring to their tents for the night. A small group of soldiers that sat around a campfire on one side of the camp was all there could be seen of a night watch—and they were well out of sight of the enclosure, and chatting calmly amongst themselves. They were obviously not expecting any trouble.

The women in the enclosure also settled rather quickly. Most of the elder ones disappeared into the makeshift houses within it, while stray groups of younger ones seemed to be preparing to spend the night on the ground under the open air. Denith soon spotted Denise milling about them.

Denise had chosen a spot near the entrance, near to where Maya had already fallen asleep. In fact, it seemed most everyone had already fallen asleep—except Denise. She sat up, awake, very alert, looking around as if she was expecting something to happen.

“Maybe she is the right one,” Denith muttered, half to himself.

“Do you think Baden was right?” Kurt whispered.

“I don’t know,” Denith answered. “The Whisperers have never been wrong before. Let’s just wait. She’ll have to fall asleep sooner or later.”

After nearly an hour, Denise was still not asleep. Some movement in a tent outside the enclosure caught Kurt’s attention. He shook Denith, and pointed in its direction. The shadowy figure of a man emerged, and headed swiftly and directly towards the enclosure. Denith and Kurt held themselves low. The man quickly produced a key from under his cloak, noiselessly opened the enclosure gate, then quickly shut it behind himself again.

Denith and Kurt watched as Denise stood up, and walked with lowered head to where the man was waiting. She had been expecting him!

The man silently walked over and took her hand, leading her back towards the gate with him. She gracefully followed, offering no resistance. Once outside the gate, which was again noiselessly locked and bolted, the figure turned to Denise and held her close, allowing his hands to freely roam her body. Then he led her off to the tent he had come from, and the camp returned to a perfect silence.

“So that’s what she was waiting for!” Denith whispered. “The whispers spoke the truth after all.”

Kurt grunted in acknowledgement.

“Let’s go!” Denith whispered. “We don’t know how long it’ll be before she comes back!”

Within moments, they stood before the gate. Kurt looked apprehensively around, still anticipating that they might be sprung upon at any moment by hordes of Watchers.

“Well, Kurt,” Denith whispered as he pulled out the keys, “this is the moment of truth. Either this works, or we’re going to have to come up with another plan very fast!”

Kurt looked a little worried, but Denith had already selected the most likely key, and slid it into the waiting padlock that secured the bolt. The key turned effortlessly, and they were soon safely inside the enclosure. Their entrance was as unnoticed as they could have wished for. There wasn’t even a stir from among the sleeping Drifter women.

“So what now?” Kurt whispered. “How are we going to wake this girl without startling her into a scream that’ll wake up all the others?”

“You forget that I speak the Drifter tongue. I will use that to try and keep her calm, and to convince her that we can be trusted. She may even remember me. Keep watch by the door. If there is any sign of that sister of hers, we’ll have to be prepared for a quick run.”

Kurt nodded. Within seconds, Denith was kneeling down near Maya’s bed—a rough mat on the ground

with some sparse blankets that covered her sleeping form. His approach was not as soft as he had hoped. Maya stirred and opened her eyes. As quickly as he could, Denith placed his hand over the girl's mouth, holding it tight.

"Shhh, Maya! It's all right. Don't scream. I'm a friend," Denith whispered.

Maya's fearful eyes stared up into Denith's, though she became less resistant when she heard her name—spoken in her native language.

"Now I'm going to take my hand away. But you have to stay quiet, or we could all get ourselves in much bigger trouble!" he whispered again.

Maya nodded.

Slowly, Denith removed his hand from her mouth. She remained silent, looking up at him questioningly.

"Who are you?" she whispered suspiciously. "And what are you doing here?"

"I am Denith. You may remember me. I stayed for some time with your tribe. I carried a Baron sword, and a gift from the other world." With that, Denith pulled open his pouch to reveal the keys glowing within it. Maya's eyes widened in surprise. It had been many years since this strange commoner had disappeared from their camp with Baden. He had never been heard of again.

"I did not know you could speak our tongue," she said with admiration.

"I learned it from Baden," Denith answered. "After we found Charine, we stayed among her people for some time."

"Baden?" Maya questioned. "Is he here?"

Denith bit his lip, and at the same time Maya noticed Kurt standing near the gate.

"Is that him?" she asked.

"No. He's ... watching the horses. I'm afraid you won't be seeing him, at least not for the moment. We

have come to find out what you are all doing here, and we may not have a lot of time. What has become of your sister, Denise?”

Maya looked down, ashamed.

“I must know,” Denith insisted. “How long till she will come back?”

“The colonel has taken a liking to Denise,” Maya confessed. “Many nights he comes to get her, and then returns her within the space of about an hour. But ... but how did *you* get in?” she suddenly asked.

“With the keys,” Denith whispered triumphantly, pointing towards the pouch. “They can open any lock when they need to. But that is not important right now. What is important is that we find out why you’ve been taken captive like this, and that we disappear before your sister returns. She must not suspect anything.”

“You have not come to rescue us?”

“I’m sorry. We are only three men, even if we are Warrior Guards.”

“You’re Warrior Guards?” Maya said in shock.

“Yes,” Denith answered. “Why? Have you heard of us?”

“It is the Warrior Guards that we are working for,” Maya responded.

“What? What do you mean? These parts are way beyond the borders of our Protected Territories. We have never even ventured *into* the Borderlands, much less all the way to the Bluffs.”

“I know nothing of Protected Territories, but I do know that we’ve been forced to make colored uniforms for Lancer’s men.”

“Colored uniforms?” Denith asked with some surprise.

“Yes, yellow tunics and cloaks, and red leather breastplates. It is all we have been making for many days.”

“That cannot be. Why would Lancer be using

our colors, or even making colored uniforms for his men?"

"It is strange, I know. But many strange things have been happening. We have had little choice but to go along with their orders. They need us to make them, as they cannot see colors themselves."

"See colors? They don't even *believe* in the colors! How could they be doing this?"

Maya shrugged.

"And what does this have to do with the Warrior Guard?" Denith continued.

"We imagined it was a new division of Watchers," Maya answered.

"Strange. The only Warrior Guard I know of is the one actively fighting against Lancer and the dark forces behind his men. We have defeated them in many battles, often with the help of the Drifters. I don't see what Lancer is hoping to accomplish. Even if his men were dressed like ours, we would know they were strangers as soon as they came anywhere near our Territories. Their pasty faces would give them away instantly."

"From what we've been able to learn, the men these uniforms are being prepared for will not be sent into the Commonlands."

"What do you mean?" Denith asked again.

"We are making these uniforms for men who will be sent across the seas."

"To the Barons?" Denith asked in surprise.

Maya nodded.

"An attack?"

Maya shrugged.

"They could never hope to defeat the Barons!"

"I only know what I've heard. Some think General Lancer is seeking an alliance, and that he needs colored uniforms to approach the Barons, who it is said know the colors also."

Denith thought aloud. "They would hardly be using

Warrior Guard uniforms for that purpose, or calling themselves by our name.” Then it struck him. “Unless they *are* planning to attack, knowing that they *will* be defeated.”

Maya looked at Denith strangely.

“That must be it!” Denith continued excitedly. “They could be planning to deliberately provoke the Barons to attack *us*. Lancer wants to play his two enemies against each other. Maya, you have helped us greatly.”

“We all help each other here,” Maya answered. “If somebody learns something, we tell each other. I don’t speak the common language myself, but I have been able to learn much from the others. Perhaps Denise knows more, seeing as she spends so much time in the colonel’s tent.”

“You must not speak to her about any of this!” Denith warned. “She cannot be trusted.”

“I know,” Maya said, looking towards the ground. “She used to tell me things she learned, but not anymore. I think she is starting to like the colonel, and the things he promises her.”

“I’m sorry,” Denith said.

“Perhaps if I pretend to be more agreeable, to want the things she wants, I can learn more of what is going on,” Maya continued.

“Perhaps,” Denith answered. “Only be careful not to be too agreeable. These are strange and sharp men. They have ways of sensing things that could put you in danger if you are not careful.”

Maya nodded soberly.

“Thank you, Maya. I must go now. I’d rather not be around when that colonel returns with your sister.”

Maya nodded again.

“Is there any way we can get in contact with you again?”

Maya thought for a while. “Use a piece of yellow cloth. Bring it to where we do the washing. I am often

with the women when they go there. Hang it on a bush on the other side of the brook. There are many bushes there, and tall grass too. It is easy to hide. I shall come for the cloth, and if you are there, I will tell you all I know.”

“You are a brave woman, Maya, to help us like this,” Denith responded.

“If my staying here and doing this for you will help in any way to defeat these men and forces that have brought this upon us, then I shall thank the ways of the other world for placing me here. But you will return?”

“Yes ... or someone will. We must return to the *real* Warrior Guard, to inform them of what is happening here. But we shall arrange that perhaps some of your own people can remain in contact with you, who can then carry the news of whatever you can tell them to us.”

“I shall do my best.”

“I know you will,” Denith answered. “And now, I must go. Remember, no one else is to know anything about this—least of all Denise.”

“I understand.”

With that, Denith stood up, and quietly made his way back over to Kurt.

“Coast still clear?” Denith whispered.

Kurt nodded. “What did you learn?”

“Much. But we don’t have time now. Let’s get out of here, and I’ll tell you everything.”

Quietly, Kurt nudged the door open, and both men left the enclosure. Kurt slid the bolt back in place, and Denith pulled out the keys to lock the door again. They were only slightly aglow.

“Hurry,” Kurt said. “I hear noise.”

Denith quickly turned the key. For a moment, the padlock glowed, and then returned to its normal color. Denith lingered for a moment, wondering if he had really seen what he had just seen. But then Kurt

pulled him.

“It’s the colonel!” he whispered urgently.

At that, the two men quietly stole to a nearby cluster of bushes, and hid themselves.

Nobody had noticed them. The only movement in the camp was the colonel’s figure, leading Denise back to the enclosure—and he passed so close to Denith and Kurt that they could almost hear him breathing. They kept as quiet as they could.

In a few more steps, the colonel had reached the gate, and pulled out his key to open the padlock. Then the man pulled back, and looked around, gazing curiously in all directions.

Denith and Kurt froze. Had the man sensed their presence? Had they dropped something, or had he distinguished their running footprints?

The colonel turned back to the gate. Kurt and Denith noticed that the man seemed to be having some trouble opening the lock. He kicked at the doorpost, and told Denise to wait where she stood. He stomped back off in the direction of his tent, and returned with another key. It did not work either.

Denise looked a little worried, or embarrassed. They couldn’t quite tell which. But the colonel was obviously frustrated. “What is this?” they could hear him mutter. “This key worked fine an hour ago! Somebody’s tampered with the lock. GUARDS!”

Denith and Kurt looked at each other in alarm. A group of soldiers quickly came over to the enclosure.

“All right!” they heard the colonel demand angrily, though not too loudly. “Who was it that jammed this lock? I will know, or I will have you all strung up naked for the night!”

The guards looked at each other nervously. “No one, sir. We ... we were all keeping watch. We saw nothing.”

“Of course you saw nothing,” the colonel retorted,

and then pointed towards Denise, who stood looking shamefacedly to the ground. "In the meantime, this Drifter wench has been sneaking around the camp doing who knows what until she finally had the nerve to come rifling about in my *own* tent! Well, don't just stand there! Go wake the gatekeeper."

The men had soon returned, and the gatekeeper—the man whose duty it was to tend to the comings and goings of the Drifter women during the day—quickly tried his own set of keys, none of which worked either. He bent down to inspect the lock—which was not very easy in the flickering light of the guards' torches.

"I can't really see anything," the man confessed. "Perhaps the moisture of the night air has made the lock stick. I see no signs of any tampering, but perhaps a more thorough inspection in the light of day will tell us more."

"Humph!" the colonel grunted. "Very well. Then chain this woman to a stake in the ground for the night. That should teach her to stay with the others when she's supposed to!" With that, the colonel turned to leave, followed by several silent but knowing glances from his men.

Once Denise had been chained, the guards dispersed and returned to their campfire. Soon the scene grew quiet again, and Denith and Kurt felt safe enough to return to where—they hoped—Baden was still waiting for them.



Baden was sitting with his back against a tree when they arrived. He was awake, but glum, looking blankly into the distance. He did not acknowledge the two men as they walked into the clearing.

"Mission accomplished," Kurt announced in his most encouraging voice.

Baden only grunted.

"Well, do you want to hear how it went?" Kurt asked.

Baden shrugged his shoulders.

Denith plopped down opposite Baden, while Kurt found a tree of his own to lean against.

“I’m sorry it had to be this way,” Denith said. “But I had to go on what the whispers told me—and all they said proved true.”

Baden let out a long sigh, and looked up. “I know,” he finally confessed. “I’ve had a bit of time to sit and listen to them myself while you were gone. There wasn’t exactly much else to do.”

Denith smiled, and proceeded to fill both Baden and Kurt in on all that he had learned from Maya.

“So what’s next?” Baden asked when he was done.

“I’m not sure,” Denith responded. “But for one, this news has to be brought to Celor and the Town Council as quickly as possible.”

“So, back to the Protected Territories, then?” Kurt asked.

“Yes, in the morning, after a good sleep,” Denith answered, stifling a yawn. “It will be a long, hard ride, and we’re going to need all the rest we can get.”

- 4 -

INFORMED

Baden was the first to wake. The light of the newly risen sun was casting its glow on the treetops above them, promising to soon disperse the damp chill of the night that still lingered on the forest floor.

Baden quietly rose and began preparing a simple breakfast from their last remaining provisions, which consisted of little more than bread, some cheese and fruits. His puttering around, as well as his tending to the horses, soon woke Denith and Kurt, and before long they were all seated around their small repast, as Kurt and Denith spoke more of their adventures of the night past.

“I still wonder if that lock getting stuck had anything to do with the keys,” Denith commented.

“What do you mean?” Kurt asked.

“Well, it unlocked fine for us, remember? But when I turned the key to lock it again—you didn’t see it, but for a moment that lock glowed.”

“You think your keys did something to it?” Kurt questioned.

“They probably enchanted it,” Baden offered playfully.

“That’s what I suspected too,” Denith answered without looking up. “As far as I remember, that’s the

first time I've locked something with them."

"What I can't believe," Baden said, putting his food down, "is how Denise could have turned like that. Why would she attach herself to this man who obviously has no regard for her at all?"

"Perhaps she has a thing for men in power," Kurt grunted, as he worked another piece of bread into his mouth.

"She had a thing for me, once," Baden said softly. "I wasn't exactly a 'man in power' in my tribe."

"I wouldn't say that," Denith answered. "As I recall, you had all the markings of becoming quite influential among your people. They listened to you, and I'm sure you would have made an excellent elder in time, had we not left when we did."

"You think so?" Baden asked.

"You are a good man, Baden," Denith encouraged him. "And an excellent teacher. The Warrior Guard would not be what it is today without you."

"Humph," Baden grunted skeptically—though his contented smile told Denith those words were greatly appreciated. "But falling for a colonel of the Watchers..."

"That's all some women want," Kurt cut in. "I've seen it before. They go for the most powerful. For a while it may be you, but then another comes along, and they move on, and it's like they never knew you—and you begin to realize you never really knew them."

"Well, at least I've never had much trouble with that," Denith said, shaking his head. "And after what's happened with Keren, it's not likely I ever will."

Denith chuckled, but Baden and Kurt just looked at one another. It was the first time Denith had mentioned Keren since they'd left the Bluffs. They wondered exactly what he meant by those words, but

Denith had already left the topic, and came back with a question of his own. “How about Celor? Does he ever see any women? He’s never spoken to me of any.”

“Oh, Celor keeps to himself,” Kurt answered. He seemed reluctant to say more at first, though soon continued, carefully choosing his words. “There is one woman—she lives on the outskirts of our town. Seems they were acquainted once upon a time, as she came to live among us not long after Celor did. He visits her occasionally, though they are never seen together in public. Some say that perhaps she was another man’s wife that he stole, and that that is the reason for their secrecy together, though it’s hard to know if there’s any truth to such rumors. And you know Celor—he doesn’t speak of anything he doesn’t want to speak of.”

“I see,” Denith said with a knowing nod, and then glanced back over at Baden.

He had grown quiet again, and looked deep in thought. In reality, he felt quite remorseful about his fit of bad temper the night before, and about how wrong he’d been in his judgment.

Denith remembered there was another matter to be tended to. “Baden, now that we have an informer within this camp, we need to find a way of continuing to communicate with her to stay abreast of what the enemy is doing. She has agreed to help us, but we need to find some way to relay messages back and forth from these parts to the Protected Territories. Do you think the local Drifters would help us?”

“I’m not sure. If other Drifters hear of this place, it is more likely they’ll mount an offensive to come and rescue these prisoners.”

“The time for that may come,” Denith said. “But for now I think we’d do better to leave them where they are, and learn more about Lancer’s plans. We

may discover something that could help us defeat him in more ways than simply overrunning this one little camp.”

“I could try to approach them about it—though if we don’t want the whole Drifter world getting up in arms about this, I’d probably want to stick with just one small tribe. And perhaps they could even help us to stay informed of more than just what’s happening at this camp.”

Denith looked at Baden. “What do you mean?” Denith asked.

“It’s something the whispers were telling me about last night—an idea they gave me: I could set up a whole network of contacts throughout this area. Drifters move around a lot, and could learn much about many parts, and still keep moving to remain undetected. We could stay informed of any new developments in these parts without having to send our own men on such long and dangerous trips. We Drifters are fully familiar with staying out of the way of these Watchers. I daresay, my people could use their skills just as easily to get safely closer to these Watchers—if only someone could get them organized enough to do it.”

Kurt, catching on to Baden’s intentions, smiled. “And we all know who could best pull off a job like that,” he said.

“That is, if you don’t mind,” Baden answered. “You may have had your fill of excitement last night, but I don’t feel I’ve quite had my share of adventure yet.”

Denith nodded, and then spoke. “If Lancer is planning a strike against the Barons, there are probably other camps like this one around. We ourselves are hardly familiar with the terrain, and even if we were, we’d never have the time to discover *everything* Lancer may be up to here. But if you think the Drifters can, then we could have a steady stream of dependable

information.”

At those words, a troubled look suddenly fell across Baden’s face. “What if there are others like Denise among them?” he asked hesitantly. “What am I to do? I have obviously not been so reliable a judge of character as I thought myself to be.”

“Perhaps now that you realize this, you will do better at it,” Denith replied.

“Yeah, and if you’re a little quieter, maybe the Whisperers won’t have such a difficult time getting through to you about these things either,” Kurt added with a playful jab in Baden’s direction.

Baden narrowed his eyes, and responded with a firm and unexpected punch to Kurt’s upper arm that almost sent him stumbling into a thicket behind him.

“Ow!” Kurt cried as he pulled a thorn from the back of his leg, and nursed the spot with his hands.

Neither Denith nor Baden could stop themselves from laughing at Kurt’s childish face and exclamations, and soon—for the first time since they had left Denith’s home—the three men were laughing together once again. Their unity had been restored.



General Celor was not surprised to see only Denith and Kurt waiting for him when he arrived at Edward’s relatively secluded farm. He had heard that only the two had returned and instantly hurried there to greet them and hear what news they had to tell.

“Denith, Kurt, it is good to see you both again,” he greeted the two men as they rose in his presence. “Was the mission successful?”

“Indeed, it was,” Denith answered. “We have learned much on our travels.”

“And what of your parents? Are they well?”

“They’re well, as is my son and his mother.”

Celor looked surprised. “You never told me you had a son.”

“I didn’t know I had one,” Denith responded somewhat dryly. “But that’s another story!”

“And one I’m sure I’ll be most interested in hearing. But first things first. Did you discover anything of Lancer’s doings?”

“There is a chance that Lancer may be planning to launch an attack against the Barons,” Denith began.

“Absurd. His men would be defeated before they even landed. They are no match for the Baron armies.”

“That is why it will likely be a surprise attack. But the biggest surprise of all is that they are going to be dressed in the uniform of our Warrior Guard.”

“What?” Celor asked, astonished.

“They have taken large numbers of Drifter women captive, and are forcing them to recreate our uniforms, since their own men can’t discern the colors,” Kurt explained.

Celor slumped back onto a couch, and sat silently for a while. Kurt and Denith seated themselves again as well.

“This is news,” Celor finally muttered. “Lancer using the colors ... and attacking the Barons. What else have you learned?”

“Besides that, there is not much else we know at the moment,” Denith answered. “But Baden and his Drifter friends will remain in direct contact with one of the Drifter women in the camp. Hopefully we’ll be able to learn of any further important developments as they happen. And if Baden has his way, we may soon be hearing a lot more about Lancer’s movements from the Drifters who roam those areas.”

“Ah, Baden—energetic as always. How is he?”

“He was well when we parted, though we had our moments of difference.”

Denith and Kurt proceeded to tell Celor the whole story of their adventure seeking out and getting into the camp of prisoners.

“I believe Baden shall act in the greatest of carefulness now,” Denith affirmed. “He knows perhaps more than any of us what’s at stake for his people, and ours. In any case, if he can accomplish even half of what he set out to do, it could do us more good than a hundred of our own scouting missions combined.”

“Brilliant, brilliant idea! Our own informers all over the Commonlands, staying undetected by the Watchers and Toilers while at the same time carefully observing their movements. I could hardly think of a better man than Baden to attempt a feat like that.”

“Indeed,” Kurt answered.

“But this news of Lancer orchestrating an attack on the Barons in our guise is most disconcerting. They are a vengeful people, and will be sure to retaliate,” Celor mused.

“Which is probably exactly what Lancer is hoping for—and we are in no way ready to face retaliation from such a powerful enemy,” Denith answered.

“We are going to have to find a way to stop them,” Celor declared.

“That could be difficult,” Denith answered. “We don’t know anything yet about how many men he is working with, or even when or from where they are planning to set sail. And even if we did, to send our armies after them could leave the Protected Territories quite unprotected.”

“True. I shall have to give all this news some thought. Though it is clear to me that there is not much we can do until we are more sure of exactly what Lancer is hoping to accomplish.”

“What about Edward, and the Town Council?” Denith asked.

“The Town Council?” Celor retorted. “They do not understand war and its ways. They are men of peace and trade. They would have little counsel to offer, and what they did have to say, we’d then be obligated to go along with. No, Denith. Leave them to their concerns. For the moment, this need not be one of them.”

Denith nodded. He did not entirely agree with Celor, but he respected the authority of his uncle, the Chief Commander of the Warrior Guard.

Kurt, who had until now remained mostly quiet, stood up. “Gentlemen, I perceive you have many other things to speak of with each other, so I will leave you to them. For my part, I am still weary from our travels, and think I shall get me some rest.”

The two others nodded, and Kurt left the room.

“So, Denith,” Celor asked when they were alone, “what is this business about your son?”

Denith told him all about the reunion with his parents, and the surprises that had come with it. He repeated almost word for word his last conversation with Keren.

“The honor of a man,” Celor said thoughtfully. “She’s right, you know. There is an honor that needs to be upheld, and no doubt the boy needs a father. What do you plan to do about this?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t have any plans. I mean, what *could* I do?”

“You could bring them here, within the Protected Territories. In fact, I think you *should* bring them here, to live with you. It would be good for you. It would do you good to be a little more in touch with the realities of life.”

“But what sort of a life would it be for Keren to be married to a busy commander of the Warrior

Guard?”

“A lot better than her not having any husband at all. You have promised yourself to her?”

“Yes.”

“Then there’s little room for argument. You cannot go on pretending none of this ever happened. No, Denith. It is your duty to bring her and the child here. It is probably safer for them anyway. You are a wanted man. If the Watchers discover you have a child—and they have ways of learning such things—your family could easily become a target.”

“So you mean for me to bring my parents as well?”

“Ah, yes, your parents. You did not tell them of me?”

“You asked me not to.”

“And I’m sure you had adventures enough of your own to talk about anyway.”

“Oh, yes. They wanted to hear everything. Even others in the village started coming by to hear my stories. But I think it would be a greater thrill, especially for my father, to learn that you are still alive.”

Celor grew quiet again, and almost looked troubled.

“Why don’t you want to meet them?” Denith asked.

“It is not that I don’t want to meet them. But there is so much that has happened, things I have tried to forget. I know to see my brother would bring it all back. But perhaps it is time for me to face the reality of what I have done as well.”

Denith looked at his uncle curiously.

“Do you think they could keep such things to themselves?”

“I know my father would. You may have to be more careful what you speak of around my mother.”

“Then so be it! Let them come—and your wife and child! They will be safe here, at least as long as we are.”



Lancer was in a favorable mood. The news from the Borderlands had been good. Preparations for the staged attack on the Barons, a plan that he and Lord Urkhin had perfected together, were nearly complete. By the season of harvest, all would be ready, and soon after that this Warrior Guard, and that cursed Baron Sword among them, would be no more.

Lancer’s own preoccupation with this plan had largely pushed all thoughts of the strange figure that used to haunt his consciousness. Perhaps it had all been his imagination in the first place—some dream he had dreamed, or the effects of some odd food he had eaten. Whatever the case, it bothered him little now, and he had not thought on the figure’s presence for some time. Soon, this Warrior Guard would be no more—and when the Barons would attack, their techniques would be closely observed, and might perhaps lead to some clue as to how they too could eventually be defeated, and their lands added to his domains.

Pitiful creature, the dark figure thought, once again observing Lancer. And yet, with a little direction, so perfectly suited to serving my interests. What he will not hear from me, he seeks from my Toilers. It could not have been any better had I planned it so myself. And even his pathetic imaginations might be made to serve my purposes still.

The dark figure waited until Lancer was once again alone, engrossed in papers on the affairs of the rest of the Commonlands that were proceeding nicely, almost of their own accord, as they should.

“You have wondered what more you can do to stop this illness of those who see color,” the figure said. His

act of speaking immediately revealed his form, and he became visible to Lancer with the same glowing aura of white that he had always had about him.

“Not again!” Lancer growled wearily. He rubbed his eyes. The vision was still there. He ran to a basin of water, and splashed some water on his face. The vision was still there. He walked onto the veranda and breathed deeply of the fresh air. He turned around.

The figure still stood, patiently—and somewhat amusedly—waiting in the room. For a moment, through the window, Lancer caught sight of the figure’s eyes. They had always been hidden, but now he could see them, staring straight back at him. The look was filled with coldness, and yet a calculated interest in the man they were beholding.

Lancer turned his gaze, and at the same time came back into the room.

“What is it that you want?” he asked, still avoiding the being’s eyes. There was a bewitching power in that gaze. Lancer knew it. He realized, though he could not say why, that those eyes were far better avoided than met.

“The question is, what do *you* want?” the figure answered. “Do you just want to squash this insignificant little rebellion, or do you want to learn the cause of this illness of color that infects them?”

“I am not interested in myths,” Lancer stated.

“I do not bring myths. Only truth, if you will hear it. Or do you want to continue eating from the primitive hand of knowledge that those Toilers have been offering you?”

Lancer breathed a silent hiss of contempt at this taunt, but held his temper. It would do him little good against this specter.

“So what can you tell me of these colors and those who see them that the Toilers cannot?”

“Much, and little. That is, there is much I could tell you, but little you would comprehend. You once said there is no other world. There is. It is the world that those who imagine the colors see—the world their diseased condition creates around them. It is an imaginary world, with imaginary beings and imaginary powers. But to them, it is real enough, and because this imagination makes them a threat, it must be counted as a threat itself.”

“How do I know you are not an imagination? You appear and disappear as quickly as one.”

“Because you can make an imagination appear and disappear at will. You cannot do the same with me.”

“How unfortunate,” Lancer muttered beneath his breath.

The creature heard it well, though, and ignored it just as easily.

“Back to the threat of this other world,” the being continued. “Because it is real to those who believe in it, their persuasions of it become very convincing—and the next thing they want to do is spread those persuasions to everyone they meet. Why live in a world without color when there is a much better world all around that you could be living in, that you could be seeing? Of course, those with any logical sense will see that there is no such thing as color. But there are always those who are ready to believe anything if it is made to sound attractive enough, and that is how they become infected, to where they themselves start believing they are seeing these things.”

“There is still one thing about these colors that puzzles me,” Lancer said. “If they are not really seeing them, then why do they all see what is not there in the same way?”

“Ah, but that is where you understand wrong. They do not all see the same things. They just use the same

names. If one hears that the sky is blue, then whatever they see as the sky, they will call blue. And because this illness spreads from one to the other, they all describe what they see to each other, and so think they are seeing the same things, when it is just their imagination that is making the distinction between what is one color and what is another.”

Lancer didn't quite follow the logic of that answer, but the creature spoke it so matter-of-factly that he did not wish to appear ignorant by questioning it. “So if all these things are just in their imagination, as you say, then why don't they just make them go away?”

“Because they don't want to—and because they don't realize it is their imagination. To them, this other world they live in is real. And if you do not want to lose your lands to this other world, in which you are but a meaningless figure, and your Watchers are despised and considered creatures of shadow, then you must realize that the imagined reality of this other world—and not merely the Drifters or commoners who speak of it—is your enemy.”

“So, what are you saying?”

“I am telling you that it is not enough to merely go after these Warriors, to ostracize the Drifters, to keep the Barons from entering your borders. Your people must be instructed and taught against these strange sayings of colors and other worlds, as you so well have been.”

“And how am I to do that?”

“That is where I can help you,” the figure answered, and Lancer once again found his eyes drawn, almost involuntarily, to the being's piercingly cold stare. “There are those among us who are more concerned with the spread of these colors than you are. We have already taken it upon ourselves to instruct as many as we can against these things. But there is one who

threatens to be the undoing of all our efforts—and yours.”

“You are speaking of this Warrior with the Baron sword?”

“Indeed. In fact, he has more than a sword. He carries with him a strange ring of keys that he uses to infect others with these colors. It is as if he casts strange spells on people with these keys, and thus his influence and fame has grown as rapidly as it has. These keys even gave him a mysterious power over the Toilers, so that he could command them to attack your men. They are the true secret of his strength, of his fame, and of his danger to your rule.”

“Then it will be taken care of soon enough,” Lancer replied. “Soon he and that Warrior Guard will be no more.”

“That may not be enough. Who knows what sort of powers those keys wield? What if I could tell you that these keys and powers were created by the Barons, and that it is they who have sent this lad into your lands to turn the commoners against you, as he is so well doing?”

“If that is the case,” Lancer replied smugly, “they will think he has turned against them the moment they are attacked by his ardent followers, and he will be destroyed just the same.”

“But think of the opportunity you shall be wasting. You could get your hands on those keys and learn of their power for yourself! Think of what you might learn of the Barons through them, if you held them in your hands!”

Lancer stopped for a moment to think it all over. Then he frowned. “I’m still not so sure about all this. If these keys are indeed such a great concern to you, why don’t you just get them for yourself? I have little use for mythological powers, or stories about them.”

“Which is exactly why you remain a mere mortal stooge. Don’t you see that I could give you so much more?”

“You have given me nothing so far,” Lancer answered, and with a chuckle added, “aside, perhaps, from an unwelcome headache or two.”

The creature let out a long and audible sigh. “You have forgotten so much more than we intended, dear Lancer. But perhaps it is all for the best. Go ahead,” the creature cooed. “Plan your little attack. Wreak your little vengeance. Perhaps it will help you to learn just exactly what you are dealing with, and how I can help you!”

Then the creature vanished, the only proof of his appearance being his words that still echoed in Lancer’s consciousness.

Lancer shook his head, trying to dislodge the words. He walked back to the bowl of water and splashed his face once again, hoping to make sense of it all.

That vision becomes more irritating every time it shows up. Keys and powers and colors and imagined realities ... it’s enough to make a man lose his mind! Perhaps that’s what this is all about! What if the Drifters or the Barons have placed some sort of spell on me, and are trying to lure me into capturing those keys for some nefarious reason of their own, to cause my downfall?

But I shall do nothing of the sort. Instead, I shall make those pesky Warrior Guards wish they’d never seen a Baron sword. And then, if it is the last thing I do, I shall hunt down and destroy any who affiliate themselves with whatever people or powers are turning my world into this living nightmare—be they Drifter, Commoner, Toiler, or Baron!

- 5 -

COUNCILS AND PLANS

After several weeks of his own adventures, Baden finally returned to the Protected Territories with the news Celor and the Warrior commanders had been waiting for.

“It is not going to be any small strike. Some one thousand uniforms and twenty ships are being readied. The plan is for each ship to launch separate attacks all along the Baron coasts. The men will retreat back to the safety of their ships before the Barons have a chance to strike back. They will attack at the time of harvest, when they believe most of the men will be busy in the fields, and the Baron forces will be caught short—at least until they can gather to retaliate against us. They shall leave enough of the Barons alive to witness the atrocities they will commit in our name, to ensure that their vengeance will be directed against us, and not them.”

Baden was almost excited as he blurted out the details of what he had learned.

Celor, Denith, and the other commanders listened gravely.

“You seem quite enthralled with this plan,” Sir Albert mumbled unenthusiastically at Baden’s delivery when it was done.

But Baden was not one to be intimidated, and his face nearly flushed red with indignation as he answered, "It is a plan bold beyond anything the dark forces have attempted before, though no less devious. And my people have put their lives in danger to discover these things, and bring news of this to you. We have controlled our own hatred and anger at our women being taken captive for this plan, and stifled our urge to go in by force and rescue them—all for the sake of bringing you this knowledge without Lancer knowing that you possess it. So take care before you fault me for seeming proud of this accomplishment, and of what my people have learned for your sake."

Celor looked surprised at Baden's forceful reply. He had not been around this Drifter as much as Denith had, and his behavior took both him and the other commanders by surprise. Baden had his own way of commanding respect, even if he would take no official rank upon himself.

The silence that followed was finally broken by Celor. "Well, men, there you have it. This is the predicament we are up against. There is little question that the Barons will retaliate swiftly and with deadly vengeance. In all likelihood they will be fooled by this ruse of Lancer's, for it is being carefully orchestrated. It is also not difficult to anticipate the Barons' retaliation, for anger and vengeance are hasty, and will not linger to devise deceptive measures when direct ones are plainly sufficient. They will strike our coast first, and continue meting out death and destruction as they cut across our lands until their revenge is pacified, and our Guard destroyed. So, commanders, what are we to do?"

Denith looked around the room at the men of war gathered around him. These commanders, while strong and able Warriors, were also the rougher and

more forceful sort of men—the type that might easily be taken for Traders had they worn different garb. Denith did not feel altogether comfortable that the fate before them was being decided amongst men like these. He closed his eyes, and as the clamor of the council around him continued, he attempted to discern the voices of the Whisperers.

“Leading our men against Lancer’s forces is one thing,” one of the commanders said. “But these Barons are a fierce people. I have strong confidence in my men, but with all respect, I do not believe we would stand a chance trying to defend ourselves against the Barons if they are to attack.”

“But they would come from across the sea,” another commander commented. “There are not many places they could land their forces. If we stationed all our men in the right places, we could fight each new shipload of Barons before they had the chance to even step ashore.”

“That would only escalate the conflict, which is just what Lancer is hoping for,” Celor said. “We would never stand a chance against the superior numbers of the Baron armies, no matter how slowly they came to us. They would just keep coming, and our defeat would only be a matter of time. No, we must think of something else.”

“Then we must go after Lancer, and stop this attack from happening in the first place!” Sir Albert said.

“The camps from which the attacks will be launched all lie far from here along the eastern coasts of the Borderlands,” Baden answered. “From there they are close to the Barons, and still safely far from us.”

“But you said these camps and boats were still being readied, and that the attack isn’t until the harvest. So they are still unprepared, and vulnerable,” Sir Albert continued.

“About as vulnerable as our men would be after a march of such a distance,” Baden answered. “Not to mention that it would leave our towns and cities almost completely defenseless. We simply do not have the numbers needed to stop Lancer, and he knows this. That is why he is confident his plan will succeed.”

“Yes, I do not think we need to be reminded of that,” Celor answered. “What we need is a solution, and if I can’t get one from this meeting, I may have to take it to the Town Council, and see if they can’t come up with a feasible plan.”

Denith looked up, surprised at his uncle’s words. But seeing the reactions on the faces of the men around him, he realized Celor had only said it for the effect, and not because he meant it.

“There seems to be one option nobody has considered yet,” Denith said, seizing the opportunity of silence that Celor’s last comment had created.

All the commanders and Celor turned to look at Denith.

“What if we were to go to the Barons and simply inform them of Lancer’s plans?”

“Go to the Barons?” Celor asked, and even Baden looked surprised at Denith’s suggestion.

“It seems our young hero is a little unaware of what sort of people these Barons are,” one of the commanders jeered. “You won’t be able to get anywhere near these Barons. They resent anything to do with our lands and people. I have been across the waters and seen their cruelty for myself. It is amazing that Traders even continue to go there, when plenty have never come back. You can go no further than the Seaport Islands, where there are few Barons to be found. Anything beyond that is forbidden territory, and of all who have sought to enter, none has ever

returned alive.”

“Yes, I know,” Denith answered. “I’ve heard those same stories myself. But I once heard similar stories told about the Drifters, and then I discovered what fine people they were. It is all too easy to spin words to make someone hate your enemy, and if the only commoners these Barons have known are Traders, I do not fault them for despising our lands and people. But what if they are in fact not as vicious as we have always considered them to be?”

Sir Albert rose to his feet. “This is going nowhere,” he proclaimed loudly. “I say we take half our men, march into those Borderlands, and burn their ships before they have a chance to leave our shores! That’s what Warriors are for. We have defeated Lancer’s men before. We can do it again.”

“Aye!” several other commanders echoed, standing up with Sir Albert.

But the rest of the commanders remained seated, and looked to Celor, who was still looking at Denith as the room grew silent again.

“Don’t tell me you’re actually considering Denith’s proposal?” Sir Albert said in shock.

“His proposals have worked before,” Celor answered, “odd though they may have sounded.”

At this, some of the commanders who stood with Sir Albert looked around. Two of them hesitantly sat down again, and stared intently at Celor along with the rest of the commanders. The other standing commanders soon followed, until Sir Albert stood alone again.

At last Sir Albert resigned himself to his seat as well. “Very well, then. Send Denith to these Barons, if that’s how he wants to meet his fate. In the meantime, in case he never comes back, I say we prepare to march.” It was as much a challenge to Denith as a proposal to Celor and the other commanders.

“You would go, Denith?” Celor asked, turning to his nephew.

Denith was caught somewhat off guard by Sir Albert’s challenge. “Y-yes. I suppose I’d go, if there is no one else.”

“I think you’re the man for the job, Denith,” Baden said, with a hearty slap on Denith’s back. “After all, you’re the one with the Baron sword, aren’t you?”

“Uh, yes,” Denith said, still not so sure what he was getting himself into.

“Very well, then,” Celor said. “You shall go, and Kurt can go with you. I’m sure he’ll prove himself useful somehow among his own people, if this voyage will be of any use at all. As for the rest of you, see to it that your men remain ready for battle—whether against Lancer or against the Barons, whichever will come first.”



“Denith! Denith, it’s so nice to see you!” Edward said warmly. “What can I do for you? You seldom come to visit us these days!”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Yes, so I’ve heard, and doing marvelous things too! Young Edward looks up to you immensely. It’s just a shame he doesn’t follow suit.”

Denith laughed. “I’m sure one day young Edward will settle down.”

Edward joined in his laughter. “I hope so. So, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit? Is it pleasure indeed, or could it perhaps be business?”

“I’ve come on business,” Denith said soberly.

“I see. I was hoping it was for pleasure.”

Denith smiled. Edward, for all of his jovial ways, was a shrewd man who hid his common sense and foresight behind a cloak of lightheartedness and banter. Denith knew this. It was the way of most elders

and town fathers within the Protected Territories—although in none was this joviality as pronounced as with Edward.

The commanders, by contrast, were stern of composure, and had little mind for anything other than battle, fighting, and the ways of war—with a definite hate for Lancer and the benign oppression that his rule brought with it. This was something, in turn, that the Town Council seemed to lack, not fully grasping the concept of the forces of good and evil that they were caught between. While these two factions of the Protected Territories respected each other, they also preferred to have little to do with each other.

“You’ve come alone. It must be interesting business,” Edward continued.

“It is.”

Edward laid a hand on Denith’s shoulder. “Come into my study. We can talk freely there.”

Denith followed Edward into the study, and waited patiently while Edward poured a drink.

“Cheers,” Edward proclaimed, holding his glass high. “Here’s to a successful voyage! I heard you’re off on another mission soon?”

“You did?” Denith asked. “Word travels faster than I expected.”

“Ah, yes,” Edward said. “That can happen sometimes. I myself have no idea what sort of mission it is—but I did hear it had something to do with the Barons.”

“This is not good, especially not now. I don’t see how news of this could have leaked already.”

“Yes, perhaps the Guard has become a bit lax about their duties and responsibilities. You may need to consider tightening up your ranks and associations. But I don’t know how that can be done. Celor, as great of a general as he is, and as much as he has done

for our town, and the Protected Territories, has little understanding of the many undercurrents that can come into play at a time such as this.”

“I think I understand what you mean,” Denith said, “and that’s why I’ve come to see you.”

“Then I’m at your service,” Edward answered. “So, what can I do for you?”

“As you’ve already guessed, I will indeed be going on a mission to the Barons.”

“To the Barons?” Edward replied with a gasp. “Whatever for?”

“I am glad that there is at least something you do not know.”

Edward looked interested in what was to be said next.

Denith glanced around the room a little uneasily.

“I assure you, no one else can hear us here.”

“Very well. Apparently Lancer’s forces are securing the coastal towns and villages of the Borderlands in preparation for a surprise attack against the Barons.”

“Is this true?” Edward’s eyes widened. “But surely the Barons’ retaliation would be swift and devastating.”

“Yes, precisely—and that is the problem! Lancer’s men will be dressed in our uniforms, and attacking in our name, so that the vengeance of the Barons will come upon us instead of them.”

“But how could Lancer get ahold of our uniforms?”

“He’s making them for himself, using Drifter prisoners who know and can copy their colors. Baden has assured me they look every bit like the uniforms we use. He has seen Lancer’s men training in them. It was a most distressing sight, as I’m sure you can imagine. It is a clever plan, and there is little chance

that these Barons will not be fooled by it.”

“And so you are going to the Barons to inform them of this plan.”

“Precisely,” Denith answered. “But Celor and the commanders ... well ... as you know, they are men of war, and have little hope in this plan, and can offer me even less support. I was hoping that perhaps the Council, with all its men of cunning speech, could help deliberate what sort of approach would be the most hopeful one. But considering how word seems to have traveled, perhaps it is safer to remain quiet about these things altogether.”

“The Town Council is not the Warrior Guard, and the Warrior Guard is not the Town Council. We are more used to keeping silent about things that are not meant to be discussed. I think I can vouch for our Council to handle these matters wisely and discreetly. And I believe that together we could find a hopeful approach for this mission of yours.”

“Then do you think you could arrange a meeting with the Council, perhaps in some secret place?”

“We are convening tomorrow evening. You may feel free to join us at that time and present your case.”



Denith was ushered into the meeting room. The town fathers were sitting soberly at the table. Countsmen Waverly was also among them. They all nodded respectfully as Denith followed Edward into the room.

Edward started the meeting, “Gentlemen, you all know Denith, and you know why he is here this evening. I hope you have had time to ponder the things I have told you concerning the situation that lies before us, as there may not be much time for deliberation. It is up to us now to discover how these Barons might best be approached, that the disaster that is otherwise

sure to come upon us might be averted.”

“My first concern,” one of the councilmen said, “is how we are to approach them at all. They are a strange people, who speak a strange tongue, eat strange foods, live in strange houses. How do you expect to make yourself understood?”

“I have thought of that,” Denith answered. “One of the men in my command is of Baron descent. His father was a Baron, and he still speaks the Baron tongue—or so he says. I would travel with him, and him alone. They might perceive any larger group as a threat. What I need counsel in is how to approach them. My companion and I are both Warriors, and know little of the ways of dealing with men and councils such as yourselves—if such councils are what we shall find among the Barons.”

“In that respect, I do not know that we shall be of much help to you, young man,” an elder councilman said. “Councils can be dangerous to navigate even for one familiar with their ways. Sometimes direct approaches are needed, and sometimes more subtle ones. Sometimes the wrong approach can be fatal to a proposed measure, and sometimes it makes little difference either way.

“But before you set yourself to face any council, it is wise to learn what you can from the common people—those who walk about the streets and stand in the marketplaces. Watch them. Are they soft-spoken, or do they freely shout at one another in the streets? This can be different from city to city, even among the Barons, I imagine. But the manner of the rulers will often reflect the manner of the people.”

“It also helps to learn their speech,” another council member added. “By that I do not mean their language, but the way they speak, the expressions they use, their tones and gesticulations. How does

one beseech? How does one demand? What courtesies do they use, and which do they ignore? Then try to emulate those. It shows you know and respect the ways of their people.”

“And what am I to say?” Denith asked.

Edward looked at Denith. At twenty-five years of age, he had already seen more than most common men would ever see in their lifetime—and yet his face looked fresh and ruddy, as if the innocence of his childhood still rested within him.

“Simply speak the truth of what you have learned,” Edward answered. “It shall be up to them whether or not they take your words seriously. If they laugh and scoff, it shall not be for long. If they are angered or suspicious, and throw you in prison, it shall also not be long before they discover you spoke the truth. If they harm you...” Edward thought it better to avoid the word “kill” at this moment. “If they harm you,” he repeated, “you shall have done what you could. But I believe, Denith, that the sincerity of your youth will speak for itself. I could not imagine a better man from among us to attempt this mission.”



In the midst of the many preparations for his voyage, Denith knew there was one more matter to be attended to.

“Baden, there is something I must ask you. You are the only one I can trust with this mission. I might say that this time, *you* are the man for the job.”

“Go on.”

“It’s Keren, and my parents—and my son.”

Baden remained silent, waiting for Denith to continue.

“I want to bring them here. They need to come here. But you know that I cannot make the journey myself right now, and neither can Kurt. You’re the only one

who knows the way, and who I would trust with the lives of my family. I know it's not a small thing I'm asking, but I can think of no one better to accompany my family on this journey. In the meantime, I'll have to cross an ocean not knowing what I'll find on the other side. I don't know how long I'll be gone, or even if I'll make it back. In all good hope I will, to greet you and my family once again. You know I would love to have you along on this voyage..."

"Please, Denith," Baden said with a chuckle, "don't make this harder on yourself than you have to. You forget that we Drifters are never eager to face a fight we don't have to." Baden's wry smile gave away that this was not entirely true of himself. "I shall count it an honor to fulfill your request. Besides, I have some informers in that area that I wouldn't mind visiting once again."

Denith thought he heard a flutter in Baden's voice at the mention of "informers."

"Was that a trace of affection I heard in your voice, Baden?" Denith asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I could almost swear I saw a picture of a girl in your eyes just then when you said that. Have you fallen in love?"

"In love? Me? ... uh ... who would I have fallen in love with?"

"That's what I'm expecting you to tell me!" Denith answered.

Baden hesitated for a moment, then turned aside and busied himself with some nearby papers.

"So?" Denith asked when Baden remained silent.

"So what?" Baden answered.

"So are you going to tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"Who you're going to see! Is she a Drifter? Is she

pretty? Have I met her? What's her name?"

Baden turned to face Denith again, a straight look on his face. "You think I'm in love, and you think I'll tell you who she is."

"So there is someone!" Denith exclaimed triumphantly. "Do I know her?"

"I am pledged to uphold the secrecy of my informers."

"Even to your commander?"

"As you may recall, I am not an official member of the Warrior Guard, so you are not officially *my* commander."

"Oh, Baden ... come on! You can tell me. At least tell me her name."

"Sorry."

"So it *is* somebody I know ... Denise? ... no, it couldn't be. *Maya!* It's Maya, isn't it? Isn't it?"

Baden cleared his throat, and stood up. "You'd best be getting on with your preparations, and I suppose I have some of my own to make now."

Realizing that he wasn't going to be getting anything further out of Baden for the moment, Denith left, happy that Baden—who, so long as he had been with the Warrior Guard, had never paid more than scant attention to any woman—had evidently found someone special to his heart. And he was sure that, sooner or later, he would find out who she was.

THE SEVEN KEYS — WARRIOR LORD

ACROSS THE WATERS

The day had finally arrived. For the past week, Denith and Kurt had been guests in Sir Waverly's house. Elisa, in her own enthusiastic way, had insisted on showing them nearly every building and enterprise in the busy city now being called the Free Port. She proudly introduced everyone she came across to "the Warrior with the Baron sword."

"It will be difficult keeping your departure a secret, but I believe there is a way to manage," Sir Waverly had told them. They had been awaiting news of a ship heading towards the Seaport Islands that they could travel on, and Sir Waverly had found them one that was departing that afternoon. To complete the ruse, Denith and Kurt would have to leave the Free Port, as if to be on their way back to their own town. The Countsman's children and their mother gathered to see them off. Sir Waverly, they said, had unfortunately needed to leave earlier that same morning on some urgent business.

"It was a great pleasure to see you again, Sir Denith. I hope it is not for the last time," Jered said.

"Considering that I have hardly slept or eaten as well in my life as I have with you, I most certainly shall have to return again before too long," Denith

answered, bringing smiles of satisfaction to his circle of hosts. "But now we must be off again. There are many duties that await a commander of the guard, even if he carries a Baron sword." He said this last part with a wink to Elisa.

After several warm embraces between all present, Denith and Kurt mounted their horses and rode off until they were out of sight of the town.

"Do you think she'd follow us again?" Kurt asked.

"Who? Elisa?" Denith responded with a broad smile. "I don't think so. I don't think we've given her anything to suspect this time. But still, we should be careful."

A short while later they came to a small path that turned off the main road. They took it. The path led down an incline overshadowed by tall trees. It led to a small cottage, in front of which stood a wagon, hitched and waiting with two horses.

"Ah, you have found the place," Sir Waverly said, coming out of the cottage. "Your disguises are ready. I hope that you are. This is truly an extraordinary adventure you are setting out on."

"Thank you, Sir Waverly. You have been a great help to us," Denith replied as he and Kurt dismounted.

Sir Waverly beckoned them into the cottage, while he himself quickly led their horses to a small stable in the back, and readied the wagon for its important passengers.

Within moments Denith and Kurt emerged from the small cottage, looking every bit the part of their disguise.

"Who would have thought we'd have to dress as Traders again?" Kurt joked as they stepped into the light and examined each other's costumes.

"At least it's something we've had some practice

in," Denith answered.

"Yes, yes," Sir Waverly said. "But you had best get going. I don't know how fast this wagon will travel, and you have a good distance still to go if you want to get to the port without parading yourself through the middle of the city."

"Yes, you are right. Thank you again for all your trouble."

"You're sure you remember your booking names?"

"Ah, yes, Howard and Drewe, Traders, bound for the Seaport Islands," Denith answered.

"Excellent, excellent. You should have no trouble once you get on board. Are you sure you have everything?"

Denith and Kurt held up the sacks and bundles they carried, with provisions for their journey, and their uniforms hid among other sundry items of clothing and merchandise.

"Gentlemen," Sir Waverly called as Denith and Kurt were seated on the wagon, "I wish you a most successful voyage. Until we meet again. May it be soon, and under prosperous circumstances."



It was an hour later that Denith and Kurt rode up to the outer docks, and found their way to the ship that was to take them to the Seaport Islands. The ship was a good size larger and heavier set than the smaller fishing vessels and other boats that lined the inner docks nearer to the city, and it was obviously crafted for the purpose of longer sea voyages. From what Sir Waverly had told them, the voyage to the Seaport Islands took about seven days, with fair winds.

Since the Countsman himself had arranged the booking, they had little trouble getting aboard, and were soon settling into their small, two-berth cabin.

They stayed there even as the call to raise anchor was sounded, to make sure that they would not be seen by any along the shore who might be watching. Not until they had been underway for nearly an hour did Denith and Kurt allow themselves the luxury of a visit to the upper deck.

Looking over the ship's stern, they could see the coasts of the Commonlands as low hills on the horizon, with the peaks of the Gray Ridges visible in the haze behind them. The ship was obviously making good headway. A steady southeastern wind filled the sails, driving them straight to their mysterious destination, as if they were being swept on by some greater, unseen power.

Then they moved to the ship's bow, to catch a glimpse of the boundless ocean stretching out before them—a view Denith was more than familiar with, and that he had marveled at more than once from the cliffs of the Southern Bluffs. Now he was on that ocean himself, being taken to the very lands and adventures he had once dreamed of. But it was no longer a dream. Now there was no more forest path that led back to his comfortable home and bed. Denith felt as if his adventure was beginning all over again.



For most of the voyage, Denith and Kurt kept to themselves. They had met and spoken with Traders before on some of their earlier missions. But it had always been for several minutes along the course of their travels, or a few hours at most. Keeping up a pretense for several days would be more difficult, and Denith and Kurt found it easier to keep to their own company as often as they could. It was also their first sea voyage, and in spite of the relatively smooth waters, their stomachs were often troubled by seasickness. Though hardly pleasant, this nevertheless served as a perfect

explanation for their reclusiveness.

When there was little else to be done, Denith took to reading writings of the tunnels that he had taken with him. Kurt, meanwhile, with a little help from a Baron business transcript he had acquired from a Trader at the port, took to inwardly practicing the tones and letters of a language he had rarely used since the passing of his father.

As much as Denith had once been enthralled by the view of the boundless ocean in front of him, the sight of nothing but water in all directions soon lost its allure. He quickly found himself longing for the sight of land, and the feeling of firm ground beneath his feet.

His longings were soon answered. The southeastern wind had continued unabated for the duration of their voyage, so that when the sun rose on the sixth day, the unmistakable form of land on the horizon could be seen beneath it.

“Spot on course! The Seaport Islands!” they could hear the helmsman cry boastfully as three distinct peaks rising in front of the mainland came into view.

A sudden splash and a loud chattering noise to the side of the ship caught Denith’s attention. He turned to see a group of what looked like fish—each one as long as a man—swimming joyfully alongside the sailing vessel. He had never seen fish this size before, but their sleek blue-gray forms and friendly chirps and clicks and noises captured his attention immediately. Their graceful forms glided through the water as if they were flying within it, and every now and then one of these creatures would leap and fly through the air before splashing back into the water and continuing its race to keep up with the ship. The spectacle was so entertaining that for a moment Denith and Kurt

forgot all about the lands ahead and the mission on which they were about to embark.

But their focus returned when the fish broke formation with the ship, and headed back out to sea. The sails were down, and the ship was coasting into a small port. Soon the captain's cry of "Drop anchor!" sounded, and the small dock beside them came to life with men throwing ropes, unloading boxes, setting out the gangplank, and disembarking from the ship. As quickly as they could, Denith and Kurt scurried back down to their cabin to grab their belongings and disembark themselves.

It was with great relief, and somewhat shaky legs, that Denith set foot on that dock—and stood still for several long moments just savoring the feel of the solid ground beneath his legs before breaking that spell by walking on them.

Kurt looked at Denith with some amusement. While he felt no less relieved to be on solid ground himself, he was not so much one for savoring moments in the same way as Denith did.

Denith felt a little embarrassed to open his eyes and catch Kurt staring at him with obvious amusement. He cleared his throat. "Let's be going," he said as casually as he could manage.

They picked up the bundles they had brought with them and headed to the end of the pier, where they could see some of the other Traders entering a tavern-like building. Not knowing anything else to do, they decided to follow the Traders.

The tavern looked much like the ones of the Commonlands, and from what Denith and Kurt could see, there was not a Baron in sight. The whole place was filled with Traders and sailors, and their ribald chatter filled the room. Denith and Kurt chose a small table in the corner to ponder where to go next. As they looked

around, Kurt caught sight of a large, carved map on one of the walls. The inscriptions of the map were clearly legible in the common tongue, and from their table Kurt read, "The Forbidden Territories."

"Where?" Denith asked.

"Over there—on that map," Kurt answered.

Denith now saw the map too. They could clearly make out where they were—the middle of the three foremost Seaport Islands. A fourth island was nestled between them and the mainland, which in turn was ominously marked only by the words "The Forbidden Territories."

"Do you really think we'll be able to get in there?" Kurt asked.

"Getting in is never a problem," a friendly voice answered from behind them with a chuckle. "Getting out alive is the difficult part."

The men turned to see an aproned man—a commoner like every other man in this room, save Kurt—standing behind them, still laughing at his own words. They guessed he was the innkeeper.

Suddenly the man stopped laughing, and narrowed his eyes.

"You are new here," he observed. "I never forget a face, and I certainly don't recall yours. What is your business?" he asked.

"Trade, of course," Denith answered.

"Of course," the man echoed, casting a suspicious glance towards Kurt. "Well, then," he continued, trying to put on a friendlier tone, "is there anything I can get for you gentlemen?"

Denith quickly ordered a light meal and some drink for the both of them, and the man left.

Fortunately they had been able to ascertain that the common coin was in use on these Islands, due in large part to the predominant presence of Traders.

Denith and Kurt had taken a substantial amount of coins with them, both to aid them in their mission and to complete their disguise as Traders. With evening fast approaching, they paid for their meal and a room, and then retired for the night to plan—as much as they could—how they would proceed the next day.



After several inquiries the following morning, Denith and Kurt took their packs and made their way down to the road that led across the island to the other side, where it bordered with the Forbidden Territories. As they had heard, there were few Barons to be seen anywhere on this island. After Denith and Kurt found a Trader who sold them two horses at a good price, it did not take them long to reach a wide, flowing river that cut through this part of the island, effectively dividing it in two. The only nearby way across was a small ferry, manned by an old and wary-looking Baron.

“What is your business here?” the old man asked in the common tongue, looking Denith and Kurt up and down suspiciously.

Kurt, seeing an opportunity, decided to answer for them in the Baron tongue.

“I am a Baron. I have come a long way to seek for my home, and the home of my father, from which I was lost. I am a Trader only in dress, as is this man, who is my friend. He is a good man, and in my care. He shall be no trouble, I assure you. We pray your hospitality in taking us to yonder side.”

Kurt’s confident answer, spoken in the Baron tongue, took the ferryman by surprise. He looked the two men up and down again, and then motioned for them to dismount, and to step onto his ferry.

Denith studied the ferry with great interest. He had never seen anything quite like it. The large, wooden raft was simple in itself, with a rope fence running all

around it. Another rope, as thick around as Denith's arm, was connected to the side of the raft, and rose up to a large wheel on the shore. The rope wound around the wheel like string on a spool. Four large oxen were yoked to spokes that extended from the wheel. On the other side of the ferry, the thick rope disappeared under the surface of the water, and reappeared on the other side, where Denith could faintly make out a similar wheel that it was attached to.

The ferry easily held Denith, Kurt, their horses, and their baggage. Once they were on board, the ferryman gave a signal to a younger man standing near the oxen. That man pulled a lever, and then gave a long burst on a horn that hung at his side. Within moments, Denith felt a tug of movement, and the ferry began moving across the short waterway that divided the island. The wheel behind them was slowly unwinding, feeding out the rope as it went, although the oxen remained yoked in place, lazily chewing in fodder-bags that hung in front of them.

Denith soon turned his attention to the approaching shoreline on the other side, where the other wheel was coming into closer view. A team of four oxen was trudging a path around it, turning the wheel and winding up the rope that was pulling their raft across. Minutes later they felt a small jolt as the raft touched shore again.

After thanking the man, who assured them he required no payment, Denith and Kurt mounted their horses to continue their trek towards the Forbidden Territories, and to find a way to cross the waters dividing this Seaport Island from the Baron mainland. It was early afternoon, and they hoped to find a way across before dark.

As they rode along, they noticed that there were many more Baron folk on this side of the island than

they had seen on the other. Though there were still Traders to be seen in the marketplaces along their way, for the most part the inhabitants all seemed to be Barons.

Both Denith and Kurt noted the very artistic use that was made of the colors on this island. Everything from the shutters and painted latticework on the houses to the clothes that were worn by the men, women and children in the streets was adorned with colors that matched and complemented one another, so that the whole island seemed to blend into a single scene. Even among the Drifters Denith had never seen such an orderly use of color.

It was close to evening when they reached the island's edge, and found themselves looking across the channel at the Forbidden Territories. But though they rode up and down the stretch of island nearest to the Forbidden Territories, they could find no way across. There were no boats or ferries to be found, and there did not seem to be any others around—Baron or otherwise—waiting to make the trip.

With evening fast falling, the men relented and returned to the last tavern they had passed, which was nearly an hour's ride back towards the island's interior. After being shown to their rooms, they entered the dining area for an evening meal. A hush came over the room as they entered. Kurt noted with some embarrassment that Denith was the only commoner in this room, and even though he himself was half-Baron, Kurt felt out of place as well. A few conversations resumed with whispers. One man abruptly rose and left the room, apparently in disgust at the new company. It was obvious that not many Traders frequented this place.

They had hardly finished eating when a distinguished-looking stranger appeared alongside their

table.

He spoke the common tongue fluently, though he was obviously a Baron.

“May I join you?” he asked, though he did not wait for a reply before seating himself on the other side of the two men.

“I hope you do not mind my asking you some questions,” he continued. “You must understand that we do not see many of your kind here, and please forgive me for saying this, but we do not relish your presence here.”

Well, he certainly gets straight to the point! Denith thought. He hesitated only a moment, realizing they were both still wearing the garb of Traders, and eagerly seeking the wisdom of the Whisperers in how to answer this stranger.

“I am sorry, but we are not as we appear,” he answered as the Whisperers had compelled him to. “My name is Denith. I am a Warrior from a city in the Commonlands.”

The man nodded, but said nothing more. Denith waited a moment longer, but the man remained silent, so Denith continued.

“This is my traveling companion and friend. His name is Kurt. He is of Baron descent, and also a Warrior among our people—a very worthy Warrior, if I may say so. We are here to seek the house of his father.”

The man acknowledged Kurt with a barely perceptible nod before continuing with his questioning. “Is that the only purpose of your visit?”

Denith looked at Kurt, then back at the man. “Not entirely. We bring news from the Commonlands that concerns your people. We are here to seek an audience with your rulers.”

The man did not look surprised. “And what sort of news is it that you bring?”

Denith hesitated again. "I am not sure that I am at liberty to discuss these matters in such an open place. I am sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"That is because I did not give it. You are the strangers here, at our mercy—not we at yours."

The man looked coolly at Denith, who was quick to note his veiled threat.

"I understand," Denith conceded. "And it is indeed your mercy we would request, for the wrath of your people is known well in our lands."

The man flashed a cold smile. "Then you are likely to distrust anyone you speak with, aren't you?"

Denith realized the truth of the man's words, and that he had little choice for the moment but to follow along with this rather authoritative stranger.

"Is there somewhere more private where we could speak of these matters?" Denith asked.

"This place is private enough," the man answered.

Denith took a deep breath. "Very well. As I said, we are warriors, and we come from a region we call the Protected Territories. We have banded together to declare our independence from Lord General Lancer, who rules the Commonlands."

"You have risen up against Lancer?" the man asked with some surprise.

"And against darker forces that rule our lands with him."

The man tilted his head and raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"I see your reason for caution," he finally answered.

"There is more. There are plans for an attack upon your people."

But the man held up his hand in a signal for Denith to say no more.

“You would be wise not to speak further of these things with strangers. I hope your stay here will be comfortable.”

With that, the man stood up, and left the tavern as abruptly as he had entered it.

Kurt broke the ensuing silence. “Strange man,” he muttered. “He didn’t even introduce himself.”

“He had no intention of introducing himself,” Denith answered.

“Who do you think he was?”

“I don’t know ... but he had a commanding air about him. I would suspect he is a man of some authority in this place, and that perhaps the man who left the room earlier immediately sought out this man to inform him of our presence.”

“So what are we to do now?”

“I think we are meant to wait.”

“Do you think he’ll come back?”

“I certainly hope so,” Denith said. “Something tells me that, if anyone, this man will know where we are to take our story.”



The days passed. Denith and Kurt waited, but heard nothing more. They stayed inside the tavern most of the time, not wanting to be absent if they were called for again. But after several days they had still heard or learned nothing new. They wondered whether the man would come back at all.

“Maybe we should try again to find a way to get to those Forbidden Territories,” Kurt suggested as they sat together one evening.

Denith sighed. Had his premonition to wait been wrong? “Maybe. There certainly isn’t much happening around here.”

The thought of what to do next lingered in his mind that night. As he stared up at the ceiling above his

bed, a soft flurry of light became visible above him. He wondered what it was, until suddenly he became aware of the presence of the Whisperers, and the reassuring tones of their guidance echoed in his heart.

You must make your inquiries tomorrow. All things shall come together. The Forbidden Territories await you. Send Kurt to ask the way. It is time to leave your disguises behind. Let him go in the dress of his own people to seek the house of his father, and so you shall be led to the place where you must go.

The next morning Kurt went out, as the whispers had instructed, to find out what he could about his father's house, and about getting into the lands known to them only as the Forbidden Territories. He returned to the inn shortly after noon knowing little more than he had that morning.

"They don't seem very helpful when it comes to things you don't know," Kurt explained when he joined Denith back in their room. "I even tried asking the innkeeper about the man who came to see us, but he didn't seem to know anything about him either."

"I don't know what to say, Kurt," Denith answered. "All I know is that the Whisperers told me that if you would ask and inquire about these things, we would find the way that we were to go. You learned nothing?"

"At first I tried asking for the house of my father, but nobody recognized his name. That is hardly surprising, though. He was little more than a servant. Then I asked the name of his master, but that name did not seem to be known in this place either. Then I gave my tale, and asked how one enters the Forbidden Territories. But that question was always met with silence, and some dumbfounded looks. I'm sorry, Denith."

Denith was about to respond when a loud pounding at their door interrupted their conversation—and

their thoughts. Before either had a chance to respond, the door burst open, and a group of four uniformed and armed Barons stormed inside, followed by the innkeeper, and another man.

“Yes, he is the one!” the man affirmed, pointing to Kurt.

The innkeeper nodded.

“You must come with us,” one of the uniformed men said, speaking the Baron tongue. “You can come in peace, or in fetters. The choice is yours.”

“We will come in peace,” Kurt answered as calmly as he could.

“Then hand over your weapons!” the man commanded them again, intently eyeing the Baron sword that hung on Denith’s belt.

Kurt quickly unstrapped his own sword that he had worn under his Baron cloak, and motioned for Denith to do the same.

Denith hesitated. He did not want to be parted from his sword again. At the same time, he felt the presence of the Whisperers urging him to follow these men.

Yield your sword, for this is the path to follow. It will not be lost, but shall be returned to your hand at the time appointed.

Still hesitant, Denith nevertheless unstrapped his sword and handed it to the man who appeared to be in command of this group of soldiers.

“Now, follow us,” the man commanded. “But make one false move, and it shall be your last!”

With that, Denith and Kurt obediently fell in place between the soldiers, who escorted them out of their room, through the tavern, and into the open streets.

Kurt felt embarrassed at all the attention they were getting with their armed escort of soldiers. Denith, however, walked upright, his eyes alert, watching and waiting to see what was going to come of this

unexpected arrest.

Their escort led them to the edge of the island, and a small path that led down to where a boat, filled with several other soldiers, was waiting. They boarded the boat, and soon found themselves being rowed across the small channel towards the Forbidden Territories on the other side. Denith felt at peace. This was the path to follow.

When they reached the other side they found a wagon waiting, and still more soldiers. Denith and Kurt were helped into the back of the wagon, where four soldiers kept them company. The other soldiers mounted horses, and soon they were all making their way up the hill that rose before them.

The landscape they traveled across was largely a deserted one. The only sign of civilization was the road itself. Other than that, much of the land was untouched. The scene around them was dry and rocky. The hillside was covered only by sparse patches of wildflowers or shrubbery that grew no taller than a man's knee. Crusty, yellow dirt seemed to be everywhere, and was being stirred up into dusty clouds by the horses that led the way in front of them, and by the winds that swept across the hillside.

The afternoon sun beamed its intense heat over the entire scene, but did not seem to be bothering the other soldiers. Denith and Kurt steeled themselves against it, not wanting to appear faint or weak. It was certainly a much dryer place than anywhere in the Commonlands, which Denith had always known to be full of trees and grass even in the hottest of seasons. He wondered what sort of people inhabited desolate places like this.

It was while lost in such thoughts, amidst the bumps and jolts of the wagon's journey, that Denith and Kurt first caught sight of where they were head-

ing—a sight so strange that they could not stop themselves from staring in awe—their mouths agape, their eyes wide, their hands rooted to their foreheads to shield the view from the glare of the overhead sun.

The soldiers noted the men's surprise, and spoke excitedly amongst each other. Denith heard one word repeated several times: "Hassak. Hassak."

"What is it?" Denith asked.

"They're saying something about a city," Kurt answered Denith. "Apparently it has a name—Hassak."

"That's not a city," Denith said. "It's a giant house."

There, at the top of a great hill that loomed in the distance before them, arose a single, great and high wall, dotted with small windows. They could see a giant door built into one side of it.

"How many people do you figure live in a house like that?" Denith asked in awe. He had seen some big houses, including the town hall of the port city—a large, stone building with many wide and open rooms. But this building looked like it was many hundreds or even thousands of times as big. It was hard to tell from this distance. One thing was sure—neither Kurt nor Denith could keep their eyes off of it as they came closer. The soldiers were obviously gratified by how greatly the sight impressed their captives.

Soon they were standing in front of a door that looked as if it had been built for a giant. The archway that framed it towered high above them, seeming to touch the very tops of the sky.

Denith had never seen anything so large in all his life. It probably stood higher than the cliffs on the Southern Bluffs, he thought to himself.

A smaller door was opened in the large door, but even this small door was big enough for the horses

to ride through, and the cart to follow. Then the door was closed behind them, and Kurt and Denith found themselves for the first time within the walls of what they discovered was not a house at all, but a great city—the city of Hassak.



Neither Denith nor Kurt had much time to take in the sights around them. The wagon continued its steady pace through the streets of the city. Within these walls were buildings, roads, marketplaces, people—and colors. Vivid colors streamed everywhere, in stark contrast to the dreary landscape that existed just outside the walls of the city. Bright banners hung from posts along the walls. Colorful tent roofs adorned market stalls and protected a vast array of colored fruits and vegetables from the heat of the sun that shone above.

But everything passed by almost too quickly for Denith and Kurt to see, as they turned from one street onto the next, until their eyes grew wide again at the sight before them. The narrow streets they had ridden through suddenly opened up to a great, wide plaza, in the middle of which stood a majestic building, glistening like a great jewel in the midst of the crown of this city. Its marble pillars and colorfully tiled walls seemed to glow with a mystical aura. Its domed roofs shone with gold and jewels. It was a breathtaking sight, and Denith found himself too stunned for words.

Denith and Kurt had a few more moments to take in the view of this great edifice before the wagon had crossed the plaza and made its way to a side entrance of the building, where they were instructed to get out. The first group of soldiers now led them through high, arched corridors into an inner chamber of the building, where they were instructed to wait.

The room was cool—a pleasant relief from the heat

that hung over the city, even at this late hour of the day. Kurt and Denith found a seat on a stone bench that protruded from one of the walls of the room, and admired the architecture around them. The walls were intricately decorated with painted tiles, and inscriptions similar to the ones on Denith's sword. Kurt was unable to read them. Like the inscription on Denith's sword, they appeared to be written in an older Baron script that he was unfamiliar with.

The room had several entrance points, and though Kurt and Denith could see no armed guards or other attendants anywhere, they somehow knew they were not to leave the room. They were content to wait as they had been instructed to, even though it seemed to take a good while. The room soon grew darker from the sun sinking behind the walls outside—although they could not tell how daylight had come into this chamber to begin with.

Kurt was almost nodding off to sleep when the sound of some commotion returned both of them to their senses—and to their feet. The stranger who had spoken to them in the tavern stood before them—only now he was dressed in fine clothes, and several other influential-looking men were with him.

"You are a very puzzling people," he said once he stood before the two men, speaking in the common tongue as he had before. "You claim to come in peace, as friends, and yet you go about disguising yourselves and inquiring as spies into matters that are not yours to be discovered. And then you come peacefully when you are apprehended, and wait patiently when you are left alone. What are we to think?"

"I am sorry, sir," Denith answered. "We meant no harm in inquiring. If we did not think that the news we carried was of utmost importance and urgency to your people, we would not have tried so urgently to

bring it to you. But we desired to warn you of Lancer's plans, both for your sake and for ours."

"You speak again of this attack?" the man asked.

"Yes," Denith answered.

"We have done some investigating of our own, and have indeed discovered a force of soldiers preparing to set sail from your Borderlands. What is more difficult to understand, however, is why your uniforms, which you hid very carefully among your things, are the same as those worn by the attackers. Now, tell us plainly what you have come to these lands to do."

"We have told you the truth," Denith answered. "I said we were warriors from the Commonlands, and so we are. We belong to the Warrior Guard of the Protected Territories. We have stood up against Lord General Lancer, and he has been unable to defeat our forces. That is why he is now plotting to turn you against us by attacking your lands in our name, in our uniforms. This is the attack we came to warn you about. This is the warning we have come to give. And we come with but one request—that you believe our words, prepare your people and forces for this attack, and avert the bloodshed that Lancer would seek to inflict upon your people and ours."

The man turned and spoke in hushed tones to the others with him. There was some discussion, though Kurt did not manage to pick up more than a few words of their conversation. Then the man turned back to Denith and Kurt.

"You shall be escorted to an inn within the walls of this city, where your belongings shall be returned to you. There you shall wait while we further investigate the truth of your words. We trust your comportment within our city will prove your trustworthiness. You shall hear from us again. Until then, the hospitality of my city lies before you. May you show yourselves

worthy of it.”

With that, the man turned around and left the room, followed closely by his entourage. Two attending soldiers remained, and motioned for Kurt and Denith to follow. After several turns through the streets of Hassak, they reached a tavern and were shown to separate rooms. There they found all their belongings, including the swords that had been taken from them. A steward soon came up, and informed them that a meal was waiting for them in the lower chambers.

Denith and Kurt were both hungry, and quickly followed the steward to the tavern’s dining area. The room had a low ceiling, so that they found they had to stoop to enter it. Round tables filled the room, and they could see other Barons seated on floor cushions around these tables, which stood about as high as a man’s knee. When they came to their table, the steward motioned for them to sit down, which they did, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of the room around them.

The steward returned with a tray of simple foods, that reminded the men much of the foods of the Commonlands—bread, cheese, and goblets of wine. When these were finished, bowls of stew were served, equally standard fare of a Commonland tavern. Denith and Kurt could not help noticing that the other tables around them were set with far more lavish and exotic-looking dishes.

The meal ended when both men had eaten their fill. The steward bowed gracefully, removed their dishes, and left. Shortly after, Denith and Kurt retreated to their rooms to settle down for the night, pondering on all that had happened, and wondering what the day would bring.



Denith and Kurt awoke to the clamor and sounds

of the streets outside. The sun shone brightly in their windows, which by the light of day they could now see overlooked much of the city. To one side, in Kurt's room, the window looked out over the great wall that surrounded the city. It rose high above most of the buildings that were placed in an orderly fashion inside it, although there were several magnificent structures that could be seen rising nearly as high or higher than the walls.

From Denith's room, which was joined to Kurt's room by a single door, the window looked out on the palace, and the great, black-and-white mosaicked plaza that stretched out in front of it. It was undeniably the most magnificent structure of this great city, and clearly more beautiful and colorful than any building Denith had ever seen in the Commonlands.

With little else to do for the moment, they decided to take advantage of the opportunity and freedom to explore the city. There was so much to see. After a short breakfast they left the tavern.

While their presence drew curious stares from those they passed by, there did not seem to be any suspicion on the part of the people. They would come to learn that the great, closed walls that surrounded this city gave its inhabitants the confidence that anyone within it belonged there.

At the same time, they could sense they were being closely watched. Baron guards stood posted at many places throughout the city, and Denith and Kurt knew that it was very likely that before the day was done, someone would know exactly where they had been, who they had spoken to, and what they had done. It was restricting, but at the same time they had the confidence that as long as they conducted themselves appropriately, no harm would come to them.

Thinking it prudent not to venture too close to the

palace, they decided to head for one of the other great buildings that they had seen from Kurt's window. It was not difficult to find. Unlike the Barons on the islands, the Barons within this city freely helped them with directions whenever they asked.

From the outside, the building looked much like the room in the palace had looked on the inside. Colorfully patterned tiles, mosaics, and inscriptions decorated the outer walls. The building was circular, and topped by a large dome, although this could not be seen from the street where they stood.

What they could see, however, and this greatly interested Kurt and Denith, was a series of images that ran fully around the outer wall of the building. They seemed to tell a story, from one picture to the next, and when they came to a set of large stairs that led into the building, they discovered that the first picture started just left of the stairs, and the last picture ended to its right.

Standing on the stairs, both the first and last images could be clearly seen. They stood in stark contrast to one another. Both were of the same scene. The scene on the left, the first scene, was dark and gray. The scene on the right was bright and filled with colors. Between these two pictures, and equally spaced all around the building, were the scenes that made up the story in between. Each picture was about as wide as a man could stretch his arms, and a little less in height. The colored glass stones and pebbles that formed the very distinct mosaics of each scene had been masterfully set. Denith and Kurt studied each image carefully, hoping to learn as much as they could from these pictures, and the histories they appeared to portray.

The tale the images told appeared to be one of a battle against dark and shadowed creatures who

were destroyed or driven out by Baron soldiers. The city of Hassak itself also seemed to play a central role in the story these pictures told. Its buttressed walls and high gates were shown more than once standing strong and firm against dark creatures trying to get in from the outside.

Denith also noted with some interest that all the Baron soldiers depicted in these pictures, if not for their curved swords and round shields, looked very much like the Drifters he had known. Their costumes were almost identical to the kind of clothing the Drifters of the Commonlands wore. In a few of the pictures, particularly the earlier ones, they could even make out the shapes of tents and wagons, such as the Drifters still lived in.

“Do you think the Drifters descended from the Barons?” Denith asked.

“I don’t know,” Kurt answered. “It’s always possible. There are many similarities, though the language is completely different.”

“Perhaps not as different as you think. There have been more than a few times, both when you were speaking with the Barons, and in other conversations I’ve overheard, that I thought I recognized a word or two. In any case, you have to admit the Baron language resembles the Drifter language much more closely than it does the common one.”

“Perhaps, though I have not heard the Drifter language much.”

It took Denith and Kurt a few days to explore all the sights of interest within the city, often returning to their tavern only as the sun began to set. The city of Hassak was an interesting place, to be sure. The colors, the sights, the smells, the people, the language, the women—and especially young women—who nearly always hid their faces when the two men passed by, as

if for them to return a gaze was somehow impolite.

They had heard no word from the palace yet. They knew they would sooner or later, but as the days wore on, Denith became more and more anxious about returning home, knowing that if he did not return soon, Celor and the commanders could easily mount their own campaign to stop Lancer's attack—a move that could leave the Protected Territories vulnerable to any other kind of attack the dark forces might seek to launch against them.

Perhaps because he was amongst the Barons, Denith also found himself often thinking of Keren, and his son. He wondered and worried about how they were—whether they were safe, whether Baden had reached them yet, how they would manage the long journey.

But the whispers continued to assure him that everything was going according to plan, and that there was nothing to worry about. Baden would ensure that nothing happened to his family, and the Whisperers would ensure that Celor and his men did not embark on any rash endeavors. How the Whisperers would do this, Denith had no idea. But their words were filled with such assurance and definiteness that he found no reason to doubt them.

On the morning of the sixth day, when Denith and Kurt went down to the eating room as they had been accustomed to doing, the steward informed them that they had a visitor.

The man stood up to greet them as they approached his table. His dress was obviously a military uniform, and from the looks of it, a uniform of considerable rank. A striking image of a mounted warrior impaling a dark, winged creature emblazoned the tunic that covered his chest.

“I hope you have found our city a pleasant one,”

the man said in greeting.

“It’s beautiful,” Denith answered, “especially the palace.”

“Yes,” the man said, “it’s a magnificent piece of architecture, isn’t it? It’s our pride and joy! You’ve never seen a palace before?”

“Certainly none like this one. You won’t find many buildings in the Commonlands that could even come close to the magnificence of your structures here.”

“I know. But before we speak further, let me introduce myself. I’m General Zarnik. I command the forces within this city. We have investigated your reports, and other things besides. I have been sent to inform you that you and your Protected Territories need not worry. We have seen the truth of Lancer’s planned deception for ourselves, and will be prepared to meet his forces when they arrive.”

“But ... it has hardly been six days. How could you learn these things so quickly?”

“We have our ways,” Zarnik answered. “But to continue my message, I have come to inform you that a ship is at this very moment being readied to return you to your lands in all haste. We can only imagine that those who sent you are most anxious for your return, and are awaiting in good hope the message we send with you—that your Territories have nothing to fear from our people. If you do not mind, the ship leaves this evening, and I am to escort you to it.”

“Now?” Denith asked, taken aback by the unexpected news.

“As soon as you can make yourselves ready—and after you have eaten. We shall go by horse, but we must leave soon if we are to catch the tide. I regret to be giving you so little time.”

“It is our regret that we must leave your pleasant city so soon,” Denith answered. “But we are happy to

return to our lands. Your message will be met with much relief, and may Lancer's forces be met with a great surprise."

"May they indeed be surprised," Zarnik answered, then bowed his head shortly in salute, and left the men to their morning meal—though they noticed he stayed within the room, speaking with the steward, and every now and then glancing back at them.

When their meal was done, and Denith and Kurt moved to leave the room, General Zarnik again approached them. "I shall be waiting outside with horses. Meet me there when you are ready."

Denith and Kurt did as they were told, and—not needing a lot of time to ready themselves—they were soon standing outside the tavern, where they found General Zarnik and three horses waiting. To Kurt's great pleasure, their ride through the city and to the gates was much more dignified than their entrance. The horses they had been given to ride were magnificent creatures and the three sped, on General Zarnik's lead, along the yellow-sanded roads to their next destination.

After nearly an hour of hard riding, it became apparent that they were not heading towards the Seaport Islands.

"It is safer that you cross the waters in one of our ships," General Zarnik explained while they were taking a short rest. "It will be faster as well. The ship you came to us on was a slow trading vessel. We have much faster ships in our command, and they do not berth at the Islands. If the other world wills it, you should be seeing the coasts of your lands again within three days."

"You know of the other world?" Denith asked.

"Does that surprise you?" Zarnik answered.

"It does ... that is, I suppose I did not expect it."

“You have seen many things in our city—the colors, the images, the histories. You could not deduce anything from this?”

“The inscriptions were sometimes difficult to read,” Kurt explained.

“The role of the other world in ours is sometimes difficult to discern as well,” Zarnik answered. “But it forms a great part of our history, and the history of our cities. We know the difference between the forces that come of good and those that come of evil. We know also that your lands are trapped, as it were, in an age of darkness and ignorance. Among Barons, your people are largely thought of as being uneducated and hardly civilized.”

“I wouldn’t have thought we were uncivilized until I saw your city, and your people. Compared to them, yes, we are largely uncivilized. But there are those amongst us who, as you have said, know the difference between the forces of good and those of evil, between the shadows and the colors. Once you can see them, they are not difficult to recognize. Perhaps your histories of old shall be the battles of our future. I am sure there is much that we could learn from you.”

“Perhaps,” General Zarnik answered, and then suddenly went silent. “We must press on,” he finally said. “There is still some ground to cover.”



The riders made it to the secret Baron harbor in good time. It was built in a cove that was effectively hidden from view by the natural curves of the mountains that surrounded it, and the high trees that grew along them. Denith imagined it would be almost impossible to see this cove and its entrance from a distance out at sea, and marveled at the variety of terrain they had come across during their short time in these lands.

There were several ships berthed inside the cove. They were obviously sleeker of build and taller of mast than the Trader's ship they had crossed on. Like almost everything else they had seen here, these ships bore all the marks of excellent craftsmanship. Denith had never imagined that a boat could look as beautiful as these did.

After General Zarnik showed them to their berths and ensured that these would be comfortable enough, they said their farewells.

When the call to raise anchor was sounded, Denith and Kurt quickly made their way to the upper deck to watch as this magnificent vessel pulled away from its dock, and was skillfully steered and directed towards the cove's mouth.

It was an impressive sight. Denith and Kurt looked up to see a whole array of sails being unfurled along the ship's masts, and watched as the wind caught and blew them into billowy sheets of white that strained against the wind and pushed the ship across the waters.

When they had passed the cove's mouth and stood with the open sea before them, all the sails were fully unfurled and the ship began to pick up speed. It sliced easily through the water, and was soon joined by a school of the same large blue-gray fish that had welcomed the ship that had first carried Denith and Kurt to the Baron lands.

With the sound of the wind filling the sails, the creaking and straining of ropes against wood, and the fresh, salty breeze that blew across the deck of the ship, Denith and Kurt felt comforted that they would soon be setting foot again on Commonland soil.



The Baron ship didn't dock at any Commonlands harbor. Rather, it stayed a short distance from an al-

most deserted shore while Denith and Kurt were taken to shore in a rowboat. When they got close to land, they could see two saddled horses tied and waiting for them, though they could not see anyone around who might have brought them there.

Once the boat had come close enough for the two men to jump into the shallow surf, the boat was turned around and rowed back to the Baron ship. Shortly after they reached it, Denith and Kurt watched the ship pull away, looking every bit as graceful from a distance as it had appeared close up. They watched until it vanished completely in the glare of the sunlight that bounced merrily across the ocean waters. Denith and Kurt found themselves feeling as if they'd just awoken from a long and exotic dream. They untied and mounted the waiting horses, and spurred them in the direction they needed to go.



It was with much relief that the Town Council and the Warrior Guard commanders heard the report of Denith and Kurt's successful visit to the Barons. Once they were again alone, Denith proceeded to update Celor on the details of his voyage.

"There was so much to see and learn about these people. From what we saw, it looks like they, too, have fought their own battles with these Shadowed Ones and dark forces that used to plague their lands. Now they are a prosperous people, with great cities and strong armies—but more impressive, with people who are happy, free, and secure in their knowledge and understanding of the colors, and the many things of beauty these colors can create."

"They certainly seem to have impressed you."

"They would impress anyone. That wall around their city ... it looked like a giant house from far away. If we had something like that around our city, or even

whole parts of the Protected Territories, Lancer could never bother us again.”

“Well, that’s an interesting thought, but hardly realistic. The Town Council regulates most of what is built here. I don’t know if they’d want a wall like that around the city. Besides, to properly construct anything like what you’re talking about, you’d need builders, stonemasons, and planners who knew exactly what they were doing. I don’t think you’ll find anyone around here who fits that description—and even if you did, we hardly have the resources or manpower to undertake such a project.”

“But we have stonemasons.”

“To be sure. But we’re not talking about building a house, are we? We’re talking about sealing an entire area with a high and solid wall. These are simple folk, Denith, and they live simple lives. This is a farming community. Most of the buildings you see standing here today were built many generations ago. The biggest things most of these people have ever built for themselves are their barns, or the wooden fences around their fields. Just keeping the Warrior Guard running and our villages safe has taken the work and presence of many men, so that those who are left—men and women alike—have their hands full keeping the rest of us fed and alive. There are simply few men to spare.”

“What about the Guard? Couldn’t they be assigned to build?”

“Denith, you don’t understand. You have had good ideas before, and I’ve always been open to hearing them, and even to letting you try them. But this is just too big. Do you know how many of our men it would take to build even a section of such a wall? And then who will keep Lancer’s men at bay? You can be sure that as soon as Lancer sees anything like a wall go-

ing up here, he will send every last soldier under his command to make sure it is not completed.”

“Well, in principle it’s a good idea!” Denith said somewhat defensively.

“Yes, I agree, it’s a good idea and I can see the need for it, but I don’t know how we could ever accomplish it. Once Lancer discovers that his plan to attack the Barons hasn’t turned out as he expected, there’s no telling what he’ll do next. We have our informers now, which I’m sure will help. But we can hardly afford to put down our weapons and pick up trowels at this point.”

“I suppose it will require more thought,” Denith said, somewhat haltingly.

“Thought indeed—and time. A wall like that would take years to build. Right now most folks are occupied with the upcoming harvest, and after that, who knows what will follow? Perhaps in a few years, when things have settled a bit, perhaps even when Lancer realizes we are here to stay, and are not a threat to the rest of his lands, he’ll leave us alone, and then we can build a wall. For now, it’s an idea better kept in the back of your mind, Denith. I know you’re quite impressed with what you saw among the Barons. But we are not the Barons. We are simple Warriors, and even simpler people. That’s just the way things are, and we have to make the best of what we can do here and now.”

Denith was not sure he agreed with Celor, but kept his silence. He sensed a resistance in Celor that he had not felt before, especially for a matter that could be of such great importance in their struggle against Lancer’s forces. But he did not know what to do about it. For the moment, he dropped the topic from their conversation.

- 7 -

MEMORIES

Denith was perched on a hill just outside of the town, watching the sun rise with the same intrigue he had watched it descend in times past. It was rare that Denith found time to muse over the many questions and thoughts running through his mind these days, and even less likely for him to dwell on the scenic beauty that surrounded him. But now he found it necessary to remove himself for a time and contemplate the change his life would soon take. Baden had sent word with the Drifters that he would be arriving with Denith's family that same day, and they were to be expected before nightfall.

Having risen before dawn, Denith had found this secluded spot and there was trying to find peace of mind—or at best, come to terms with the commitment that lay ahead of him.

The sky slowly transformed, dispersing the darkness and filling with color. The wispy clouds were soon tinged with pink as the sun climbed higher in its glory. The beauty of the sunrise washed over him like a wave of peace, calming his troubled mind.

“Such beauty,” Denith whispered, as he lay in the soft grass. “Faethé, tell me something. If this is right, why do I feel so uncertain? Barthol is my son, he is

my responsibility, and I wish to honor my word and care for him like a father should. But I cannot help feeling apprehensive. Will I be all that a father should be? Being a father will be so different from my life as a Warrior.

“As for Keren, I try not to think about what this commitment will mean. She is a friend, and I love her as such, but there is no passion...” His sentence trailed off. Placing his hands over his face Denith let out a stifled shout. “Tell me once again that this is right,” he pleaded. “Please, Faethé.”

The passing breeze sent a shiver through Denith’s body and he quickly sat up, wondering if the breeze had brought Faethé with it, or at least an answer to his question, but there was nothing out of the ordinary to be seen. Denith remained very still, his eyes shut, until Faethé’s reassuring whisper pierced the silence.

It is well, Denith, for this is the start of a different path in your life. Though you feel apprehensive about this step of commitment—the ending of your independence—this is the right path for you to walk now. We will continue to guide you and teach you along the way. You must but stop and listen to our whispers, as you have.

Love Barthol and guide him carefully, for he is in need of your instruction. As for Keren, treasure her. Even though you feel no fires of love, she will always stand by you, remaining strong and true. And though unseen, she carries with her a promise of the future of this land.



Denith and Celor had been laboriously poring over a stack of papers strewn over Celor’s desk. Their conversation was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Enter,” Celor called, and proceeded with his pensive muttering, paying little attention to Kurt, who

had entered the room and now looked on with a bemused smile. Denith, on the other hand, had turned to Kurt with a questioning look. Denith had been edgy the entire day, and his face hid little of the emotions churning within him.

Celor went silent, but continued to rummage through the numerous papers. He raised his left eyebrow. "Have they come?" he asked.

Kurt's smile broadened, his eyes fixed on Denith, though he remained silent.

"Kurt!" Denith said impatiently, when he could bear the silence no more. "Speak!"

Celor looked up, raising his bushy eyebrow once more, only this time it was to question his nephew's outburst and Kurt's hesitancy in responding.

Catching Celor's glance, Kurt quickly answered, "Yes, they've been sighted a short distance down the road."

Denith bolted from his stool, sending it clattering to the ground. He began pacing the tiny room, tugging at an imaginary beard, and taking quick glances out the small, barred window.

While placing the stool back on its legs, Kurt filled in a few details. "I posted a few men beyond Edward's house, to keep an eye open for Baden and your family. I thought you might like a little advance notice." He paused and chuckled, while Denith kept up his relentless pacing. "Looks like I was right," he concluded, willing himself not to laugh. Denith had never looked so comical in his musings.

"Everything is ready, right?" Denith asked, as if he had not heard any of what Kurt had said.

"Yes," Kurt responded. "All is ready! Are you?"

Denith paused and stared at Kurt, then shook his head as if trying to clear it. "No, but I'm as ready as I can be." He crossed the floor in two large steps and

opened the door, but stopped. "You will be greeting them with me, won't you?" Denith asked, turning to Celor.

"Ah, boy, I wouldn't want to steal the joy your parents will have upon seeing you again. You go on ahead, and I'll come soon. I just..." Celor's voice faded, and a perplexed look stole across his face. "Go, Denith, greet your family, I have more work at hand. I will show myself soon."

Denith paid little attention to Celor's response. He had not noted the worried look that marred his uncle's face.



"Denith, it is good to see you!" exclaimed Baden, as he dismounted his steed.

"You too," Denith replied. The two men greeted each other with a rough hug and a series of slaps on the back.

"You have been gone so long, I have even missed your pathetic humor," Denith said with a laugh.

Baden feigned a hurt look, then burst out in a hearty laugh. "From the looks of you, you probably could have used it. But let's not keep your family waiting. The journey has been taxing on them. I'm sure they will relish nothing more now than to have a place to call home again, except perhaps to see you."

The two men strolled over to the small caravan of horses and wagons that had entered the town.

"Denith! Denith!" Miria cried.

Denith helped his mother from her horse, and gave her a welcoming hug.

"It is wonderful to have you here, Mother. I hope you traveled well."

"We did," she said, straightening her wrinkled dress. "Baden was a wonderful guide and made the trip most pleasant and interesting. I'm sure your fa-

ther would agree.”

Elden, for the moment, was content to study the town. Already a curious crowd of onlookers surrounded them, eager to see the family of the Warrior hero they had all grown to respect. Elden keenly noticed the orderliness of the town scene that greeted him. Rather than the blazing conflict of colors that he had grown accustomed to in the southern villages, this town had obviously learnt the art of using colors in a way that pleased the eyes. Already Elden could feel the freshness of the place invigorating his soul. He knew there would be much to learn in a place like this.

While it had at first been difficult to think of leaving behind the home and trade he had known all his life, after much thought and inward examination, the decision had been made. From then on, and throughout the long journey, Elden had been eagerly anticipating the redirection of his life this move was set to bring. And now that he was here, he fully allowed himself the luxury of taking in every aspect of the life and scene he saw around him.

After a short embrace, Denith left him to his musing and moved towards Keren, who had been carefully scanning the entire road leading up to the town for the first sign of Denith, and had not removed her eyes from him since.

“Welcome to your new home, Keren,” he said with a smile. “I see you have survived the journey well. And how is Barthol?”

She hesitated momentarily and then returned his smile. “Thank you, Denith. Barthol is well. He has become rather fond of the Warrior Guards that accompanied us.” She continued with a hint of laughter in her voice. “I fear he has found a fascination for all their heroic feats, which seem to always end with some mention of his father’s greatness.”

Denith lowered his gaze. “They exaggerate, I’m sure,” he muttered, looking at Keren again.

A child’s laughter broke out, and Denith turned to see one of the Guards playing with Barthol.

“I see what you mean,” he said. “I only hope he will take more kindly to his father this time.”

It was night before the entourage was finally settled into the house that had been readied for them. Denith had insisted that Edward join them for dinner. And when Kurt attempted a quick retreat from the family gathering, Denith pleaded with him to stay as well. His effort at cajoling Baden to join them had, however, remained ineffective. Celor, also, had still not shown himself, and his name had not entered any conversation.

Edward’s wife had prepared the evening meal, as the travelers were weary from their arduous trip. She had made no small affair of presenting them with the finest dishes from her town. And it was with much merriment that they all gathered at the table to enjoy dinner and tell and listen to tales of the adventures and journeys with Baden that Denith’s family had experienced along the way.

It was late into the night when the final welcomes and last goodnights were spoken.



Celor’s eyes remained transfixed on the little insect that furiously paced up and down the wall, just as his mind frantically pursued an explanation for all that his life had become. Uncertainty over how he could face his brother once again resounded within his thoughts. Celor inwardly trembled, knowing that he could not lie to Elden, but he did not wish to relive the past he had pushed from his mind. Now he could not stop his thoughts from wandering back to all that he had been through, from his early rejection of the whispers to the

peaceful reconciliation he had finally found.

As the candle flame flickered in his room, Celor thought of the many years he had spent running from the truth. His life was stained by the guilt of what he had forsaken because of his weakness and fear. Everything he now watched Denith embrace, he had once shunned. Welcoming Denith into his life was the reprieve he had longed for, because he knew Denith brought the promise he had heard the Whisperers tell him of many years ago. For Celor, Denith was the light in his world, though Denith's closeness with the other world often pricked Celor's heart. But he knew that meeting Denith had meant that the Whisperers had not forgotten him, and that maybe they still had a plan for him.

So thinking, Celor fell into a fitful sleep, and a frightful dream...

The sky was oppressive and dark, shrouded not only by the falling night, but by a sense of evil that pervaded the entire scene. A group of Traders had built a fire, ready to camp for the night. The ribald tales and loud guffaws of these lowlifes penetrated the depressive gloom, as they related experiences they had known in times past.

On the outskirts of the small camp two Traders were binding several Drifter women to a tree. One of the younger women persistently struggled to release herself, twisting her body and kicking at her captor.

"Be still, wench!" bellowed one of the Traders, giving the girl a swift kick with his boot.

The girl stilled, but the fury in her eyes was as sharp as the steel blade of a knife.

The Trader grabbed her by the hair, and pulled her face close to his. "So you wish to defy me, slave!" he shouted. "I will show you who is in control." He struck the girl several times. She made no sound, and only

willed her ominous look deeper into his eyes.

The commotion caught the interest of the other Traders, and they quickly gathered round to watch the spectacle take place. The first Trader roughly unbound the young woman's hands and held her struggling body under his, as he tore at her clothes. A couple of the other Traders soon came to aid him by keeping the girl still as they urged him on in his rape of her.

After satisfying himself, he left the young woman to the brutality of the other Traders. Soon her violated body lay motionless, her life ended in barbarous cruelty.

Celor awoke in a sweat. "Forgive me, forgive me!" he cried. The dream had not merely been a nightmare, but a replay of the past he wished forever to forget. He remembered the night well, and how he had watched and participated in the scene with all the cold disinterest of a heart that had grown hard through its acceptance of evil. How could he ever face his brother and his family with the darkness of such a past?

The haunting memories had always restricted him, limiting his freedom of heart and mind, and in truth, even his will to comprehend the awakening that Denith's arrival and the keys he carried with him had brought. Yet he knew he could no longer suppress them.

"If I am to embrace my future, I must learn to face my past," he concluded with a sigh. "It is only fair to those I love, to my own family, that I bare all that has remained hidden."

As soon as the night had ended Celor set off toward his brother's house. The time to unveil the mystery of his past had come.



"Ah, you finally came!" Denith said as he opened the door for his uncle. "For awhile I thought maybe

you'd left town or something. But don't worry. I'm sure my father will be happy to see you."

"Thank you, Denith, and I hope you are right. I always noted some of your father in you. I hope that he has remained as open and perceptive as I remember he was those many years ago." Celor's eyes took on a faraway look, drifting into the immense sea of memories, both good and bad, of a lifetime of experience and secrets.

"Good morning. And who might this fine gentleman be?" Elden asked with a lift of his eyebrow, greeting Denith and Celor.

For all the expectance that surrounded this moment, neither Denith nor Celor had considered how to begin the introduction itself, and such a sudden entrance on Elden's part put both of them at a loss for words.

"U-uh," Denith stuttered, but after a moment of thought went on. "Father, this is the general—the one who first introduced me to the Warrior Guard."

"Well, from all the stories I've heard, you have indeed made my son into a fine warrior," Elden said, and the room fell into silence again.

Elden soon continued. "I am sorry. I have made no formal greeting myself. I am Elden. And you would be, General...?"

Denith held his breath, knowing that it was time for his uncle to carry the rest of the greeting. Tears had begun to well in Celor's eyes, gathering in the wrinkles that lined his eyes and slowly trickling down his weathered cheeks.

"You are still as generous in your acceptance of everyone, Elden," he started. "Just like I remember."

Elden looked puzzled, unable to understand the cryptic compliment the general had made. But as he stared into the misty eyes, distant memories flooded

his mind. Still he remained silent, hesitant to make a sudden declaration only to have it proven wrong.

“Yes, brother, it is me ... Celor,” the general finally exclaimed. “It has been so long.”

“C-C-Celor?”

After several more moments of silence, the two brothers reached out their hands and fell into a tearful embrace.

When Elden had regained some semblance of composure, he said, “I always hoped for the day when I would see you again. I knew it would come. But, Denith,” he continued, turning in Denith’s direction, “why didn’t you tell me...”

Celor cut in. “I am the one to blame. I made him swear not to tell. I wasn’t sure what you would think, or even sure that I was ready for you to know. I’m sorry.”

When Miria, drawn by the commotion, had entered the room, she stood mouth agape. Seeing Elden embracing this stranger in such a brotherly fashion astonished her, even more so when she noted the tears streaming down their faces. But she remained quiet, certain that an explanation would follow.

It was only when Barthol came bounding into the room, followed by Keren, that the two brothers took notice of the onlookers.

“Would you introduce me to your family, Elden?” Celor asked, clearing the tears from his eyes.

“Why, of course! Forgive me. This has all just been so overwhelming that I became unaware of everything else.”

Turning to the little gathering, Elden went on. “Miria, Keren, this is my long-lost brother, Celor. Celor, my wife, and”—he paused and looked over at Denith—“my soon-to-be daughter-in-law, Keren.”

Keren and Denith glanced at each other, and then

both sheepishly gazed elsewhere.

“What about me, Grandpa?” Barthol asked, tugging at his grandfather’s pants.

“Oh, dear, how could I forget? This is my very special grandson, Barthol.”

“It’s nice to meet you, sir,” Barthol said, being unusually polite.

“The pleasure is mine, lad!” Celor exclaimed, patting him on the head.

“Come sit, Celor,” Elden said. “We have much to catch up on. I am sure Denith has told you much of what has happened to us, so I am most interested to hear all that has become of you these many long years.”

Miria had set about to make a welcoming drink for the little gathering, while Keren remained standing in the doorway.

“Ah, many years it has been—some forty-odd long years,” Celor began. “And I fear that I have little good to tell for them. Memories that I have harbored in silence, hoping to forget, now haunt me again. But it is only fair to you, my family, that I tell of all that has happened to me. I have kept my past hidden from all. Even Denith, who knows more of me than most, knows but little of my story.”

Celor paused and looked into Elden’s eyes, “It is not a story I am proud of, but I would not feel right keeping it hidden from you, brother.”

Now Elden took his turn to speak. “Celor, for many years as a child, and as I entered manhood, I wondered what had become of you, whether you were alive, or if the rumors of your death were indeed true. Yet somewhere inside of me I knew that you were still alive, though I had no idea where your path had led. But I never gave up the dream that I would one day see you again—and today that dream has come to pass.

“Whatever your past has been, you are still my brother, and I will not be one to judge you for the path you chose to take, whatever it may have been. I look at Denith now and I see what you have helped him achieve, and I thank you for that. By helping him, you have already undone any disappointment I felt at your disappearance. Your past may hold painful memories for you, but looking at you, I know it is a good path you are following now. I cannot judge you, nor do I plan to. You are my long-lost brother found, and I will not spurn this gift because of the faults of the past.”

“I have no words to thank you for your acceptance of me once again,” Celor said. “You know so little of me, yet you embrace me completely. You still bear the kind and accepting heart you had when I last saw you. It is a privilege to be called your brother, and I hope that I may one day be able to heal the wound I inflicted with my disappearance. But now, allow me to tell you my story.”

Celor once again looked around the room, at the eyes fastened on him.

“Please sit, Miria. And Denith, you and Keren should know of this story too.”

There was a moment of silence before Celor began recounting the day it all began.

“You remember the night I disappeared, Elden,” Celor started, “the night after I had seen them—whoever they were—for the first time. It started ordinarily enough. I was walking along the cliffs when I saw this old woman. Well, she was probably not much older than I am now, but I was a good deal younger, so she looked old enough to me. She seemed to be lost, looking around aimlessly at the edge of the forest, so I walked up to her to see if she needed help.

“I don’t remember much of what she said, except

that it didn't make a lot of sense to me. What made even less sense, and scared me all the more, was that I suddenly started hearing these voices. Strangely enough, these voices sounded familiar to me, even though I could not remember hearing them before. She said they were whispers from the other world. I didn't know what was happening. I started seeing things—odd things—faces, forms, images, swirling all around me. I didn't know what to think or do.

"I faltered. In that instant, I thought of our father and mother and how they would react. The fear they had implanted in my heart about stepping out of the ordinary came back to me. Perhaps I was losing my mind, like they had always said I someday would. That's when I turned and ran home, suddenly realizing how late the hour had become.

"It was after the beating from father I suffered that night that I finally decided to leave the Southern Bluffs. I was hit with the frightening thought that these familiar-sounding 'whispers' had been with me for much longer than I had realized—and that it was they who had distanced me from my family and made my life as miserable as it was. Yes, the thoughts they implanted in me had always fascinated me, but when I realized that I had no control over where they might lead if I were to follow them, I was scared. Since I didn't have the courage to discover the truths they spoke of, I ran away—from my family, and from the whispers.

"The whispers didn't vanish right away. In fact, they kept coming back, haunting my mind as though there was something they wanted me to do. But I felt that to give in to them was proving that I really had gone insane, and so I fought them, resisted them, ignored them. As the months passed and I continued to reject the whispers, they slowly began to fade, and in their stead came a depressive emptiness, which soon turned

to a dark anger at everything I saw in the world around me. And seeing as it was my only means to express all that I felt, I let it ravage my heart—until, without realizing it, the anger began leading my life, just as the whispers would have. Only it was in a different and darker direction.”

Celor stopped and shook his head. “From that time on, I have never heard the whispers again, though at times I have still felt their presence. But looking back on the path I chose, I know all the wrong turns I made, and I often wonder where the path of those whispers would have led me instead.”

Celor turned to Denith, and smiled. “It seems it is a path you have found, and have been able to follow. You made all the right choices where I made the wrong ones, and it has brought me comfort that perhaps my failures are now being undone through you.”

Denith looked down, but Elden looked well pleased with this comment.

“I don’t know how much you learned of the lands around you as you traveled here, but for the next few years after having left the Southern Bluffs behind, I wandered from the Borderlands, into the Woodlands, and beyond into the Heartlands. I worked for a while under several groups of Watchers...”

“You? A Watcher?” Denith gasped, his eyes wide in shock. “I thought you became a Trader?”

“And so I did,” Celor answered. “But that came later. First my adventures led me to follow the ways of the Watchers. I traveled with them, and for a time even trained under them at one of their camps in the Heartlands. That’s where I learned to fight, and learned the arts of war that I have since been able to use against them. But when they had taught me all they could, I became restless again and set off on my own, becoming a petty thief, stealing for a living

wherever I went. Until I met Zenda.”

Celor’s eyes took on a distant and faraway look.

“Who is Zenda?” Denith asked.

“Ah, Zenda,” Celor answered with a pleased sigh. “She was a lone star shining in the blackness of my life. She was the sunshine that dispelled the clouds of my aimless despair. She was the most attractive woman I had ever met. She seemed to cast a spell over every man who laid eyes on her—and I was no different.

“I spotted her in a little village near The Edges. I had gone into a tavern that night with the hopes of drinking away my sorrows. But a fight broke out in the tavern, and in the tussle someone kicked over an oil lantern. Before long, flames had engulfed one entire side of the tavern. The owner of the tavern managed to find a few men who still had their wits about them, and by heaving buckets to and from a nearby stream, the fire was eventually put out. But it had ravaged most of the tavern’s rooms, so I had to find another place to spend the night.

“Thinking to sleep the night outdoors, I walked toward the outskirts of the village, when a woman called out to me. ‘Young man,’ she said, ‘where are you headed? You don’t plan to spend the night outdoors, do you?’ Still under the influence of drink, I didn’t give my actions much thought. ‘Do I have another choice?’ I asked.

“She didn’t answer. Instead, with a flick of her hand, she motioned for me to follow her, which I did—obligingly. She led me to a secluded house, and a little room. I was so drunk I remember little else of what happened that night, except that after that I found myself visiting her more frequently.

“She was no prostitute, and once I questioned her motives for taking me in on that destitute night. Why me? She didn’t give much in the way of an answer, but

told some roundabout story of the boredom that had surrounded her evening until I came along. But there was one part of her story that echoed in my head: She said she had noticed something different about me. I had watched plenty of women like this one go for a man of wealth or influence, but I was nobody. I had no riches to speak of. I was a vagrant, without a purpose or goal in life. But with her, I felt I was somebody, like I had some importance. And best of all, she made me forget about the whispers. In fact, I forgot about everything except her while we were together.

“Unfortunately, the next dark turn would be hers to bring me to—though she did not realize what it would do to me. You see, it was Zenda who first introduced me to the world of Traders. That’s when I discovered it was a world I fit into very easily—more easily than she had anticipated, I’m afraid. I found myself drawn to their roving ways. I found it was not too different from being a vagrant thief, except that the profits were greater, and the Watchers more readily ignored you. Seeing as my heart was as darkened as theirs, I was soon readily accepted into their guild, becoming one of them.

“What I traded was of no concern to me. It varied every time, from animal hides to Drifter women. It was all the same to me. Somehow, though, I always found myself making my way back to this village, and to Zenda. She was the only home I knew. But even she noticed the change that had come over me, and I think it saddened her. You see, the more I worked with Traders, the more I became like them—vulgar, uncouth, cold and heartless. And one day Zenda just disappeared. She didn’t leave word or anything. I came to her house and it was empty. She was gone.”

Celor shook his head. “Sad to say, I was too hardened by then to care much about it. I set out, never

to return to that town again. I immersed myself in the life of a Trader for more years than I care to admit, until even that life started to bore me. Then I became simply an outlaw, a fugitive even among other Traders, whom I swindled, robbed and cheated. It was a sad and empty life of violence, flight, drink and plunder, until one day something strange happened.”

The animation Celor had been telling his story with ended abruptly. The room remained silent, everyone waiting for him to continue.

“It was one night, while I was again drinking my senses away in some nameless tavern at the edge of the Heartlands, that a young stranger entered the tavern. There was a mystical air about this lad that filled me with a desire for things I had not felt or yearned for since I was a child. I went to follow him once he had left, but in my dazed stupor, and on that dark night, I never found him.

“What I did find, when I awoke the next morning, was that I started seeing things—colors—that I had never seen before. At first I thought it was some strange aftereffect of the drink from the night before, a dream that my body was living because my mind hadn’t awoken from it yet. But when the dream lasted, and the colors instead of fading became more distinct, as well as ubiquitous, I knew that there was something more to what had happened to me. And so I set out to explore my strange and colorful new world, in the hopes of finding answers to where it had come from, how I had entered it, and where one might leave it—though the longer I searched, and the more I saw of those who lived outside of it, the less I desired to return to life as I had known it.

“My travels eventually brought me here, where the colors were known and

seen, and where I was able to use the things I had

learned and seen along the way to convince this town of its need for protection—which led to the birth of our Warrior Guard of which Denith has become an illustrious commander, as you no doubt have heard. In fact, it was when Denith first came to our village with his Baron sword that I recognized him as the lad who had entered the tavern that night my life changed so drastically—a change, I have since realized, that was caused not so much by Denith as by the keys that he carries, which unlocked the doors to another world for me as they once did for you.

“But I believe I have kept you all here for long enough, and so ends my story,” Celor said with a deep sigh as he sat back in his chair and curled the ends of his mustache between his fingers. “There are a lot more details that I have chosen to leave out, but they are only of the sort that would reassert the decadent life I lived.”

The silence that pervaded the room left an uncomfortable feeling. No one was sure what to do next. It seemed appropriate that Elden be the one to break the silence, or so Denith thought. After all, it was Elden who had been most affected by the absence of his older brother. But mostly it was that Denith didn’t have a clue as to what to say. Up until this point what little he had known of his uncle had been sufficient, and he had never felt any reason to pry further. Even now, he felt he knew more about the history of his own general than he really should.

Elden finally spoke. Placing his hand on his older brother’s shoulder, Elden stood up. “I understand why you would not be proud of such a past,” he started. “But seeing you now, I find no reason to hold that past against you. I know that acknowledging your wrongdoings is an act of bravery, as great in its own way as that which is displayed in battle. And seeing you strive

MEMORIES

to come back to what you have lost, and to right the wrongs you committed, makes me admire you more than ever. It is clear that you have come to follow the ways and path of the other world, even if you think its whispers have remained silent to you.

“I told you that you would always remain my brother, both in flesh and in heart, and I stand by what I said. I see that you have trod a difficult path, my brother, but your eyes tell of your heart, and they are not dark—a little sad, perhaps, but not dark. If those in the other world have forgiven and accepted you, I see no reason to be hesitant to welcome you once again as a part of our little Woodsman family ... or perhaps it is to be the Warrior family from now on.”

All eyes turned on Denith and Keren, and their faces broke into shy smiles.

THE SEVEN KEYS — WARRIOR LORD



Celor

- 8 -

THE NEXT PATH

It had been a week since Denith's family had arrived, and Denith had persuaded Keren to spend some time alone with him. The hectic environment of getting settled into their new home had not afforded them much time together, but now that things had quieted down, Denith felt it was time for Keren and him to make certain where things stood between them.

As they walked in the cool evening air, a sense of expectancy hung over them. Still, they walked on in silence for some time. Finally, Keren was the first to speak.

"Denith, I never thanked you for sending Baden to bring us here."

"I made a promise, and I am a man of my word," Denith replied, facing Keren.

"I know. You always have been. But after you left, I couldn't help wondering if you would remain true in this aspect as well."

She stopped walking and sat down in the tall grass. "I don't mean that badly," she continued. "I just know that this has not been easy for you, and there are times when I wish the past had never made such a distinct mark on your future, and mine as well."

"What do you mean?"

Keren sighed. “Oh, Denith, sometimes you force me to be so direct. What I’m trying to say, despite all the confusion in my head, is that I am happy that you brought us here—for Barthol’s sake...” Her voice faltered and in a low whisper she added, “...and perhaps for mine as well.”

Denith kissed her forehead, and held her. “I promise, I’ll do my best to be everything a father and husband should be. But I’ll need your help, because I know nothing. You will help me, won’t you, Keren?”

“I’ll always be there for you, and I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

They talked into the night, planning for the wedding that would affirm the promise Denith had made many months earlier. Edward was already gleefully planning the event in the same town square where Denith had first earned his fame in this town by so nearly winning the great tournament.

Late into the night, after they had talked their fill, and under the light of a thousand stars, Denith and Keren made love once again.



The late summer flowers shone in an array of brilliant colors, transforming the town square with their festive palette. The day had come when Denith and Keren would be wed. The simple ceremony that was to ensue was a symbolic demonstration on Denith’s part to the people of the Protected Territories. If it had been left solely to Denith and Keren, they would have been satisfied to live out their commitment without a ceremony.

But an esteemed character such as Denith had to be an example of not only a good Warrior, but also of an individual who took the responsibilities of life and family seriously, with the proper respect for the institution of marriage and whatever circumstance or

tradition came with it. Or so Celor and Edward had convinced him.

The ceremony itself was never an illustrious one. Marriage was simply an official and proper binding of a man and woman, conducted by a Council member. Edward, of course, would direct the ceremony. While they had hoped to keep it a simple and small family matter, Edward would hear nothing of it. While Edward agreed to keep the ceremony itself simple, the event would nevertheless have to be one that as many as possible could witness.

And so it was that, on the appointed day, Denith and Keren found themselves standing on a small raised podium in the middle of the town square, listening to Edward pontificating (as he was so well able to do) on the ritual guidance to be given to a couple who were about to be married. A sizable crowd from all corners of the Protected Territories had gathered.

Keren wore a simple dress of pale mauve that reached to the ground. The pastel color enhanced her olive skin and her beautiful, long dark hair, which was adorned with freshly picked, ivory white flowers. Denith was clad in a loose shirt, pants and boots. Only his famed Baron sword, resting magnificently in its scabbard on his side, offset the elegant simplicity of his costume. Together they were quite the couple.

It would have been difficult to find fault with Kurt's observation the day before. "It's a shame there isn't more passion between you and Keren," he had told Denith, "because the two of you just look right together."

Denith and Keren stood before Edward, facing each other as Edward finished his speech. Then it was time for them to recite their own vows of devotion to each other.

First Denith took Keren's hand. "Keren, here I

stand, holding to my promise to care for you and our child, and any future children we may have together. I vow to respect this commitment by giving you my complete devotion and care. You have always been a dear friend, and I am a fortunate man that I may now know you as not only a friend, but as my wife. No matter where our life together leads us, I promise to hold true to this commitment. Keren, I take you as mine for always.”

Denith then kissed Keren gently.

“To stand here today,” Keren began her vow, “is a dream that has finally come true. Denith, with all my heart I promise to give you the love and service befitting a wife. Wherever this path takes us, I will remain devoted to you for eternity. I will love and care for you no matter what. It is my sole desire to be all I can be to you. And I am privileged to stand here today as your wife, and as the mother of your child. I will always love you, from now till forever and still further. I dedicate my heart to you, Denith.”

She reached up, confirming her commitment with a kiss tenderly placed on her husband’s lips.

Now it was Edward’s turn again, and he beamed as he finished the part that was his to play.

“And so, with joy in our hearts, we have heard your vows and seen your love for each other in the presence of us all. It gives me great pleasure to declare, before the Council, before our town, and before the people of our Protected Territories, that from this day forward, you two shall be known as husband and wife.”

As soon as Denith and Keren embraced in the ritual kiss, the crowd cheered. Miria cried tears of happiness. Celor and Elden looked on approvingly. Kurt and Baden whispered quietly among themselves about a topic that seemed to be greatly amusing to both of them.

The festivities that followed made it all the more a day that would not soon be forgotten. The food and drink that was set out was the best that could be presented, and the music and dancing and eating and feasting and then dancing again lasted long after Denith and Keren had quietly pulled themselves from the scene.

It was good, Denith thought, that the people could celebrate freely, even if his own heart was still unsure about the path his life had now stepped onto.



Though he was now married, with a home and family to call his own, Denith still spent most of his days—and even some nights—away with his men, and tending to the business and needs of the Warrior Guard, and the duties that befell a commander.

There were Traders to be kept in line, reports of Toilers terrorizing small communities and settlements that had to be investigated, and the ever-present need to patrol their borders for any sign of activity from Lancer's men.

Reports from Baden's informers were still coming in, but were few and far between. Only a few days ago, they had received word that the ships along the Borderland coasts had set sail, leaving their camps largely deserted. Small bands of Drifters had been able to overcome the Watchers at each one, rescuing their women, and taking them in to their own tribes. There was no mention of what had become of Maya or Denise specifically, but with as many women as had been rescued, that was hardly surprising.

By the time the news reached them, Lancer's men were in all likelihood already landing on the Baron shores. Denith wondered if they would ever hear the outcome of the battle.

He did not have long to wonder. A few days later

Celor, accompanied by an unfamiliar Drifter, rode into the camp where Denith was stationed.

“Who is this, General?” Denith asked as Celor approached, leaving the stranger a short distance behind them.

“I thought perhaps you might know,” Celor replied. “He came into our town today asking for the Warrior with the Baron sword. He will not tell anyone else of his business, or where he has come from, so I had to bring him here.”

At this, the man himself stepped up.

“Are you the Warrior who carries a Baron sword?” the man asked Denith, speaking the common tongue effortlessly.

Denith looked the man up and down. Though he was dressed like a Drifter, Denith quickly realized something that Celor had not. The man’s bearing and appearance was much closer to that of a Baron than that of a Drifter.

“I am,” Denith answered.

“May I see it?” the man asked.

Denith pulled aside his cape, unsheathed his sword, and handed it to the stranger, as Celor looked on suspiciously.

“I bear a message for you,” the man answered, handing Denith back his sword. “You are to accompany me straightway. I come bearing the seal of a man you should know.”

The man flashed a seal bearing the image of a mounted warrior impaling a dark, evil-looking creature with wings.

“General Zarnik,” Denith said, remembering where he had seen that insignia before.

“You are bid to come alone.”

Celor raised his eyebrows and glanced at Denith, who appeared in thought only for a moment before

answering the Baron. "I shall come. Let me ready my horse."

The Baron nodded, and waited patiently as Denith strode towards his tent and his horse. Celor followed.

"Are you sure? You don't know this man. How can you trust him?" Celor asked once they were out of earshot.

"I have no reason not to trust him," Denith answered. "He is a Baron, and the Barons are honorable folk. He could not have gotten the seal he carries if he was not trusted by them."

Celor did not look convinced.

"Besides," Denith added, "the whispers just told me I could trust him, and that I should go with him as he asks, alone."

Celor looked uncertain. "Let me at least send Kurt to follow you from a distance, for your own safety."

"No, Uncle, that will not be necessary. These Barons are as sharp as any Drifters. He will know if we are being followed, and that will only give him reason to distrust me. It is safer if I do as he says. He has come alone. I shall go alone with him. The whispers will protect me. They always have."

Celor still wasn't satisfied, but knew that there was little he could do about it. "Very well then. I just hope you know what you're doing."

"I don't," Denith answered. "But the other world does, and it is with them that I am going, and not just with this Baron."

So saying, Denith mounted his horse, and rode out to where the Baron messenger was still waiting. Celor anxiously watched the two men spur their horses to a great speed and disappear down the road.



For two days Denith and his mysterious Baron

companion rode on. The man said little, seeming intent only to fulfill the mission General Zarnik had sent him on. By the evening on the second day, they reached the western coast, with the beginning of the Dark Woods visible a short distance to their right.

“Wait here,” the Baron said after he had dismounted. He turned to make his way into the forest, then paused, and turned again. “I may be gone for some time.”

Denith nodded, and watched the Baron disappear into the dark folds of the forest in front of them. Then he waited ... and waited.

As the sky grew darker and the evening air colder, Denith lit a small fire. He contented himself to sit along the edge of the rocks that lined the shore and watch the glistening of the moon on the water as it rose above the horizon. Then his eye caught sight of a dark shadow floating across the silver streaks on the waters. He soon recognized it as a ship, and its form and sails as being Baron. It was coming closer.

A few minutes later there was a rustle in the leaves beside him, and the Baron messenger returned. “Stay here,” he said, keeping to short commands and sentences as he had so far. “He is coming for you, not for me.”

“Who is coming? General Zarnik?”

The messenger didn’t answer. Instead, he loosened the bundle of supplies his horse had carried and dropped them on the ground. Then he mounted his horse and rode off into the darkness, leaving Denith to face the approaching shadow on the waters alone.

As his own small fire died down, the nearing form of the ship on the dark waters became clearer. It stopped a short distance out, and a smaller rowboat lit with a single torch made its way to shore. It was still too far out to tell who was in it, or even how many people.

Denith lit one of the torches the Baron had left behind in the bundle, and made his way down the rocks and onto the sandy beach where the boat would be landing. The wave of his torch was met with an identical wave of the torch on the ship.

As the boat came nearer, Denith could see an identical banner to the one the Baron messenger had shown him flying from a pole on the boat's front.

"Denith?" a voice called out from the boat as it made its way closer.

"General Zarnik?" Denith answered back. "Is it you?"

There were some hushed whispers aboard the boat, and then a man stepped out, walking the last of the way through the water to where Denith stood, while the others rowed the boat a short distance away, and dragged it onto the sand.

"General Zarnik, it is good to see you."

"Ah, Denith, I am glad my messenger found you. I bring news of our glorious victory against Lancer's men. His attack came just as you had warned us, and we were ready. Close to one thousand of his men landed at different points along our coast, but most were taken captive or slain before they reached any of our villages. And very few of their ships ever made it back to the docks they had come from. I just had to bring you the news myself, and to convey the gratefulness of our people for your timely warning."

"I am glad to hear of it," Denith answered, "and pleased that we could be a part, if ever so humble a one, in helping your people. But your thanks should be to the other world, and not us. Without the whispers of those who led us, we might at this time be meeting on these same shores under very different circumstances."

"So it is," General Zarnik answered, "and a great

injustice would have been done. When a man seeks to get his enemies fighting among themselves, it is because he is plotting a greater evil against both. In seeking to falsely provoke us against you, they have made their intentions against our people known as well. But that is hardly surprising. What is surprising to many among us is how there are those of your common cities who are now becoming aware of the workings of the other world. It would have been a sad and very likely error for us to retaliate against the people of your Protected Territories. And so the victory we have won against Lancer's men is all the more glorious, not only because they were defeated, but because the darker purposes behind their treachery have been disappointed.

"But for the same reason, this victory gives cause for warning—a warning I have come to give you. We know of Lancer, and we know of the strange forces that govern your lands. Those you call the Shadowed Ones will not let themselves be defeated that easily. Having lost one battle, they will likely return with another. You must not let one victory make you forget the war, for I doubt that Lancer will be resting when he hears of his defeat."

"It must have been an easy battle for you," Denith suggested.

"In fact, it was not quite as easy as we had hoped for. But we were ready. They came upon our coasts from many sides, and we had our troops ready and waiting in strategic and hidden positions when their ships appeared on the horizon. When their forces finally stepped ashore ... I don't think I've ever seen any soldiers so impassioned, so blindly fervored."

"What do you mean?" Denith asked.

"These men would do the most foolhardy things, take the most amazing risks—walking into the midst of our soldiers flailing their swords aimlessly and hop-

ing to kill as many as they could. They were butchers! Their fierceness made our men uneasy—they had never met such wholly undisciplined and fervor-driven soldiers. Even once they realized their attack had not come as a surprise to us, and that they had met a fair match in battle instead of helpless hordes of civilians, they still would not retreat. Many of them fought to the death, though most of those left towards the end of the battle quickly grew weary, and allowed themselves to be taken prisoner.

“But now, I regret I cannot stay longer. Our ships must never stay long along your shores, or our men among your people. There is too much danger in being seen. Perhaps someday that shall change, and I see that these lands could be more pleasant than I once allowed myself to imagine. But for now, my friend, I must bid you goodbye.”

General Zarnik turned to make his way towards the waiting boat. Then he stopped, and turned around once again with what could easily have been a twinkle in his eye. “Oh, and one more thing, Denith. Congratulations on your marriage, and your beautiful bride! Much happiness to both of you! You really should think about spending a little more time with her.”

Zarnik’s last words left Denith momentarily stunned, and by the time he’d regained his composure and looked around, Zarnik had vanished into the darkness. Denith could faintly hear the sound of a boat being rowed out to sea, but saw nothing more of Zarnik, the departing Barons, or their ship.



Denith’s journey back to his camp was a slow one. He found there was much to ponder, and whenever he found his mind wandering on to another topic, he would hear the faint chant of the whispers coming back to him, saying, *Think about the wall! Think about*

the wall! But Denith did not quite understand what there was to think about. He had already accepted Celor's words as the apparent truth—that building a protective wall of any size would be too large an undertaking for this time. But he could not get the thought out of his mind. There seemed to be some urgency to the message the whispers kept repeating in the back of his mind—which only unsettled Denith more, since he could not understand it.

The other thought that unsettled him came from General Zarnik's last words. It was true that he had not been able to spend much time with Keren. It was perhaps as much of his own choosing as it was that his work and duties had kept him from spending more time at home. *What more could you expect of a Warrior?* he asked himself. But that did little to ease the sting of the words he still felt inside.

A relative measure of peace finally came to his mind when he resolved to bring the matter of building the wall before the Town Council. Celor had said that they managed any building projects. Perhaps they would have more to say about it. After that, he spurred his horse on, and soon saw the familiar houses of the town he called home.



“Denith, how are you? Is it going well?”

“Yes, Edward, it's going very well.”

“Your mother and father, Keren and the child?”

“They're well, and very happy to be here.”

“And they are comfortable in their new abode?”

“Yes, I believe they are. They are very grateful for your hospitality in giving it to them, though my father is already speaking of building his own house nearby. He is an excellent Woodsman, you know.”

“But of course. A man’s home is his life, and he has every right to construct his own. But he is more than welcome to remain in that house for as long as he is building.”

“Thank you. I am sure they will be comfortable there.”

There was a moment of silence.

“But you did not come to me to speak of building houses, did you, young Denith?” Edward observed with his usual perceptiveness.

“Not houses, but something else ... somewhat bigger.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I have just come back from a meeting with one of the Baron generals. He informed me of their great victory against Lancer’s men.”

“But that is wonderful!” Edward answered.

“And also dangerous,” Denith added. “Even if Lancer does not have the immediate resources to launch another attack, there are darker forces behind all this that will not be discouraged by this one defeat. They will try to get at us again—whenever and however they can. I feel we must do more to ready ourselves and our Protected Territories for any future attacks that may come upon us, whether sooner or later.”

“And what did you have in mind?” Edward asked.

“Remember what I said about the great walled cities of the Barons? Ever since I have returned, I have not been able to let go of the thought that we should be constructing such walls ourselves. The whispers have been relentless in urging me not to dismiss the thought. I mentioned this idea to Celor, but he had no idea how it could ever be done. But the fact remains

that our towns are largely defenseless against any attack, especially if Lancer were to suddenly decide to send the full force of his armies against us.”

“Walls around our town? I see what you mean. It certainly *is* bigger than building a house.”

“It may sound like a very grandiose idea, but think what an assurance it would be to have high walls around the outer perimeter of this town. There would be gates to allow for regular traffic going in and out, but in time of war, or in the face of an approaching army, the city could be sealed up so that not a man could get in or out. And we could still have a steady stream of supplies coming to us from the Drifters, and through the secret tunnels.”

“I can see you have given this a lot of thought,” Edward said. “Of course, there are many obstacles. There are no qualified builders within this town who could attempt to even design a structure of that magnitude, let alone build one. The other obstacle is the resources for such a project—the stone and mortar, not to mention the labor.”

“But we do *have* the resources, don’t we? There are quarries and mountain ranges nearby where the rock could be found, and the mortar mixed.”

“And what of the labor—the manpower? Such a project could take years—if not decades. We are a busy people, and every man has his own trade to ply.”

Denith was discouraged. “Perhaps Celor was right, then. It does seem to be an impossibility.”

“I said there were obstacles,” Edward countered. “I said nothing about it being an impossibility. Why, the fact that our town is here at all—not to mention your Protected Territories—is an impossibility. I don’t know how we have survived this long—but we have!”

THE NEXT PATH

Denith took heart. “So you’re saying it can be done?”

“I am saying that it is a worthy suggestion, and a grand plan. But we will have to see. It will take a lot of discussion and counsel to determine how to do such a thing.”

DISCOVERIES

Lancer was livid. "What? How could this have happened? How could they have known?"

The messenger who had just brought the news of the loss of their forces in the Baron Territories took a few timid steps back, and lowered his head to avoid catching the lord general's eye.

"I only know what I know, sir," the man continued cautiously. "Only one ship has thus far returned. There were reports of others being burned in the waters, but this has not yet been confirmed. But we do know that none of the other ships have been sighted since the attack."

"No!" Lancer shouted, pounding his fist on a table next to him. "This cannot be true!" Then he collected himself, and his face grew calm. "Very well, you may go," he told the messenger.

The messenger bowed, grateful to have been dismissed from the presence of this man whose temper had proven to be predictably unpredictable.

"It was the Warrior," a cold voice said close behind him.

"Aaaarh!" Lancer's barely controlled temper suddenly flared again, and he drew his sword and swung it blindly around to hit whatever unfortunate victim

had just intruded on the collected frustration of his fury. But the heavy blow only struck a large, ornate candlestick, splitting it in two so that the pieces went sailing across the room and then clattered to the floor with a loud noise.

It wasn't until silence returned to the room that Lancer caught sight of the familiarly elusive figure.

"Now you come, in my hour of defeat," Lancer muttered. "What is it that you want this time?"

"Only to help you get what you want," the figure answered.

"How do you know what I want?" Lancer taunted.

"I know what you want even better than you do. You want your lands restored as they were, so you can get on with your rule without these pesky Warriors and Drifters constantly interfering with your affairs and plans. You don't want to hear any more nonsense about these colors and a better world. It makes the people edgy. It makes them uncomfortable with the world they have now. It makes them question. It makes them confused. It makes them rebel against anything and everything they once accepted. You want them to accept the orderly life you have worked to bring them."

Lancer looked stunned for a moment at the ease with which this figure had put all the thoughts that had ruled his life into so few sentences. It suddenly sounded so small.

"And you would help me with this?"

"I have been trying to all this time," the figure answered. "You just never seem to get the point."

"Well, if you would stop being so mythological about everything, maybe I'd listen."

"Very well, I'll dispense with the mythology, and get down to exactly what I can do to help you take care of

this Warrior Guard. There is a weakness within their own camp which can be exploited, and with a little help from me, I believe we could make this weakness suit your wishes just perfectly.”

“I’m listening....”



Several weeks had passed since General Zarnik’s visit—weeks that had been busier than ever for Denith. Shortly after his discussion with Edward, he had accompanied a small delegation under the auspices of the Town Council on a mission to determine the logistics involved in building such a wall, and to find and document possible sites where the needed materials could be found and gathered. With many of Lancer’s landholders and Watchers expelled, the resources that lay untapped within the borders of their Protected Territories could now be freely used.

It was with great satisfaction that Denith returned, and presented his report that there was enough stone and mortar available from many possible sites to cover the building of several walls and still not exhaust their supply. There was an abundance of cliff, rock, and mountain formations that fell within the borders of the Protected Territories.

Edward, in turn, had his own report to give.

“Denith, the Council has talked of almost nothing else but the ideas and ramifications of your project. It is one of the more exciting topics we have had to deliberate on in a long time. We have come to the conclusion, however, that for all intents and purposes, it is a project better left alone—”

Denith’s face fell. “But I thought you said—”

Edward held up his hand. “Let me finish. Unless we are able to avail ourselves of the expertise that I’m afraid only the Barons could provide.”

“The Barons?” Denith asked.

“Yes. They are obviously the ones with the skills and knowledge to build such structures. It would be foolish for us to expend resources and energy on a structure that might fail, when we could learn straight from them how to build it properly.”

“I see your point ... but how would you persuade the Barons to help us?” Denith asked.

Edward didn’t answer, but looked blankly back at Denith. There was a moment of silence before Denith caught on.

“You want *me* to go again!”

“And why not?” Edward replied emphatically. “You’ve been there before. You are known among them. You have been to their city and seen their palace. Who better to return and present our case? If these Whisperers of yours want this wall so badly, surely they can give you the words to say that will win favor to our plight among the Barons.”

Denith hesitated. “You’re serious about this?” he finally asked.

“Only if you are,” Edward responded. “The only way the Council will approve such a project is if the help of the Barons can be secured. And so the matter rests with you once again. Think about it, Denith—but think carefully.”



Keren smiled warmly at Denith. “And to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

Denith looked surprised. “You mean I’m such an infrequent visitor that my company brings such pleasure?”

“I wouldn’t say you’re an infrequent visitor, although it’s seldom that you stay for any length of time. And you will be staying for two days—that’s wonderful!”

Denith smiled and meekly looked down at his feet.

In the past weeks he had often been out on missions, or encamped in various locations with his men. He had yet to stay home for more than a couple of hours at a time. But now he needed a little time to think—to retreat for a while from his busy affairs on the field, where the words of the Whisperers were more difficult to hear.

Celor understood, and had graciously granted Denith two days' leave from his duties as a commander. With General Zarnik's little remonstrance still ringing in his ears, Denith decided to spend those two days at home among his family.

Denith spotted Barthol playing silently in a corner of the room. Feeling somewhat playful himself, Denith called out to him.

"Barthol, may I join you in your game?"

Barthol looked up at Denith with his big brown eyes, but said nothing.

"Have you lost your tongue?" Denith gently taunted.

Still there was no response.

Denith thought for a moment, "Ahh, would you like me to tell you some stories?"

Barthol's eyes widened, and at last he spoke. "Stories? Yes!"

Denith smiled as Barthol hurried over and jumped on his lap. "So, young man, what sort of stories would you like to hear?"

Barthol thought for a moment. "Tell me about battles, and soldiers, and shadowed creatures."

"You would really like to hear those stories?" Denith asked, in mock surprise.

"Oh yes! I want to be a Warrior too, one day—just like you!"

"And I'm sure you will be!" Denith said with a laugh at the determination in the young child's voice. "Only

to be a very good Warrior you must also learn to listen to the Whisperers.”

“Baden talked about the Whisperers,” Barthol answered. “But none of the other soldiers did. I think I’ll just learn how to fight!”

“All in good time, my boy,” Denith answered. “But let me tell you about how the Whisperers can help you.”

And so the storytelling began, and went on for a good while, until after some time Barthol grew restless, and Denith let him go off to his own adventures playing outside.

Later that night, when Denith was alone with Keren, she asked, “And now Denith, you must tell me to what we owe the pleasure of your visit.”

Again, Denith pretended to be surprised.

She laughed. “You don’t have to pretend with me, Denith. I understand you’re a busy man, and to have your company for two whole days is unheard of. There must be a reason why you wish to spend time with Barthol and your parents.”

“And with you!” he said in his most charming manner.

Keren laughed. “And with me! But why?”

Denith thought for a moment, wondering how much he should tell her—wondering if he even *could* tell her. She waited patiently, standing with her hands on her hips, looking down at him with a perceptive half-smile on her face.

“I may soon be off on another mission.”

“I thought so. But you have been on missions before. So what is different about this one?”

“This mission, if I am to embark on it, would take me further away than usual.”

“To the Bluffs?” Keren asked expectantly.

“No ... not exactly.”

“Oh.” Keren’s face fell. “You’re going into the Heartlands. Baden told us about that region. Isn’t it very dangerous and dark there?”

“It may be, but I’m not going that direction either.”

“Then ... where are you going?”

Looking Keren straight in the eye and with as much calmness as he could muster, he answered, “Back to the Barons.”

“The Barons? *Back* to them?”

“Yes. I’ve been there once before.”

Keren had not yet heard of Denith’s adventures among the Barons. The nature and outcome of that mission had remained a secret among the few who had known of it from the beginning.

“You’ve been to the Barons before, and you never told me?” Keren asked in shock.

“It was before you came here. Very few people know of it.”

Keren stood silently for a while, lost deep in thought. She slowly turned and walked over to her jewelry box.

“I have something I want to show you,” she said. “I’ve been meaning to show it to you for some time, but I wanted to wait till the time was right. I believe that time is now!”

Keren came back with a folded letter in her hand. Denith leaned forward, expectantly. But Keren stopped short, and looked set to take her time.

Denith settled back in his armchair and waited for what appeared would be a long story to follow.

Keren began. “Remember when you, Baden, and Kurt came to visit, and you asked me about my mother? You seemed surprised that I had never gone back to the house, and we discussed whether anyone might have come looking for me, and if they would

have known where to look.”

Denith nodded slowly, remembering the conversation.

“Well, after Baden came back for us, I decided that I would go back to my house to see how things fared—especially seeing that I would most likely be leaving the Bluffs for good. I wanted to leave a note there for my mother, in case she one day returned, letting her know what had happened in my life—you know ... Barthol and all!”

“Yes, yes. Go on!”

Keren smiled, and deliberately waited before saying any more. She could see Denith’s curiosity mounting with every word she uttered.

“Go on!” Denith repeated.

Still Keren said nothing.

Denith stood up and walked towards her in a mock-threatening manner.

Keren ran around the side of the bed. “Sit down, I’ll tell you!”

He sat on the edge of the bed. Keren came and stood in front of him, with the letter still clutched in her hand. “When I arrived, I found the house exactly as I had left it. I thought perhaps if anything had been left for me it would be in my mother’s bedroom, where the sword was left. So I went in, and that’s when I found this!” She waved the letter triumphantly in the air.

“Unfortunately, it had been there a good while,” she said remorsefully. “I probably should have returned the same week I’d left. But I didn’t!” She shook her head, thinking of how foolishly she had acted.

“So what does it say?” Denith asked.

“Would you like me to tell you?” she teased.

“Yes, please!”

“Very well. It’s from my mother ... oh, here, why don’t you read it for yourself. I’ve already read it

hundreds of times. But seeing as you have been to the Barons already, perhaps you'll understand more than I have."

With that, Keren handed Denith the worn, delicate sheets of paper. He carefully opened it, and read.

Dear Keren,

I'm sending this letter with a good friend of mine. I sincerely hope it will not have to be left for you. We are hoping to find you and explain what happened. I had to leave in such a hurry that you must have been frightfully worried. First of all, I want to assure you that I am safe and well, and I think I'm the happiest I've ever been! I cannot go into too many details in this letter because there would hardly be time to put it all on paper. But I do want to explain as much as I can. Perhaps I should start with your father—since you were always greatly interested in him.

I know it has always been a source of great hurt to you that your father left you and me to be alone. Your father was a married man when I found him, though I did not know this at that time. He did not remember much himself. Then you know what happened. We fell in love, of which you were the result.

But before either of us knew of your coming, those who had returned for the survivors of the Baron ship realized one of their men was unaccounted for. His presence in my house was soon discovered. Shortly after, they came back for him and he was returned to his own lands, where he rediscovered his heritage, being son to a prosperous lord, heir of a great estate, and husband to a Baron wife.

But he did not forget about me, though on ac-

count of his father and his wife, and the position he held, it was not appropriate for him to have any sort of continued communication with a commoner from our lands. In time, both his father and then his wife died, and he found himself growing older, with no heir to his estate. It was then that he sent for me.

As it was an urgent matter, and from what I have come to understand of Baron ships, they are never permitted to stay long on our shores, they had to take me swiftly. There was no time to find you, and they could not understand when I tried to tell them of you. Instead, they were both forceful and insistent that I come with them immediately.

It wasn't until I arrived here that I was finally able to explain that I had a daughter, and furthermore that she was half-Baron. This news was received by your father with mixed emotions. After much deliberation, discussion and debate, it was proposed that someone should return for you, to bring you to these lands, and to your father's house.

He is a lord among the Barons, by the name of Hamenor. He has a great estate, and life here is pleasant. I have sent this letter with those who are to accompany you here, should you decide to do so. I promise you will be well received, as your father is a greatly respected man in these parts.

But there is always the chance that they will not find you, in which case they have been instructed to leave this letter on my bed, at the same place they first left the sword.

Oh, I must tell you about that sword. It has a story all its own, and if you're not curious about

DISCOVERIES

it, I'm sure Denith probably will be. I was worried that you might think it was a threat, but that is not the case. It's a simple custom these Barons have, that if ever they take something that might be missed by another without their knowledge, then they are required to leave something valuable in return. I suppose they must think that a woman and a warrior's sword are of about the same value—isn't that odd?

Now Lord Haminor knows he has a daughter, and he would be greatly delighted to see you—as would I. And if for some strange reason you and this note do not meet until much later, then our invitation will still stand. So, my dear, if this letter finds you, and you find the courage and the strength, please come and see me!

It is not easy to enter the Baron territories. They guard their lands carefully. But there is a jewelry shop on the main Seaport Island where I often go. It is not difficult to find, and it is called by the name "The Crown of Hassak"—written in our common tongue, as well as in the Baron script, the looks and sounds of which are strangely different from ours, as I'm sure you can imagine. If you should come, find this shop, and ask for the lady of the house of Haminor. If you still have the sword that was left, you can show that. It will help them believe and understand. Without it, you will not likely receive an answer, but I shall hear of your presence just the same. And when I do, I shall come as soon as I can to find you there, though that could take a few days.

These lands are so vast, and distances so great. Perhaps our lands are just as great and vast, but as I have never traveled them, I would

not know. But I do know that from here to the Seaport Islands is a goodly ride. I have made it several times. But every path of that journey will be shorter when I know that I can find you on the other end of it.

I realize that you would have to be a very brave woman to travel these parts—indeed, I wouldn't recommend you travel by yourself. But if ever you wish to contact me, please do. I am afraid I cannot return to the Commonlands, and except for the purpose of seeing you again I have little desire to. These Barons guard their women almost as well as they guard their lands, but as for me, it feels good to be cared for. Your father himself is in need of some care, as he has fallen ill and does not think he will live very much longer. This is another reason I was sent for in such haste.

But please know and remember that even if I cannot come back for you myself, I still love you dearly. I have spent much time thinking of you and beseeching the other world to watch over you and take care of you. I trust that you are in good hands, and if the other world wills it, I know I shall be seeing you again in due time.

*With all love,
your mother*

Denith sat, dumbfounded. When he was finally able to speak he shook his head in amazement at Keren. “Why didn't you tell me that you had this letter before now?”

“Like I said, I was waiting for the right time. And I have barely seen you since my arrival. You've either been here or there, and often when you were here, it was in the company of others. I didn't know if this sort

of thing should be discussed openly.”

“You could have somehow sent word to me!”

“Oh, and how? You tell me nothing about yourself. I don’t know where you are, and the only way I could possibly get anything to you when you’re not here would be to corner Kurt or Baden long enough to pass on a message—but I’ve hardly seen them since I’ve arrived either!”

“I’m sorry for making it so difficult for you,” Denith said, realizing he had no real excuse for his almost perpetual absence.

“It’s not so difficult under normal circumstances, but when one has something like this”—she waved the letter in front of his face—“it would be nice if there was a way to reach you!”

“So you want to come with me?” Denith asked, changing the subject.

“Me? Never! Oh no, oh my! No. I’ll stay here and take care of your son. But if you are going there ... could you perhaps inquire after her?”

“If I can. The city of Hassak is where we have to go. If that is where she lives, then perhaps I may be able to find her. But I shall inquire in any case.”

“Oh, you must, Denith! And if you see her, you must tell her that we’re well. Tell her about her grandson—she’ll be thrilled! Tell her how everything turned out.”

“Keren, there is no guarantee I will find her. In fact, there is no guarantee I am even going to the Barons. I said I *might* go.”

“Oh, but Denith, you *have* to go. Whatever it is you’re hoping to accomplish among the Barons, I’m sure my mother could help you. You know how she can be. And if my father is as respected and wealthy as it sounds, I am sure that could only work in your favor, whatever it is you must do.”

Denith paused for a moment. “You know ... you may have just given me another reason to embark on this mission,” he said.

That night, after Keren had fallen into a silent sleep, Denith remained awake, pondering the renewed vision and sense of purpose that his conversation with Keren had brought him. But Denith knew that even this was not enough to base his decision on. He knew that if this was a path that he was to take, that the Whisperers would tell him how and when to go. And so, in those quiet moments before he drifted to sleep, he watched, waited, and listened for their presence.

His state of expectancy was not disappointed, and soon he heard them, as they imparted to him the assurance and knowledge that this plan indeed stemmed from a source beyond the physical circumstances that dictated life around him. Pieces that had been so long in preparation were now coming together, and the time had indeed come to return to the Barons—and to seek out Amy.

After two days, and with renewed confidence that the next path before him had been clearly set forth, Denith set out to find Celor.

“Ah, Denith, how can I help you?”

“I have told you that I have been considering another voyage to the Barons.”

“Ah, yes—the wall. I heard that the Council had deliberated on your request. You will be asking the Barons to help?”

“Yes. I don’t know how much they’ll be able to help us with, but the least I can do is ask.”

“And they will most likely listen!” Celor said.

Denith hesitated a moment before continuing. “I wanted to ask about someone else.”

“That would be Kurt?”

“Yes.”

"I expected that," Celor quickly answered, hoping to put his visibly nervous nephew at ease. "So it will be just the two of you again?"

"Uh, not exactly. There is someone else who wants to travel with us."

"Another of my Guard?"

"Hardly," Denith laughed.

"Edward?" Celor asked in great surprise.

"No, I'm afraid nothing as illustrious as a Council member. It's a rather good friend of mine, with a thirst for adventure."

"Ah, Baden! I should have known."

Denith nodded, and hesitated. "There is one other thing that I wanted to mention," Denith said slowly and cautiously, "and I'm sure you're already aware of this. But this mission, like my last one, will need to be kept..."

"Under wraps?" Celor interrupted. "You can trust me, Denith. I believe your last mission to the Barons was one of the best-kept secrets of this town."

"Was?" Denith asked.

"Denith, you have nothing to fear, even if you are working for the Council. I respect those men, and I respect you, and I won't breathe a word of this to anyone—even the commanders."

"Thank you, Celor!"

"Thank *you*," Celor said. "I know that if you can pull this off, you'll be doing this town and these people a lot of good. I'm just glad you have the energy to pursue these ideas of yours. I'm much too old to get involved in these types of things. But I'm right behind you, even if I can't be beside you."

"So I have your blessing?"

"You most certainly do," Celor said. "I wish you all the best for your mission."

"Thank you, Uncle."

A LORD AND A LADY

It was with so much anticipation that Denith had awaited this voyage that when the day finally came, he felt as if he had been waiting much longer than he had. In the meantime, all necessary information had been gathered on the resources and possibilities they had come up with. Now, everything was ready.

“Oh!” Keren exclaimed, as she stood looking at Denith, Kurt and Baden. “You look like such fine men! And Kurt—I must say, you look quite the Baron.”

Kurt laughed. “These are my father’s clothes. I finally went back to visit my mother, and at the same time I relieved her of many of my father’s belongings. I figured I might as well use them among my own people.”

“And Baden,” Keren said, turning to the Drifter, “you’re finally off on a new adventure.”

“That I am, Keren!”

Denith, amused at the conversation, finally remarked, “Well, we’d best be off!”

After saying their final goodbyes they left for the small cottage on the road just outside the port city. There they would once again meet with Countsman Waverly, who had arranged the rest of their voyage across the waters as Traders on another merchant

vessel.

The journey itself was uneventful, though due to some unfavorable wind it wasn't until the eighth day that the peaks of the Seaport Islands came into view. Denith and Kurt had survived the voyage somewhat better than Baden, who had never been out to sea before. The close quarters aboard the ship did not suit him in the least, and he spent most of his time on the upper decks, where he chose to sleep as well—to the great amusement of the other Traders on board.

He was most relieved when the ship finally berthed.



Denith carefully reread Amy's note, and with the help of Kurt had soon located the jewelry shop where Amy had instructed Keren to initiate contact.

Although there were many Traders about, Denith was relieved to find the shopkeeper to be a very polite and scholarly looking gentleman. The shopkeeper, in turn, was most puzzled by the two guests who came into his shop. One was obviously a Baron, and the other obviously a commoner. This posed a dilemma as to which tongue he would use to greet them. The common language was more often spoken here, but most Barons took offense at it. And still, the commoner seemed the more distinguished visitor of the two, so that he might take offense if they were addressed in the Baron tongue.

The slight pause that resulted from the shopkeeper trying to make up his mind was soon broken by his halting greeting.

"M-may I help you?" he asked nervously in the common tongue.

Denith and Kurt looked at one another, and there was another short pause before Denith decided to speak.

"We have come to seek the lady of the house of Hamenor," Denith answered the man. "We were told this was the place to come."

The man looked a little surprised at Denith's words. Then Kurt pulled out Amy's letter, and showed it to the man. Meanwhile Denith let his coat fall open to reveal his sword. The man took all of these things in quietly. Finally he simply nodded.

"I shall see what I can do," the shopkeeper answered. "Please, let me know where I can find you, should I need to."

"We're staying at the Seaport Tavern, by the docks," Denith answered. He knew that there was little more to come of the conversation, and so after a quick farewell, Denith and Kurt returned to the tavern, where Baden was still trying to recuperate from the unpleasantness of his first ocean voyage.

Two days later, as the three sat in the dining room of the tavern, they watched as a well-dressed woman entered the room, accompanied by the innkeeper and what appeared to be a servant. Their hopes were confirmed when the innkeeper pointed the woman to the table at which they sat. The woman, her head covered by a hood, hurried over to the table.

As she came nearer, Denith stood to greet her. She slipped the hood off her head.

"Amy!" Denith exclaimed. "It really is you. You look so good!"

"Denith! And who would have thought that I would be meeting you again—and after all this time? I'd almost given up hope that my letter was ever found. But I should have known that you would end up here one day."

"It's wonderful to see you, Amy. Please, sit down and join us. These are my two good friends. Baden is a Drifter—and a very resourceful man to have around.

Kurt is half Baron, and my dependable friend. They already know who you are.”

Amy sat at the opposite side of the table. “So, tell me *everything!*”

“You first,” Denith said.

“No, no—you first! What about Keren? Is she with you?”

“No, but she is well,” Denith said. “As is your grandson!”

“I have a grandson?” Amy almost squealed. “Then ... I presume I must also have a son-in-law.”

“Yes. I’m pleased to meet you, ma’am!”

“Oh, Denith! But do you love Keren?”

Denith was taken aback. Kurt and Baden were likewise most surprised with Amy’s forthright question.

“Never mind,” she said quickly, with a mother’s perceptiveness. “You don’t have to answer that. It’s enough that you’ve married her, and you have a son. How nice! So ... how is it that you have come here after all this time?”

“Well, to be honest, Keren never found your letter until several months ago, and I only learned of it shortly before my voyage. It’s part of the reason I came, though I have already been here once before.”

“You have?” Amy asked, her eyes wide. “When?”

“On a mission, several months ago.”

“Ah ... there were rumors about some warriors from the Commonlands who had come to our city some time ago—I remember now. Unfortunately, by the time I heard of it, they had already left. But you’re not a warrior, are you?”

“In fact, I am. It’s a rather long story that will take quite some time to tell, starting back when we first found the sword your Baron friends had left behind. But what about you, Amy? How has it been, living with the Barons? Have you ever thought of coming

back?”

“Well,” Amy responded, “you’ve read my letter. Little has changed since then. My husband, Lord Haminor, recovered from his illness, but it left him crippled, and his lack of movement has only steadily weakened him. He is also getting on in years, as he was already a good deal older than me when we first met. But as long as he is alive I shall remain by his side. It is sad that Keren couldn’t join you.”

“She’s in a safe place with our son, Barthol. She felt it more prudent to remain there with him for the time being.”

“I understand. Still, I hope she may someday be persuaded to visit me here.”

“Perhaps,” Denith answered.

“You said my letter was only part of your reason for coming here. What is the other? Another mission?”

“Yes,” Denith answered. “A mission we were hoping to get your help with.”

“My help? How exciting!”

“You must know how difficult it is for a commoner to get into your Forbidden Territories, and yet we have to meet with the Council of Hassak. But we have no idea how to get there. Had I not known that the Whisperers were guiding us on our last mission, I would have considered that we got into your city by accident. This time, I was hoping that maybe...”

“I’d be able to help you? But of course. I have my own means of getting into the city, and my husband is an influential man. Accompanied by me you would have no trouble at all, and you could stay at my house. From there, I’m sure we can make arrangements for you to meet anyone that you’ll need to.”

“Do you know General Zarnik?”

“Ah yes, very well. He is a personal friend of Lord Haminor, and comes to our house often. He is one

of the few Barons who, for reasons I can only guess, speaks our language. These Barons can be very secretive, even among their own people.”

“He is the man I need to see.”

“Well, then these Whisperers of yours have certainly sent you to the right person. I’ll be happy to arrange a meeting between you.”

“It’s not a problem for us to be seen in public with you?” Denith asked. “Your letter mentions that these Barons guard their women quite well. What would they think about you bringing these three strange men into your house?”

“I see nothing wrong with it,” Amy answered. “It makes perfect sense. You’re my son-in-law, coming to visit me from a distant place. In fact, they may well be aware of that already.”

“Really?” Denith asked.

“There’s little that escapes their attention, these Barons. But I see no problem with inviting you all to my home as honored guests.”



The trip to Hassak was a shorter one than Denith and Kurt had taken the last time. They didn’t have to cross the ferry this time. Instead, they rode to a place where a small boat was already waiting to take them across the channel of water that divided the islands from the mainland. From there, it was only a short ride before the looming walls of Hassak rose up from behind the hills that hid them.

Baden could not stop himself from gaping at the vast walls before them, and staring in awe as they entered through one of the large, arched gateways that rose as high as the tallest Commonland trees. As they rode further, they discovered just how vast an area this city covered. Suburbs, parks, hills, valleys, and even small forests were enclosed within the circle

of its giant walls.

The house Amy led them to was set on a hill not too far from the edge of the walls, which loomed high behind it, providing little in the way of a view. The front of the house, however, looked over the heart of the city, and provided a perfect bird's-eye view of the distant buildings, including the palace and its grounds at the heart of the city. From this vantage point, the beauty and symmetry of the city's architecture was all the more apparent.

The house itself was a spacious one, with many rooms. Amy soon found a suitable one for each of her guests, and afterward led them all to the large dining room for supper. Darkness was fast falling, but that didn't stop them from talking long into the night, as Amy heard all about her guests' adventures in the Commonlands, and they heard her tales of the Baron people and their way of life.

When the hour began to grow late, first Baden and then Kurt politely excused themselves, and Denith found himself alone with Amy. The room grew quiet.

"You've been staring at me again," Amy finally said with a chuckle.

"I have?" Denith asked nervously.

"Oh, it's nothing to worry about—though it does make me curious as to what you were thinking."

Denith was caught off guard. "I ... I was just thinking how good you look," he confessed.

Amy laughed. "Well, I'm certainly dressed better than I ever was in the Commonlands."

"No, that's not what I mean ... I mean, your clothes are certainly becoming. It's just that I ... oh, never mind."

Denith wasn't sure where his own thoughts were leading, and decided to change the topic.

"So you are married yourself now," he said. "What

sort of man is this Lord Haminor?"

"As I told you, he is crippled and frail, though his character and integrity are strong. His age proves a great frustration to him. You see, he was a strong and active warrior in his younger years, and even when he first met me. But now he's considerably older, and he cannot even walk without someone holding his hand.

"He is resting now, but you shall have your chance to meet him tomorrow, if you like. I'm sure he would be most interested to meet a Warrior of the common people. He has a great curiosity for our lands, you know. Most Barons consider our lands and people as barbaric and uncivilized."

"I've heard that somewhere before," Denith interjected.

"Yes, well, it isn't surprising," Amy answered. "Especially when you consider that the commoners they do see in these parts are mostly Traders, and you know what sort of men those can be! What Lord Haminor did in bringing me to these lands, and into his house, and taking me as his wife, is most unheard of. But still, he did it openly. It's odd, isn't it?"

Amy gazed off into the distance, remembering a world and time far away.

"I was always considered a shameful woman in the Commonlands. But here I was thrust into high society. I was taught how to speak their language, and my tutors were the most cultured women in the city, befitting the role I was to play in Lord Haminor's house. So all of a sudden I became a woman of wealth and influence. It's surprising how things can change, isn't it?"

"Perhaps," Denith answered quietly. "I have seen unexpected changes of my own over these past years. But it's obvious that you are happy and content here,

and Keren will be glad to hear that.”

Amy looked as though she was about to say something, then paused. Finally, she said, “It is late, and I should be retiring. I have a busy day ahead of me tomorrow informing everyone that my son-in-law has come for a visit, and making arrangements for some guests who I am sure will be most interested to meet you.”

“You are an amazing woman,” Denith remarked, as he stood up with her.

“And you, Denith, have become quite the man.”

Not quite sure what to make of that comment, Denith silently followed Amy out of the room, and as she turned towards her bedroom, he proceeded to his own.



When Denith rose late the next morning, he was surprised to discover that Amy had already taken the liberty of calling for General Zarnik, who was to meet him at noon. Kurt and Baden had left earlier to see parts of the city.

Denith used what time he had left to prepare his papers, and to seek the wisdom and counsel of the whispers about how best to present his request.

When the hour came, Denith felt ready.

“General Zarnik, I’m so glad you could come,” Amy said in greeting. “Please let me introduce you to my son-in-law, though I believe you have already met.”

“Indeed we have met,” the general answered. “I have been looking forward to your return. Once we discovered that you had a relative amongst us, I knew it was only a matter of time before we would be seeing you again.”

“You knew Amy was my relative?”

“It wasn’t a difficult conclusion to come to. She is one of the few commoners within this city. But what

made the final connection was your sword. When we managed to trace its history, it led to the house of Lord Haminor, who himself supplied us with the details of how it was sent to the Commonlands, where it obviously came into your hands.”

“You traced the history of a sword?” Denith asked, astonished.

“The sword you hold is no ordinary weapon. It is of the finest craftsmanship, and of a kind given only by the king to those who distinguished themselves on the field of battle. With a little seeking and inquiring, the master of the sword was soon found, and the story of how it was sent to the Commonlands told. I suppose you have your own story of how it came to serve you.”

“And it is a long one, to be sure,” Denith answered, “though I should be glad to tell you in full when you have time to hear of it.”

At this, Amy motioned the two men towards the parlor, where they sat down. Once Amy had excused herself, General Zarnik resumed their conversation.

“There is never too much time, unfortunately. There are many matters to be attended to, even for a general of a nation that is secure and largely at peace. I hear you come with matters of your own for my attention, and that I shall give. But before you begin, allow me to speak freely.”

Denith nodded.

“There is more that we know about you and your lands than simply your relation to Amy through your marriage to her daughter. We know, for example, that you have made quite a reputation for yourself among the Warrior Guard with your Baron sword. We know that this Guard keeps itself abreast of Lancer’s movements through a network of those you call Drifters, even if they have not gone as far as to infiltrate the

lands of Danar from where Lancer rules.”

“Danar?” Denith questioned.

“His city, as we call it,” Zarnik explained. “It lies in the midst of what you call the Heartlands, and is the seat of Lancer’s government, and of his shadows that have spread themselves throughout the Commonlands—in much the same way that your town has become the heart that pumps more enlightened teachings of truth and liberation into your Protected Territories.”

Denith looked at Zarnik curiously.

“We know still more,” General Zarnik continued. “We know that Lancer has been watching you and your towns, if from a distance, and that he fears your influence spreading. We know that he is fortifying his own city, and is trying to strengthen his hold on the Commonlands by increasing the presence of his troops in various regions, including around yours, though—after his costly and unanticipated defeat on our shores—he shows no intention of attacking until he has had a chance to rebuild his forces.”

Denith was stunned. “How can you know all these things?”

“We have our ways,” Zarnik answered. “But now, tell me of the matter for which you wished to see me.”

“Of course,” Denith answered, realizing that the questions Zarnik’s introduction had raised in his mind would not immediately be answered. “And since what I have to ask concerns many of these things of which you have spoken, I am glad that I shall not have to recount them to you myself. So let me come to the heart of the matter.”

“Go on,” Zarnik answered.

“Our people know little when it comes to the ways of war, or even protecting ourselves. Yes, we have a

small army, and we have stood up well against any attacks Lancer has launched against us thus far. But our towns and people are left largely defenseless, and we are only so many Warriors. If Lancer were to come on us with a great force such as you say he is now preparing, we could be overwhelmed.

“I have sought the advice of the men in our Council, and of my uncle, General Celor. We believe our lands have abundant resources for a similar wall to be built around our own city, only we lack the knowledge of how to build a structure of such proportions. This is where we would seek your help—to have your skilled craftsmen teach and assist us in creating a city where our people can feel as safe as you do within this one.”

“I see,” Zarnik answered, looking pensive. “That is indeed a great request, and I foresee it taking quite some deliberation within our own councils. They would have to be made to see the need for it. You see, your people are still looked on by many of us as crude and uncivilized. I may not see you or your lands that way, but there are still some who do, even among our councils, and to them such a request would come as a surprise indeed.”

Denith nodded, answering, “And that is exactly why I need your help. You seem to know much about our people already. I am sure you are aware of our strengths—and our weaknesses. If there is any hope, it is in me convincing you, and you instructing me in how to present our case to those who could help us.”

“You’d almost do well enough just to convince me,” General Zarnik answered. “Unlike your commanders and your guard, we work very closely together with our councils. To speak with me is to speak to those who could help you, and I won’t be a difficult man to convince. While few may admit it, I know we are

indebted to you for your courage to come to our lands bringing news of Lancer's attack. While we may well have learned of this attack ourselves, we would likely not have had as much time to prepare. I know what it is like to lose men, and we could have lost many more without the time your warning gave us.

"But to give others an appreciation for what you are trying to accomplish could prove to be the greater challenge." At this, Zarnik looked straight into Denith's eyes. "You see, they would want to know what we could possibly stand to gain from this. There is little your people have that we need."

"I know," Denith answered. "There is little we can offer you, which is why I have not come with an offer, but with a request ... a request in the name of the other world."

General Zarnik's expression remained unchanged.

Denith continued. "Your own histories speak of battles against dark and evil forces, against creatures who sought to overrun your lands with shadow. But they were defeated, and your lands remained free—free to enjoy the world you had fought so hard to keep. These same dark forces came to our lands, but our people did not know how to stand against them as you did, and the Commonlands were swallowed by the shadows and the Shadowed Ones who brought them.

"Now some of us who have broken free from these shadows—and who have seen and tasted the freedoms of another world that was taken from us—desire to stand up against these dark forces, and win back that which we have lost for all our people.

"The building of this wall, as great a project as it portends to be, is still but a small step towards that goal, and it is one that we cannot take by ourselves. So

we implore your help, with the promise that once it is given, you will find on the other side of the waters that divide us lands of friendship rather than darkness, a place of peace instead of conflict, a wall of strength that in time might drive the shadows further from your borders as well as ours.”

Zarnik listened attentively, and furrowed his brow. “I fear perhaps we have known our freedom for too long to understand what it would be like without it,” he finally said. “But now our people have known and seen for themselves the ferocity of the forces against which you fight, and perhaps received an inkling of battles that may once again come to our shores if Lancer was to gain strength, and continue his dominion over your lands unresisted.”

At this, Zarnik stood up. “Very well, Denith, I shall see what I can do for you, but it may take some time. While you wait, feel free to enjoy the hospitality of our good city. Your good hostess is a very pleasing and affable woman. I could not wish you any better company during your stay here.”

After that, the two men bade farewell, and Zarnik left.

“How did it go?” Amy asked eagerly, when she came back into the room.

“As good as I’d hoped. It’s in his hands now.”

“Perhaps so,” Amy answered, without adding any further comment. “And now, since I don’t know how long I’ll have the pleasure of your company, what would you say to joining me on a tour of this great city? It will easily take the rest of our afternoon, and there are some places I just have to show you, and people I must introduce you to.”

Denith agreed and they soon departed, accompanied by a tall, husky Baron of somewhat darker complexion than most. Amy introduced the man as Le-

onor, her personal steward and one of Lord Hamenor's most trusted servants.

Setting out in a horse-drawn carriage, Leonor drove them from place to place, and sight to sight. Amy knew exactly which vistas over the city and within the walls would be the most impressive and appreciated by Denith—and there were many such places, from the great botanical gardens sporting trees and vegetation such as Denith had never seen before, to the distant hills rolling along the horizon around this elevated city.

While Amy delighted in watching Denith's reactions to the various sights and sounds, scents and tastes that could be found within this Baron city, Denith inwardly marveled at the freedom and grace with which Amy moved about in this city, bringing smiles to all along their way with her charm and graceful manner—and a seemingly perfect command of the Baron tongue. By the end of the day it was difficult to say what had impressed Denith more—the city, or Amy.



Another surprise awaited Denith, Kurt, and Baden the next day, when their morning explorations were interrupted shortly before noon by Leonor's hasty approach.

"Her ladyship wishes your presence back at the abode," he instructed them. "I am to bring you back immediately."

The men quickly followed, wondering what had happened.

Amy was there to greet them. "Why, gentlemen, you are almost late! But I'm glad Leonor managed to find you so quickly."

She immediately walked up to Denith, placed her arms around him and kissed his cheek. "I'm glad you're back!" she said.

She stepped back again and eyed the three men up and down. "Your attires will do. I can't really keep my guests waiting any longer." She linked her arm through Denith's, and escorted him and his companions through the hallway and into the dining room—where a sumptuous feast was spread before them.

"Amy, what's all this?" Denith asked.

"Well, it's not very often that my son-in-law visits." She smiled. "I have some guests I'd like to introduce you to. Being very gracious and good friends of my husband, when they heard you were here, they expressed a keen interest in meeting you for themselves. So I've invited them, and here they are."

As they walked towards the table, two couples stood to greet the three men. One man and woman were more elderly. The second couple was younger—and Denith instantly recognized the man as the commanding stranger who had never introduced himself.

"This is his Lordship Sir Hanawah," Amy began, leading him to the elderly man first. "He is a leading council member of our city, and this is his wife, the gracious Lady Isme." The man and his wife nodded at the three newcomers, who likewise nodded back.

"And this," Amy said with a great flourish of pride, as she led them to the younger couple, "is the honorable Prince Beldanah, ruler of the city of Hassak, and his lovely wife, the much-envied Princess Suranis."

At this, the princess smiled coyly, but the prince took over the conversation.

"I believe we have already met," he said, "though I am glad that this time we can be more properly introduced to one another."

"As am I," Denith answered, a little nervous at the realization of whom he was speaking with, and realizing why he had been called in such haste.

Prince Beldanah held out his hand and respect-

fully shook first Denith's, and then Kurt and Baden's hands. His wife nodded politely at the three men.

Kurt and Baden grew nervous as well—Baden because he had never had to be so formal in all his life, and Kurt because he was not sure what level of formality such an introduction warranted. Neither of them were exactly sure what to do, but since it seemed much of the attention was being focused on Denith, they were content to remain quiet sideliners to this event.

“Now please, let us all sit down,” Amy said. “I hope you don't mind eating this simple fare. In honor of my visitors from the Commonlands, I have seen fit to prepare a meal as would be found in their homes. It is perhaps not as elaborate as many of our beloved Baron dishes, but I hope you shall enjoy it just the same.”

Then turning to Denith, who had by this time seated himself, Amy said, “Well, Denith, let's show them how to eat these 'strange' dishes.”

At that signal, Denith grabbed a slab of bread, dipping it in the broth in front of him. The Baron guests watched with great interest, and with much amusement tried to copy the manners and habits of the Commonland dwellers.

“Well, I am not sure that I would change my preference of food over this, but it is certainly a tasty meal in its own way,” Prince Beldanah commented—a high praise that obviously delighted Amy.

As the meal progressed, many questions were asked about the Commonlands, its people and their customs. Prince Beldanah in particular showed a keen interest in their lands. “Indeed, I have often wanted to visit your lands, but my father won't allow me to do so. He says it is far too dangerous for a prince to travel—especially to those lands.”

“And as king of all the Baron lands, he is probably right!” Princess Suranis piped up.

“But one day I shall!” Prince Beldanah looked straight into Denith’s eyes. “Perhaps if our two cities formed an alliance, I would have a good reason for visiting your lands.”

Denith looked surprised.

Beldanah continued. “You are surprised that I speak plainly of these things? I think it is only a matter of time. Your request for our help in fortifying your city is at this moment being brought to my father and the Upper Council of Barons to be discussed. If they accept such a proposal, I only imagine that further amities between our people will come in the future. Indeed,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, “you should try to impress me as much as you can, so that I can speak a good word in your favor when the time comes for me to do so!”

Denith was at a loss for words. “Uh....”

“Never mind,” Prince Beldanah said with a laugh, “I speak only in jest.”

Denith managed a small smile, but a quick glance at Amy told him that it was likely the prince was not entirely joking.

The remainder of the meal continued in a pleasant manner. For the most part the conversation was simple, partly for the reason that most comments had to be translated back and forth by Amy and Prince Beldanah, who were the only two people in the room proficient in both languages. The women showed great interest in hearing about Keren and young Barthol, and were delighted as Denith unfolded the story as it had unfolded for him.

“Let me count,” Princess Suranis said. “So you didn’t realize you had a son for five years? It must have been most disconcerting once you first discovered

that you were a father.”

For some reason, this slightly more personal question was in itself disconcerting for Denith. He struggled for an answer, but none came. He looked at Amy for help—as she had given throughout the evening when the conversation began ebbing—but she remained silent, waiting for an answer almost more intently than the princess.

Finally it was the princess herself who came to Denith’s rescue. She turned her attention to Kurt and Baden, who had remained largely silent so far, but were becoming more mellow after having eaten and drunken some.

“And what of you two fine young men?” the princess asked through Amy. “What do you think of our Baron ladies? Perhaps I can introduce you to some.”

Kurt, trying his best to respond in a respectful manner, said, “I’m not sure that would be so appropriate.”

“Have you seen much of our women?”

“We have seen plenty. But we’ve learned that they are carefully guarded, and so considered it best not to approach them or become in any way involved with them while we are here.”

“It’s true that this is largely a man’s world,” Sir Hanawah remarked. “Women of their own accord will rarely address a man openly. They are often spoken for, and speaking to the wrong one can have undesirable consequences. But as you can see, among close friends and those who know each other well, such traditions can be dispensed with.”

“Still,” Lady Isme interjected, “you are wise not to try to initiate contact with any of the young women here.”

“Oh, we have no intention of doing so,” Kurt assured her, though Baden kept silent, with an uncon-

vinced expression on his face.

“You, sir, do not seem to think the same,” Suranis said, looking at Baden.

“Oh, no, no. You have no need to fear,” Baden quickly answered. “I will behave myself most admirably. However, I must say, I have certainly noted that the women here are very fine.”

The comment brought an amused laugh from the women present.

Time passed quickly, and before long the guests stood to excuse themselves. The prince lingered behind as Amy escorted Lord Hanawah and his wife to the door. Kurt and Baden had already disappeared elsewhere.

“There is one thing I am curious about,” Denith said in parting. “This city is not so close to the Seaport Islands. How was it that *you* found us there so quickly the first time?”

“That is not difficult to explain,” the prince answered. “I frequently mingle with my people in these parts, and especially on the Seaport Islands. I told you I have a great interest in the things of your lands, and there is always much to be learned on those islands. Few folks there know me for who I really am, but some do. That particular day I happened to be nearby when one of my men informed me of your presence. Naturally, I came right away to determine what sort of men you were.”

“And then you disappeared. We didn’t know what to do.”

“So you began making further inquiries of your own. I know. We made inquiries in that time as well, and learned much. I apologize for the treatment you received in being apprehended rather roughly. You must understand, we knew little about you or whether we could trust you or not.”

"Then why, when we were arrested, did you bring us straight into these Forbidden Territories, and your city?"

"It is only called 'forbidden' by those not worthy to enter our lands. You may consider our lands and my city open to you whenever you should choose to come, because you have proven yourselves trustworthy. If you had not, you would have never left our city, and so could have told no one further about anything you saw within our lands. But I am glad that was not the case, and because of it, we now have the opportunity to get to know you and your people somewhat better."

"And *we* are grateful for the hospitality that we have come to experience while here. It is truly a delightful city, and your people are a pleasant people."

Amy, upon returning, was delighted to see the good rapport the two had together.

"I am glad to see you enjoy one another's company so greatly," Amy said. "You must come again, Prince Beldanah."

"I would be delighted to," the prince answered. "I hope you shall be able to stay somewhat longer than last time, Denith."

"I hope so too."

With that, the two men bade farewell.

When Amy had likewise escorted the prince and princess to the door, she returned to Denith.

"If you're not in a hurry to go anywhere at the moment, there is someone else who would like to meet you," Amy said.

"Oh?" Denith replied. "And who is that?"

Amy didn't answer, but simply clapped her hands. A sheer curtain at the far end of the room moved aside, and in walked Leonor, pushing a wheeled chair that held an elderly man.

Before he knew why he was doing it, Denith found

himself kneeling to the floor in front of this man.

“Now, now, what is this?” the man asked. “He bows to me.”

Denith looked up, a little puzzled at his own actions.

“Denith,” Amy said, “this is your father-in-law, Lord Haminor. Lord Haminor, may I introduce the man who has married our daughter, Sir Denith.”

“I have heard much about you,” Lord Haminor said, his chair having come to a stop a few feet from where Denith was still kneeling. “A commander of the armies of light among your own people.”

“The armies of light?” Denith asked.

“Yes ... your Warrior Guard. You are the armies of light, for you fight against the forces of darkness that rule your lands. And this is good. There is great power in the light. Sometimes we forget. There is not much darkness here. But I have known your lands, and your people, and the darkness there.”

Lord Haminor grew silent for a moment, and Amy directed Denith towards a comfortable sitting pillow nearby.

“When I came back to my homeland, I wanted to understand. Your lands are known only as strange and dark places here, and in many ways they are. But for a time, while I was in your lands, I was given the gift of forgetfulness, so that I learned among your people as one who had known nothing of them before. I found a home, a life that was good, and a love that was pure.” Lord Haminor cracked a little smile in Amy’s direction, who beamed a broad smile back.

“You have come to learn the gift of the colors,” Lord Haminor continued. “It took me some time to understand that your people were unable to see them. These dark forces are strange, and difficult to understand. They are one thing to one person, and something else

to another. But I came to understand from my time among your people that it was not the people themselves who were dark, only those forces that controlled them—forces that you have defied, and angered.”

“He has carried your sword with great honor,” Amy interjected.

Denith looked at Amy, who had seated herself next to Lord Hamenor’s chair.

“Ah yes, my sword. May I see it?” Lord Hamenor asked.

Obediently, Denith unstrapped the sword, and placed the sheath in Lord Hamenor’s hands.

Lord Hamenor took it reverently, and slowly clasped the sword’s hilt with one hand while he held the sheath with the other. His fingers played with the familiar feel of the hilt in his hand. Then he slid the sword from its sheath, and carefully inspected the blade.

“I see you have used her well,” Lord Hamenor said. “She is stained with the vile blood of shadow, but has become no duller for it.”

“I found it where it was left, in Amy’s house. I ... I was told by those from the other world to keep it, and use it to discover the path they had set before me.”

“And so you have, and I could not have imagined a better use for her. She was languishing here at my retired side. I have long been too old for war, but she is still fit to face many days of battle. I am pleased she has found her way into the hands of such an honorable warrior as yourself.”

“I do not know that I am very honorable,” Denith answered haltingly.

“But of course you are. My sword will only serve an honorable man. That you are standing before me today, with her at your side, proves that she has been a faithful companion to you.”

“That she has been,” Denith answered, a little

puzzled at the very personal way this man spoke of his sword.

“I suspect,” Lord Haminor continued, “that it was she who compelled you to bow before me. For though I am in no way your master, I was hers, once.”

“I ... I still don't understand why I did that.”

“You don't need to understand,” Lord Haminor answered, handing Denith back the sword. “Come. I want to show you something.”

Lord Haminor tapped lightly on Leonor's hand, and the servant turned his chair around, and began wheeling it through a curtained doorway, and down a narrow hallway behind it. Denith and Amy rose and followed quietly.

They came to a halt in front of a heavy wooden door. Lord Haminor reached into his cloak and found a ring of keys. He handed the ring to Leonor, who opened the door and motioned for Denith and Amy to enter first. Then Leonor pushed the wheeled chair through and closed the door behind the small group.

They found themselves in a small, round room, with paintings of various sorts hanging all around.

“Tell me what you see,” Lord Haminor said to Denith.

Denith walked closer to one of the paintings, and inspected it carefully.

“It is difficult to make out, but it seems to be a scene of mountains, trees, and a large lake. But the colors are strangely mixed.”

“Even so, even so,” Haminor answered. “Good. Now take a look at this one.”

Denith studied the next one as well. “It is a harbor scene. There are boats, and people on the docks, and some buildings behind them. But the boats are distinctly not the Baron sort.”

“And the colors?” Haminor asked.

“Again, very oddly chosen.”

“Good. You have seen well.”

Another tap on Leonor’s arm brought Haminor’s chair to a pedestal in the center of the room, with an odd-looking hood on it.

“Now,” Haminor said, reaching for the hood, “look again, wearing this.”

Denith took the hood, which was designed to fit entirely over his head, with two small holes for looking out. The holes were fitted with pieces of clear, but thickly colored brown glass. Denith placed the hood over his head, and adjusted it until he could see out through the two pieces of colored glass.

He had to blink his eyes a few times to adjust to the dim outlook of the colored eyepieces. When he had, and looked around, everything he saw held the same, brown-colored tint.

A dull voice on the other side of the hood urged him to look at the paintings again.

Denith turned his attention back to the walls. The eyepieces effectively blocked out all confusion of the colors, and perfectly accentuated the tones and contrasts of each element in the picture, so that the image became perfectly discernible. At the same time, a strange feeling swept through Denith. Memories rushed into his mind of the achromatic gray landscapes as he used to know them, and suddenly, inexplicably, he found himself longing for the simplicity of life as he used to know it. Quickly, he removed the hood.

“You see?” Lord Haminor exclaimed excitedly. “That is how I finally discovered the secret of your people’s perception. As you may know, there are few works of art among your people. To collect these was a difficult quest, and one I largely had to keep a secret—which is not easy among Barons. We can become very suspi-

cious very easily. But I managed, and so I came to a greater understanding of your people, even if it was an understanding I knew few would share.”

“I never saw the colors until I was given the keys,” Denith said.

“Ah, yes ... your keys from the other world. Very few have been blessed enough to be touched by this world, although it is said that to see the colors is a touch of this other world as well. But it is a touch we have perhaps become so familiar with that we do not even realize where it comes from anymore.”

Denith turned to look at the discordant paintings again. “It is a reality we are faced with and reminded of almost every day. The forces of darkness are strong in our lands, and growing stronger. Those who live in their domains and a world without perception of color are now beginning to lose their own colors, and growing pale through the power these dark forces wield over them. And because they are unable to see the colors for themselves, they have no inkling of the change that is coming over them.”

“And they will not stop until they have made Shadowed Ones of them all,” Lord Haminor added.

“You know of the Shadowed Ones?” Denith asked.

“We have done battle with them in our own histories, though they are battles that many have now forgotten—especially the younger ones amongst us.” Lord Haminor lowered his voice. “Even the prince, in his fascination for your lands, fails to consider the reality of the dark forces that inhabit them.”

“Have you ever faced any of the Shadowed Ones?” Denith asked.

“No, but I have battled those who were under their control. In my younger days, they made many attacks on our shores, until the king sent a large army across

the waters, of which I was privileged to be a part. We destroyed many of their ships and camps, and killed many pale men. As a reward for my service during those battles, the king presented me with the sword that you now carry—crafted by the finest Baron craftsmen, of the lightest steel. It felt as if it had a will and power all of its own.

“Unfortunately, I never got to use it all that much, as after our victory on your lands, there were no further attacks. We sent ships to watch your shores, to make sure no new camps and docks were being constructed for further attacks, and I often joined those missions. It was on one of those voyages many years later that our ship encountered a strange storm, and was wrecked on the rocks of your Southern Bluffs. That was when I first met Amy.”

“The inscription on the scabbard ... does it carry your name? Kurt was never able to read it.”

“It is in the royal script, taught only to those who directly serve the king. It reads, ‘From courage comes strength, from service comes loyalty, and these yield honor.’ ... Perhaps if my name had been inscribed on it, we would have all learned of each other much sooner.”

“There’s a thought,” Amy interjected. “But come now, my dear husband,” she said, turning to Lord Haminor, “this room is too cold for you to stay in much longer. We must get you back to your sun porch.”

Lord Haminor heaved a sigh. “That’s the kind of care I would’ve never gotten from my sword, no matter how faithful she was to me,” he said, then added with a gleam in his eye, “I suppose it was a fair trade.”

Amy cracked a smile at her husband’s joke, and then moved herself to take hold of his rolling chair—another one of those ingenious Baron inventions Denith found himself staring at for a few moments.

After Amy wheeled the chair out of the room, Leonor motioned for Denith to follow her, and then shut and locked the door behind them.



For the next few days, Denith and his companions enjoyed the friendliness and hospitality of the Baron people within the city of Hassak. They often found themselves drawn to the outer perimeter of the city to study the height and design of the walls for themselves.

Amy was a most congenial host, and Denith found himself often seeking out her presence, though he seldom found her alone. Still, she managed to warm Denith's heart whenever he was with her. She herself seemed to be happy for the companionship of her fellow countrymen.

Late one night, there was a knock at the door of Denith's quarters. Startled that someone would be interrupting him at such a late hour, he opened the door cautiously.

"Amy! You're a late night visitor!"

"I know," she whispered with a broad smile. "I come with news. May I come in?"

Denith opened the door fully. "Sure. Can I get you anything—a drink?"

"Oh, you're a real gentleman. That would be nice, thank you. But since you are my guest, after all, let me serve the both of us." She went over to a nearby closet and poured Denith and herself a tall drink. Holding the glass high, she said, "So, Denith, here's to what I believe has been a successful mission."

"Indeed?"

"Prince Beldanah has sent word requesting a meeting with you tomorrow. He will be here in the morning. I do not think it will be a social call at that time of the day. He has requested to meet with you in private. It

sounds promising!”

“Do you think they’ve made a decision?”

“Yes, they must have. And the fact that the prince himself is coming seems to imply that he is bringing glad tidings!”

“Well, I must say, that is good news!” Denith plopped himself down on the edge of his bed, visibly relaxed.

“Yes, I thought you would be happy!”

They sat in silence and sipped their drinks. Amy had seated herself next to Denith on his bed.

The drink had a calming effect on Denith, or perhaps it was just the feeling of relief knowing that his mission was coming to a close.

“You look relaxed,” Amy observed. “I think it’s the first time I have seen you looking this relaxed.”

“Do that again!” Denith suddenly said.

“Do what again?” Amy asked.

“That smile.”

“My smile?”

“There ... you just did it again! It makes you look ... younger.”

“Well, I’ll take that as a compliment,” Amy answered.

There was a short moment of silence before Amy spoke again. “I asked you a question the first time I saw you, but to my knowledge you have never yet answered it. Do you love Keren?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer, especially when her mother is the one asking.”

“Oh, why is that?”

“Because any mother would want the best for her daughter, and I’m sure that would include romance and passion.”

“Not necessarily,” Amy slowly replied. “Though those things are nice, they rarely last forever. In

truth, I think what I would be most happy with is the knowledge that my daughter is secure and that she and her children are going to be well protected and provided for.”

“That she shall have,” Denith said. “I have pledged that much.”

“And what of love?”

“I love Keren as a close friend. She fulfills all of her obligations as my wife. But as far as passion or romance, I’ve not found much time for that. And from all appearances, it seems she has little interest in it as well. Does that bother you?”

“No. I want the best for my daughter, and as I said, romance and passion do not necessarily fall into that category.”

“And what of you, Amy? You’re married to a crippled Baron lord who abducted you from your own lands. Do you love each other?”

“You have seen him. He is a kind man. I loved him long ago. When I saw him again and knew who he was, I felt a great deal of gratitude towards him. Maybe it is a form of that same love—though, because of his condition, our marriage is largely in name only.”

“I see.”

“But he is a good man and a wonderful husband. He helped me to be accepted into this society. He saw to it that I had only the best tutors and was surrounded with the elite, so that I would reflect that in my speech and my habits. He introduced me to people and was always pushing me forward.”

“It must have been nice for you to finally have someone.”

Amy smiled, and gracefully stood and took his now empty glass. She walked over to the side of the room and refilled it, and then returned to the bed, sitting beside Denith once again. They sipped their drinks in

silence for some time before Amy lowered her glass and leaned over to rest her head on Denith's shoulder. Almost automatically, Denith's right hand crept around to caress her back and shoulder.

Amy let out an audible sigh, and her body relaxed.

She remained in her comfortable position for several moments without uttering a word, until Denith began to wonder if she had fallen asleep.

He looked down at her face, resting on his shoulder. Her eyes were closed. Her features were a picture of serenity, and Denith found himself wondering at her inner beauty that seemed to have come a little closer to the surface at this moment. *I wonder what she was like when she was my age?* he pondered silently.

Tentatively, he reached out his left hand to pull a strand of hair out of her face.

Amy stirred at the movement, and turned to look at Denith.

"Oh ... uh ... I was just making sure you hadn't fallen asleep," Denith stammered.

Amy smiled. "I haven't, though I am tired. I was just thinking how amazing it is that you're here, and that you're married to Keren, that I now suddenly have a whole new family I didn't know about before."

"You must try to come visit us sometime," Denith answered.

"Yes, I will have to one of these days—perhaps when Lord Haminor is doing a little better. There have been times when he felt stronger. Even now, he is comfortable most of the time. But the afflictions of his age can make things rough for him from one moment to the next, and that is when I must be there for him.

"He is sleeping soundly enough now, but I probably should be returning to him sooner than later. But I have enjoyed this time to talk to you without a thou-

sand other ears listening in as well—which in these lands seems to be almost all the time.”

“There are never a thousand other ears listening,” Denith answered.

“Well, no, not exactly. But you know the feeling.”

“I suppose I do,” Denith said.

“But the hour is late now, so I shall bid you goodnight, and see you again in the morning. See to it you dress well for your meeting with the prince tomorrow.”

“I shall,” Denith answered.

“Goodnight, then, son-in-law,” Amy said with a grin. She gave Denith a quick kiss on his cheek, and then turned to leave the room.

“Goodnight, Amy,” Denith called after her, watching until she had closed the door behind her.

BEGINNINGS

Denith waited in the garden for the prince's arrival. At last he heard footsteps. He turned to look. Amy was walking arm-in-arm with the prince along the pathway that led into the small garden. Denith stood to greet him.

As the prince approached, Amy let go of his arm and, without a further word to Denith, turned and made her retreat. The prince came to a halt some feet in front of Denith. Denith was overcome with a feeling of great respect in seeing the young prince in his regal role for the first time—not as a friend, but as a soon-to-be-sovereign, and the ruler of this city.

He bowed deeply in respect. “Your Highness, I am honored to meet with you again.”

The prince acknowledged his greeting and then, seeming to dispense with his position, walked up to Denith and held out his arms. “Denith, it's good to see you again! How are you? Does Amy treat you well, and are your friends happy?”

“Yes, yes ... to all of your questions,” Denith smiled, relieved that the prince was so friendly and personable.

The prince continued. “I imagine you must have been most anxiously awaiting the outcome of your

proposal to General Zarnik. I'm sorry it has taken some time to come together. First it was discussed in my council, and among the generals here. They made their recommendations, and those had to be presented to my father and the Upper Council of the Baron lands. Now I am sent to bring you a response to the matters you have brought before us."

Slowly, the two men walked to some nearby seats, where Denith sat down, and looked eagerly at the prince, who seemed to be taking his time in presenting the news he had come to deliver.

"It seems both the Council and my father were quite taken by your words of the other world, and the power of the Shadowed Ones. As a people we know of such things, though I confess I have never seen or understood much about them myself. But I do understand war. My people have battled Lancer's men before, and I know what sort they are. I can easily see why you'd want to keep those men from your towns, and to that purpose a wall is certainly well suited."

"So?" Denith asked expectantly.

"So it has been decided that we shall indeed send you the help you need to fortify your city, and to build you a wall that shall do both our nations proud."

"Why, thank you! Thank you!" Denith said, his heart leaping with relief. "I feel honored to have found such helpful friends."

"You may indeed count me as a friend," Prince Beldanah answered. "I would certainly have agreed to your proposal on account of our friendship, and my own desire to see your lands. But the majority of those who came to this decision do not know you as I do—though I do not doubt that General Zarnik represented you most adequately. Their decision was purely rational, based on the facts and politics of our two lands, on the advantages and disadvantages of

your proposal, and primarily as concerns our own people.”

“I understand,” Denith answered. “But still I am grateful that they came to the conclusions they did.”

“There is more. I personally will be accompanying the architects, stonemasons, and craftsmen that shall supervise the work. Furthermore, we have the capacity to provide you with workers, as well as the needed watchmen to keep an eye on them.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Denith answered.

“During our battle with Lancer’s men, many of them were taken captive. We have them still, some seven hundred prisoners. Until your proposal came along, we could think of little to do with them. But I am certain your townspeople will be much relieved by the added workforce these prisoners could provide.”

“Prisoners? We’ve never really worked with prisoners before. Are you sure it’s safe?”

“Like I said, we will have our own watchmen and wardens watching out for them. Already many of these captives have changed drastically from the time they were captured. It’s almost as if being among us, or at least away from their own lands, has begun to make them normal again, instead of the dazed and crazed maniacs that came to invade our shores. Some councilors even suspect that by making them help you, the goodness of your town may positively affect these prisoners.”

“We certainly could use the help,” Denith answered. “To be honest, I wasn’t sure yet how many men we could spare to work on this wall.”

“Accommodations will have to be prepared. But we can help with those as well. There are many preparations to be taken into account, and it will all take some time. But I am still hopeful that I shall be able to come to your lands with our architects and masons

within a few months, to begin drawing up preliminary plans.”

“It will be an honor to have you visit, and stay among us.”

“This was not a carefully planned, premeditated decision. I have simply volunteered myself out of the eagerness of my own heart!”

“You are most kind.”

“I admire you, Denith, and all you seem to have done for your people. From what I have heard of you, and seen for myself, you should yourself be a prince! You have qualities which are more fitting for a lord or king than a warrior.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Denith modestly responded.

“So, does this news please you?”

“I’m elated, most honored, and very relieved!”

“I thought you’d be. I like being a bearer of good news.”

“You certainly are.”

“I assume you’ll be wanting to return to your lands soon with this news.”

“Yes, as soon as it is possible to arrange a voyage back.”

“It is being arranged as we speak. But it will be a few days. I hope you have not run out of things to see in this city yet.”

“I’m sure I haven’t. It’s much bigger than I thought the first time I came here. I’m certainly enjoying my time here.”

“I am glad to hear it. Amy plays a wonderful hostess.”

Denith didn’t reply, and a short silence followed.

“What is it like, living in a world without color?” the prince asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Amy has told me that colors are not known or seen by the common folk. I find that difficult to imagine.”

“So do I, to be honest,” Denith answered. “At least ever since I came to see them myself.”

“Through your keys?”

“Yes. She told you about those too?”

“We have spoken many times, and I have always been greatly interested in your lands.”

“Even to the point of learning our language. That must not have been easy.”

“Your language is a simple one in comparison to the Baron tongue. In our language, there are many different facets and intonations that can color a single word or even phrase with different meanings.”

“Ah yes, the Drifter tongue is like that as well. I found it a challenge to master.”

“A simple world, a simple language; a colorful world, a colorful language,” the prince said.

“A wise observation, and probably true,” Denith answered. “There are few subtleties of any sort to be found among people whose perceptions of life and the world around them are limited to shades of light and darkness. Should you ever come to our lands, you will see what I mean. The people who inhabit it are simple, accepting, unquestioning. They won’t seek after knowledge of things that have no immediate concern to them, and so are stymied in their learning, remaining primitive where your people have excelled, whether in speech, music, art, construction, knowledge, or vocations.”

“I’m beginning to understand the challenges you face,” the prince answered. “I am glad that we can be a help.”

“And I am most grateful for it. I pray that some day I may be able to repay your kindness.”

“You are the one who has done us the honor of ask-

ing. It is our reward to give you what you have asked for, and an even greater reward to me personally that I have gained a friend.”

“You are too kind, your majesty. I am only a humble woodsman seeking to help others learn of the freedom that I have found, so that they too may recognize it when they see it, and be willing to fight against those who would steal this freedom away from them.”

“Lancer and his Watchers?”

“And even darker forces,” Denith answered. “There are beings and creatures of shadow who move about our lands largely unseen, their works unnoticed by those who live in the shadowed world. They are forces and creatures as mysterious and yet as real as those of the other world which appeared to me. These are the true enemies, and Lancer and his Watchers, and the Toilers he has allied himself with, are only shadows of their presence. The Watchers have been easy enough to fight. The fight against the darker forces of the netherworld and the influences they have cast over our lands will be an even greater struggle, I am sure, and an entirely different battle.”

“Why do I get the feeling that there is so much more behind this than I originally imagined?”

“I felt exactly the same once upon a time,” Denith answered.



The time of their departure arrived all too soon. After almost three weeks in Hassak, Denith, Kurt, and Baden set sail again in one of the sleeker Baron vessels.

“Why don’t we have ships that go this fast?” Baden asked.

“These ships are designed for speed, and for war,” Kurt explained. “Even if we had need of such ships, we would not know how to build them. Baron ships are

not allowed to stay long near common shores, where they could be studied. There is indeed much we can learn from them.”

“That *you* can learn from them, perhaps,” Baden said. “We Drifters do not like moving fast if it can be avoided. Life is meant to be enjoyed, not rushed through. Nevertheless, I am glad this voyage will be over sooner than our last one. I may be a Drifter, but I certainly don’t enjoy drifting on an endless body of water.”

Denith paid little attention to the two men. His mind was occupied with the conversation he’d had the night before, when Amy had once again come to his bedroom—this time to bid him farewell. He’d noticed that she was wearing much less than the night when she had first come to his room alone. This time, he had been unable to escape or resist the firm and lingering kiss she had planted on his lips.

“You need to find passion,” she told him before she left. “Otherwise you will continue to seek it until you have found it. So why not let yourself find it—then it will be done with. You will have experienced true, unbridled passion, and can then move on from it—satisfied that you have known it once.”

I’m just not so sure, Denith now thought to himself, *that it can so easily be left behind once it has been found.*



Several days later, Keren was surprised to hear a knock at the door.

“Denith, it’s so good to see you! I didn’t know you were back! How long have you been back?”

“We docked a couple of days ago, and I made my way here just as quickly as I could!”

“Did you see my mother?”

“Yes, yes, I did! She was happy to see me, and asked

about you right away. We spent most of our time at her house, as her guests.”

“Tell me all about it,” Keren said excitedly.

Over dinner, Denith told Keren about his journeys and adventures among the Barons, about Amy, and about the father Keren never knew. She listened with rapt attention and was careful to ask the right questions at the right time.

After dinner, and after Keren had put Barthol to bed, they met again. This time Denith insisted Keren do all the talking, and tell him what had been happening at home. They talked late into the night.

“Oh, Denith, if we don’t stop talking now, we’ll never get to bed,” Keren said at length. “You are sleeping here, aren’t you?” she asked, somewhat hesitantly.

“Yes, of course. Why wouldn’t I?” Denith asked.

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted to,” she whispered.

“Whatever do you mean?” Denith asked, though Keren was quick to note the troubled look that passed over his face.

“Oh, nothing,” she answered, as she made her way to their bedroom, Denith following close behind.

“Denith, there is something I’ve been meaning to ask you about,” Keren said once they were lying in bed next to each other.

“Yes?” Denith prompted.

He turned to look at Keren, but she was staring up at the ceiling, and hesitated before continuing.

“I’m not sure what you’ll think of me for saying this, but I know that on your travels you probably come in contact with many beautiful women, and I would imagine because you are alone so much of the time that you...” She stopped, not knowing how to continue.

Denith decided to study the ceiling as well, as he wondered what she was about to say.

“What I’m trying to say is that I understand that you probably see other women from time to time. There! I said it! You spend very little time with me, you travel much, and I am not a fool! I understand these things.”

Denith was at a loss for words. He had been many places and met many women, but not in the way Keren was speaking of now. He was unsure how to respond.

“I imagine your silence speaks your assent,” Keren continued. “It answers my question, since you are not denying it. But I have been prepared for this from the beginning. You’re a handsome man. I realize I am not able to fill all of your needs. Indeed.” Her voice trembled as she continued. “I don’t know that I fulfill any of your needs. I know you have taken me as your wife because you felt it your duty to do so. But as far as there being any true passion, or love, or attraction ... well, I have accepted the fact that it is not there.”

Denith reached over for Keren’s hand, “I do love you, Keren. I love you dearly!”

“I know you do, Denith. But it’s more like a love for a friend.”

Denith could not answer that.

“It’s not that I’m complaining,” she quickly added. “I’m thankful for your love, and I’m very thankful for your care of Barthol and myself, and that you were willing to wed me. I know what it’s like to have no father, no husband. I’m thankful that you have brought me to such a beautiful city and that you take such good care of me. I don’t really need anything else. I’m satisfied with that. I ... I just want *you* to be satisfied too. I don’t want you to go through the anguish of feeling like you’re betraying me in loving another. I am able to accept your being with another woman—even your having another love in your life.

“I just want you to be happy, because I know that as long as you’re happy, I will be happy. I want nothing more from life. You’ve been very good to me, and a good father to Barthol. That is enough for me.”

“Oh, Keren!” Denith turned to her and stroked her hair, touched by all that she said. “Keren, you have nothing to worry about. I love you, and I will always come back to you. Why would I do anything else?”

Keren shrugged.

“I know,” Denith continued. “Baden has probably been telling you stories about life among the Drifters. I know they are quite free with their women amongst themselves, even with their wives. But I am not that much of a Drifter, Keren. Besides, I have been so busy I would not have had time to see any other women, even if I wanted to.”

“Have you wanted to?” Keren asked.

“Keren, I want to be with you—not just out of duty, not just for Barthol, but because this is my family, this is my home, this is my life.”

Denith reached out and pulled Keren close to him, and tenderly kissed her.

Keren smiled to herself in the darkness, and they said nothing more.



Several weeks later, Denith heard word that the prince and a delegation of Baron craftsmen would soon be arriving. For reasons of their own, the ship would not dock at the port city, where there were many Traders, but would land at the same place where Denith had once met General Zarnik.

With a greeting party consisting of Edward, Sir Waverly and Kurt, Denith rode out to meet him there. Many preparations for this grand event had been made, especially for the people of Denith’s town. It would be the first time they would see Barons for

themselves.

When Denith rode through the town with Prince Beldanah and his delegation of Barons, they were met with a mixed reaction. Some folks cheered and waved, while others looked on silently, suspiciously. The prince and his men had been prepared for this, however, and took no offense at it.

Insisting that the prince and his men refresh themselves before they were to engage in any meetings, they finally alighted in front of Edward's spacious home, where Keren was busy helping Edward's wife prepare for the arrival of their guests.

After many other greetings, Denith finally led Prince Beldanah to Keren.

"Prince Beldanah, this is my wife, and a daughter of your people, Keren. Keren, this is Prince Beldanah, ruler of the city of Hassak, in which your mother lives."

The prince took her by the hand. "You look so much like your mother. Beautiful—just as she is!"

"Thank you."

"I hear you have a son. He'll most likely make a fine warrior, like his father and grandfather."

"Indeed," Keren said. "He already shows potential."

After a quick meal all together, Prince Beldanah filled Keren in on many details that Denith had not heard about her father, as well as about Amy and her standing in the city of Hassak.

"You must come and visit one day."

"I'm terrified of traveling across the water," Keren was quick to reply. "Perhaps it would be more simple for my mother to visit me."

"It's not that easy to convince her to leave your father. It almost has to be a matter of state. But we can try."

The Baron craftsmen, eager to proceed with the business for which they had come, soon left, accompanied by their respective guides. The guides would lead them around to the places and sites of interest to each one, and the translators—various trusted individuals from the Seaport Islands—went along to help the Barons and commoners communicate with one another.

The prince lingered at Edward's house to meet with Denith, Edward, and Celor—who had just arrived back in town after travels elsewhere.

“General Celor, I would like you to meet Prince Beldanah,” Denith said, introducing the two men to each other.

Celor bowed deeply. “It's a great honor to meet you. As a commoner, I bid you welcome to our lands, and as a general, I congratulate you on your mighty victory against Lancer's men. We must talk of the battle someday.”

“Yes, we must,” the prince answered. “Only you would do better to speak of it with my generals, as they were there. I was not allowed very close to the battle myself, I'm afraid. ‘A ruler must rule, and let his armies fight,’ my father always says. I envy your nephew.”

“As do I,” Celor said. “He's a fine warrior, and a fine man too.”

After some small talk, Prince Beldanah proceeded with matters of business.

“Now we must talk about our presence here. There is little doubt that Lancer will learn of it before long—especially once we begin building. Word will leak out, and Lancer will perceive our presence here with you as an even greater threat. He will come against us, whether in small numbers or great. Your men will have to be ready for that.

“The prisoners will handle most of the building, and we shall bring men to keep them in line. But buildings and enclosures will need to be readied for them. The building of this wall is a task that could last years. The prisoners will find new lives here. Most of them have little else to go back to. If they find they are accepted, which could come with time, they could very well learn to call this their home, and the gain would be yours. We shall all be older before these walls are completed, but we promise we shall give whatever help and cooperation we can until it is done.”

“We shall need to form groups of men for each of these projects immediately,” Denith said. “My father has already volunteered to help with any construction that shall be needed. He is an excellent woodsman, and has built houses before. He is at this moment building one for himself. I would be glad to help him as well.”

“That is good, Denith,” Celor interjected. “But we may need you more as a commander of your Warriors. As the prince said, we do not know what Lancer will do when he discovers what is happening here. Our men will have to be on high alert for anything unusual.”

“True,” the prince added. “Each one will have to do what they do best. Everyone’s help will be needed, whatever their ability—guards, builders, fellers, stonecutters, diggers, cart-drivers, farmers, cooks. All will have to play their part. The first monumental task that now faces *you*, gentlemen, is to find that part for each one—and I suspect that this will take you almost as long, if not longer than it will take me and my men to come up with the plans for your wall.”



And so the plains that had lain in relative peace for some time burst forth in a flurry of activity, as the people whose lands and houses would find themselves

within the great circle of this wall banded together to each do their part.

Trees were felled. Houses and enclosures were built. Fields were enlarged. Old fences were broken down. Fallow ground was broken up in preparation for greater crops and harvests. Pastures were enlarged, and herds combined.

A ring of defense was now concentrated all around the area, and at some distance, to keep any of Lancer's men at bay, and thus hopefully also keep what they were doing from the eyes and attention of the Shadowed Ones. But nobody noticed the lone eeghaw that one day circled high above them, and then turned and flew towards the setting sun.



- 12 -

ANOTHER VOYAGE

Three more busy years had passed since Denith's last visit to the Baron lands, and the project of the wall was well underway. While the wall would not be nearly as large and high as the walls of Hassak, it would be sufficient enough to shelter the people of the Protected Territories in a time of trouble, and high enough to make scaling it impossible by any simple means. Foundations had been dug and filled with reinforcing beams and mortar. Stone had been cut and transported in great abundance, and the outline of the wall was slowly and surely beginning to show itself.

The supporting towers and various watchpoints rose the highest, and many portions of the wall itself now stood almost as high and wide as a small cottage, though they would stand more than twice as high when they were finished.

Baden continued to make regular trips into all parts of the Commonlands where his Drifter informers were to be found. There had been no news of Lancer's men. Even the buildup of Watchers in the regions around them had dissipated. In fact, all recent reports from the Drifters indicated that there were few Watcher encampments to be found anywhere. For the most part, they seemed to have gone back to patrolling the many

villages still under their dominion in small bands.

Denith had been greatly embroiled in the many affairs pertaining to the building of the wall, and the stationing and assigning of men in his command to various posts of watch or labor, as they were needed. This, and his home life, had kept him busy and his mind largely occupied. Still, in moments of quietness he would find his thoughts turning to Amy and the Baron lands—both of these blending into a single fascination.

Prince Beldanah had made occasional voyages into the Commonlands to tend to matters pertaining to his men and the work, and often brought back news of Amy as well. Even so, it was with some surprise when a Baron messenger arrived one day with an urgent letter for Denith—from Amy.

Dear Denith,

I miss you greatly, and hope this letter does not meet with any trouble reaching you. I am writing on behalf of Lord Hamenor. He has fallen desperately ill again, and does not expect to recover. He has asked for you to come, that he might see you before he dies.

While I know you are greatly busy with the building of your wall and tending to all the business that comes with your responsibilities there, I myself feel responsible to tell you that it is considered a great honor in these lands for someone to be called for specifically by a lord on his deathbed.

I do not know what honors he plans to bestow upon you, but whatever his intentions, this will likely be your last opportunity to see him before his death. I suggest you consider making another journey to our lands as soon as you can possibly

arrange it.

And if you can convince Keren, I would be most glad to see my daughter once again—as well as, of course, my darling grandchild.

I am looking forward to seeing you again soon. You know how to contact me.

Much love,

Amy



Denith sat quietly, watching while Keren busied herself serving Kurt, Baden and himself. It was with great interest that he noted Keren's hand accidentally brush against Kurt's as she picked up a serving bowl. He was equally as interested to see Kurt's rather coy response.

"I'm sorry. Here, let me help you."

"No, I'm fine. It's nothing really, I ... uh, Baden, did you want some more?"

"No, thank you, Keren. Though it was delicious, as always. You're a wonderful cook!"

"Actually, Kurt helped me this time," she chuckled shyly. "He's very good with some of these Baron spices."

"Oh ho!" Baden said, with a mischievous glance in the man's direction. "You're sure it wasn't more than just Baron spices?"

"Baden!" Keren laughed.

Denith simply raised his eyebrows at the exchange.

The three men, still firm friends, often spent their evenings together, and Kurt and Baden were regular occupants of the guest rooms in the house that Edward had given Denith and his wife. Elden and Miria now stayed in the small, humble cottage that Elden had built for the two of them.

“I shall be off to bed,” Baden finally said. “Denith keeps me too busy. It’s only been keeping me out of trouble.”

“You look quite distressed about that,” Keren answered back.

“I am!” he said with a good-natured laugh. “He’ll have to provide me with another adventure soon.” With that, Baden rose and bade the others goodnight. Keren soon retired into the kitchen, leaving Kurt and Denith alone at the table.

“I got a letter from Amy today,” Denith said, breaking the momentary silence.

“Is that what’s been on your mind all evening?” Kurt asked.

“Sort of. She’s asked me to return to the Baron lands. Lord Hamenor has asked for me. Apparently he’s dying, and it’s a matter of great honor.”

“Have you told Keren about this?”

“Not yet,” Denith answered. “She is with child again, you know.”

“I heard,” Kurt responded. “Congratulations.”

Denith nodded in response.

“So she won’t be traveling with you,” Kurt added.

“Even if she wasn’t with child, I don’t think she’d want to. I’ve asked her before.” Denith hesitated before continuing. “Kurt, I’ve been thinking ... what if I were to ask you to remain here this time?”

Kurt was surprised at the question. “But who else would go with you? I am the only Baron here.”

“But you are also a commoner,” Denith added.

Kurt grew silent, realizing that Denith’s question was a serious one, and that it had not been spoken in jest.

“I need you here, Kurt,” Denith explained. “With all these Baron craftsmen around, I need someone who I know can communicate with them, and see to it that

any matters of importance will be dealt with wisely. You understand the ways of your people.”

Kurt was obviously displeased with the thought of staying behind.

“You’ll be in charge of the project,” Denith said, trying to encourage him.

Kurt responded with a glum, monosyllabic grunt.

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re not too keen about this idea?” Denith asked.

“I would much rather be off to the Barons. You’ll be taking Baden?”

“Yes.”

Kurt still did not look convinced.

“There is another reason I would ask you to stay back,” Denith said, shifting his gaze to the fireplace a short distance away.

Kurt looked up, curious.

Denith hesitated again. “It’s of a somewhat more personal nature.”

“Go on,” Kurt urged him.

“I have noted that Keren seems awfully fond of you, and you of her...”

Kurt was quick to cut him off. “No, no. Not at all. That’s ridiculous! Ah, uh, I...” he floundered.

Denith laughed. “Let me finish.”

Kurt was silent.

“I’m pleased that you two are fond of one another. I’m so often busy with things here and there that it’s nice for her to have someone else to enjoy her time with, as I have noticed she does with you. Now I am going on a trip again, and there is no telling how long it will keep me away this time. But since Keren is with child, I was hoping that you could stay back to look after her—to care for her—in addition to managing the affairs of the walls. Could I ask that of you, Kurt?”

Kurt looked puzzled. “But ... your parents could

easily look after her. What would she need me for?"

Denith let out a sigh. *Oh Kurt, you're not making this very easy!*

"Keren has a need for ... companionship." Denith darted a quick look at Kurt, who returned his gaze with a look of wide-eyed alarm.

"I'm not sure I exactly understand what you're saying," Kurt answered. "If you mean..."

"Kurt," Denith said firmly, "you're forcing me to be extremely blunt. I was hoping that you would understand my meaning. Keren needs companionship. She needs a friend. She needs someone to talk to. She needs a lover."

Kurt gulped.

"I left her to herself the last time she was with child. Now she's with child again. Though I have to go on this trip, I don't want to leave her alone again. So I am asking you to be for her what I cannot be while I am gone. Do you understand what I mean?"

Kurt looked down. "I believe I do, though I don't know why or how you could come to expect this of me."

"Simply because I have noted that you are both quite attracted to each other. Perhaps it's because you are both part-Baron, but it is not difficult to see that there has been an affinity between you two from the beginning.—Also, I trust you." Denith smiled kindly at Kurt, relieved that the topic was now out in the open.

Kurt, however, was becoming more uncomfortable by the minute. His face showed his embarrassment, and he didn't know what to think about all that Denith had just said.

"I'm sorry if I'm making it difficult for you," Denith finally said. "You don't have to answer me now—you can have a little time to think about it."

"Thank you," Kurt muttered. "It will definitely take a lot of thinking."

"I'm sure you'll come to the best conclusion," Denith answered. Then he rose and left the room.



That evening, as they lay in bed together, Denith told Keren the news.

"I received a letter from your mother today. Lord Hamenor is ill, and has sent for me. But your mother would love to see you, and Barthol."

"Denith, I cannot go," she said. "I would love to see her again, but I am with child. And from what I've heard of these ocean voyages, I think I am sick enough staying at home."

Denith nodded. "I imagined that was what you would say. And so I've taken the liberty of asking Kurt if he would stay back with you while I am gone."

"Kurt?" Keren blushed, and then quickly looked away, hoping Denith hadn't noticed.

"Keren, listen to me," Denith whispered, as he moved over closer to her. "I know about you and Kurt."

"What do you mean? There's nothing to know about us."

"I know that he is very loyal to me, and so has probably not made any advances towards you. And you are such a dutiful wife that you have been too modest and prudent to encourage it. But even your modesty can't hide the tenderness in your touch and the softness in your voice when you are near him—and the way he responds to that."

"Denith," Keren whispered, turning to him. "I'm so sorry."

"No, don't be sorry. I understand."

"I ... I have always felt drawn to him. He's been like a brother to me—half Baron, as I am. We seem to

have much in common.”

“I know,” Denith answered. “But I know that there is more than that between the two of you, and I am glad for it. Remember what you once told me, about how you wanted me to be happy, even if I found that happiness with someone else?”

Keren nodded.

“Well, I want the same for you, and that’s why I have asked Kurt to be with you, to stay with you while I am away. I trust him more than I trust any other. If I can trust him with my life, then certainly I can trust him with my wife.”

Keren was amazed. “Denith! I can’t believe you would think this way!”

“I don’t think Kurt could quite believe it either,” Denith said with a chuckle. “I don’t even know that he’ll be able to look either of us in the eye after what I’ve told him, but I believe he will choose to accept my proposal. And when he does, I will leave whatever happens in my absence between the two of you. You understand what I mean, don’t you?”

“I think so,” Keren answered thoughtfully.

“I shall miss you,” she said at length.

“And I shall miss you,” Denith answered. “But I will come back. I promise you.”

“I know,” Keren answered.



Having entrusted the matters of the wall and care of his personal family into Kurt’s hands, Denith departed with Baden for the port city, where Countsman Waverly had again secretly arranged for their transport aboard a Trader’s vessel heading to the Seaport Islands. Before long they had boarded the ship and were on their way.

A sense of foreboding filled Denith as the ship got further out to sea. He could not quite place it. Perhaps

it was an uneasiness about Kurt and Keren. But no, he knew he had done what was best—for both of them. Perhaps the feeling was an omen of things to come, or of news that would greet them once they reached the Baron lands.

Baden took little notice of Denith's moods, however. He was occupied solely with thoughts of pity for his stomach, which again felt strange at the sensation of perpetual swaying beneath him. So for once—in Baden's presence—Denith was left to his own thoughts.

"I think I'll go up for some fresh air," Denith finally said.

"Uh-huh." Baden barely acknowledged Denith's comment. He did not exactly feel like walking the deck at that moment.

Denith made his way up to the deck alone. The cool evening air was refreshing. It seemed the sun had set earlier than usual, and all that remained of its presence was a dusky glow on the horizon. Denith leaned out over the railing, looked into the darkness, and breathed deeply. All he could see to the right, the left and above, was water, the sky, and the stars twinkling far away. The darkness felt comforting, and the freshness invigorating. For a moment he forgot his troubled mind, and relished the feeling of the brackish wind blowing on his face and through his hair and clothes.

A noise behind him suddenly caught his attention, and interrupted his moment of reverie. "Who's there?" he called into the near-darkness.

There was no response. Once again silence ensued.

Probably just a sudden gust on the rigging, Denith thought to himself, though he could not stop that edgy feeling from creeping back over him. He realized how

alone he was. Aside from him, the bow of the ship appeared deserted. He looked around. The only light came from the upper deck, where the helmsman stood calmly manning the wheel at the ship's stern. Other than that, everything else seemed to blend together in a hazy blanket of darkness. Denith could barely make out the forms of the masts, and the sails.

There—I heard it again! This time it had been a distinct thump. It was not the wind. Instinctively, his hand crept towards the hilt of his sword.

Suddenly a dark shadow came rushing towards him. He could barely distinguish its features, but its intentions were clearly not friendly. Denith quickly unsheathed his sword and held it in front of him, poised, ready for use. The figure lunged forward, a knife held high ready to plunge into Denith's heart. As quickly as he could, Denith leapt to the side, throwing himself on top of a stack of wooden crates. He felt the wood give way beneath his weight as the stack shifted. But the stranger's knife had missed him.

Denith twisted around and in a flash jumped back to his feet. He threw himself at the temporarily bewildered man who was trying to figure out where his opponent had disappeared to. Within seconds, Denith's sword had pinned the man's shoulder to the ship's deck.

This did not deter the man at all. Moving with rage he fiercely jerked forward, apparently not feeling the sword that was slicing deeper into his shoulder before Denith quickly withdrew it to strike another blow. Without hesitating, the man again thrust his knife forward, aiming for Denith's heart.

Denith barely managed to roll away from the forceful lunge and found himself lying on his back, momentarily shaken by the man's strength and seeming imperviousness to the pain he must have been feeling.

Denith quickly stood up again, but the man was now nowhere to be seen. The darkness felt darker. He could not see the helmsman's lamp anymore.

"Help! Is anyone there? Quickly, come! Bring light!" Denith shouted at the top of his voice, as he tried to feel his way around.

He had not gotten far when the figure sprung at him out of the darkness, and plunged the knife into Denith's back. Denith felt the blade sinking deep into his flesh below the left shoulder.

Instantly Denith's right elbow shot back, landing a hit directly in the man's ribs. Denith felt the knife being jerked back out of his wound as the man stumbled to the ground.

Denith was stunned, and could feel himself losing blood rapidly. He began to feel faint, but knew that his attacker was not finished with him yet. In one last desperate attempt, and with a burst of supernatural strength, Denith lifted his sword and swung it blindly, cutting down everything in its path without knowing what he was hitting. Suddenly it was met by a loud wail. He had struck his attacker, and the man was sent stumbling backwards. There was a short pause, followed by a heavy splash as something hit the water. Then all was silent.

The silence soon broke into a new commotion of voices, as the helmsman and a group of others came to where Denith now lay, dazed and bleeding.

"Quick! Get his companion!" one of the men called.

Once Baden had arrived, he quickly took command. "What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know," the helmsman answered. "All was fine until I heard frightful noises on deck. I ran down to call some others to come look with me, and when we got here, this is what we found."

Baden brought the lamp closer. Denith looked pale from the loss of blood. The lamp seemed to awaken him for a moment, and he looked up at Baden. “A man,” he whispered faintly. “He came at me from the shadows ... couldn’t see him ... think he fell ... overboard.”

“Shhh! Don’t speak of it now. Conserve your strength. We’ll get you to your room.” Then he turned to the helmsman. “Find the captain, and search the ship. Discover who is missing. I will know who is responsible for this!”



Back in his berth, Denith was slowly regaining his strength. Baden had done what he could to tend and bandage up the wound, and now Denith sat upright with his left arm in a sling.

“It’s really not so bad,” Baden was saying. “It’s basically a flesh wound—deep, but it should heal. I think you have sustained worse injuries before.”

“I think perhaps it was the man’s ferociousness and strength that shocked me more than the wound itself,” Denith answered.

“And you have no idea who it was?”

“No. Everything was dark, and it got darker after he sprang on me. He was young, I could tell that, and not a very experienced fighter, or with his force he could have killed me easily.”

“Maybe it was not his intention to kill you,” Baden suggested.

“But then why attack me?” Denith asked.

“I don’t know,” Baden answered with a shrug. “Maybe he didn’t know who he was attacking.”

“He knew,” Denith answered. “What worries me is how he could have known! Our presence aboard this ship was supposed to have been secret. News must have leaked out somehow. But how?”

“Edward?” Baden suggested.

“No, I don’t think it was Edward.”

“But he talks...”

“He talks a lot, I know,” Denith replied. “But you

know as well as I do that this is not the kind of thing he would have spoken about indiscreetly."

"Countsman Waverly?"

"I doubt it."

"What about one of the commanders?" Baden asked. "They knew of your departure."

"Perhaps so. But I don't think even Celor would have told them the particulars of our voyage, or where or how we were going."

Just then, the door to their berth flung open and a heavysset man rudely let himself in.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" Denith demanded, standing before the man.

"I am the captain, and I want a word with you! That's what I want!"

Denith noticed another man standing timidly behind the captain, whom Baden quickly recognized as the helmsman who had first found Denith.

The captain did not look very pleased, and his countenance grew worse when he caught sight of Baden.

"What's this Drifter doing aboard my ship?" the captain almost yelled. "This ship carries Traders and merchandise—not cattle!"

Baden's temper had already been stirred by the attack on Denith, and at the captain's outburst he almost lost control. His face grew red, and his hand reached for his sword.

"No, Baden!" Denith commanded. "Sit down!"

Denith turned back to the captain. "The man travels with me, as my servant," Denith explained, casting a stern glance in Baden's direction telling him to keep quiet.

"Then he obviously isn't serving you very well, to allow this to happen to you," the captain barked back.

The helmsman cleared his throat from behind the captain, and when the captain turned around, he handed him a small piece of paper.

“Oh, yes,” the captain answered in a slightly calmer tone as he took the sheaf of paper. Then he continued in a more formal manner.

“We have indeed discovered that one of our crew is missing. He was a young lad, signed up at the port as we were making our way out. Said he’d take any employment if he could come along. Our only opening was cook’s mate, and he agreed without hesitation.”

Denith and Baden looked at each other.

“His room is empty, and we’ve searched the ship. There is no sign of him. His room was pretty bare as well. Just a few articles of clothing littered about here and there. There was, however, a remnant of paper that may provide some clues as to what happened. There were burned remains of other pieces in a saucer on the table. Apparently this one somehow escaped the same fate.”

The captain dutifully handed the paper over to Denith, who unfolded the scrap.

It was written in the common script, and from the looks of it, was penned by the hand of a woman. Denith read what parts of it were legible.

...traveling as Traders, but will be recognizable by ... accompany the ship at all costs. Seek a place of employment ... escape suspicion. Watch for when he is alone, then make your move ... not harm his companion. He must live to spread the tale of what befell ... lost their hero of the Protected Territories ... position, arrangements shall be made once those who ... confirmed at the docks.

Baden was looking over Denith’s shoulder while Denith silently read the note.

“It’s a woman’s writing,” Baden observed.

“Do you recognize it?” Denith asked.

“Not immediately. But the script is from a com-

moner's hand."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

The captain interrupted their exchange. "If you don't mind, I have a few questions of my own that I'd like answered."

Denith and Baden looked up at the man.

"It seems to me there is more to your presence aboard this ship than we were at first led to believe. I consider this a personal offense, firstly that you would dishonor yourselves by pretending to be men other than who you are, and secondly that you have brought whatever danger accompanies you to this ship without my knowledge. You will understand my obligation and responsibility to get to the bottom of this."

"I'm very sorry if you feel we have betrayed your trust, and your good will," Denith answered. "We had no desire to do so, though it was necessary, for reasons that should now appear obvious—and for the safety of your ship and its crew—that our identity remain hidden. However, it appears we did not hide it as well as we thought."

"It appears not," the captain answered, his demeanor slightly softened by Denith's calm response. "Still, I would like to know the nature of your presence and business aboard this vessel, and who it is that would seek to do you harm. It is my responsibility to protect the passengers under my care, and I do not intend to let anything further happen to you or anyone else aboard this ship so long as we are still at sea."

Denith was silent for a long while, consulting the whispers for what he could say to this man.

"I have nothing to lose by telling you the truth," he finally said. "My name is Denith. I am a commander of the Warrior Guard, which has many enemies among the Watchers. We are men of war, though our desire is for peace, and the mission we are on is a peaceful one—though again, for our safety, it has been neces-

sary to keep it a secret. For the sake of my safety as your passenger, I hope you will understand that there is not much more I can tell you than that.”

“So it is the Watchers you are running from. I should have expected as much from that unwatched harbor.” The captain grew silent as he pondered his next words. Finally he spoke again.

“Very well. It is my responsibility to ensure that you reach your destination safely, in good health and unharmed—a duty I have already fallen short in. Your business is your business, and I have no right to judge what you are doing, nor any further desire to meddle with it. My responsibility is solely to get you safely to your destination, which I pledge to do. I cannot guarantee your safety once you have left my ship, but I shall guarantee it until your feet touch solid ground.”

“Thank you!” Denith managed to pull himself to his feet again. He staggered forward and shook the captain’s hand. “I am much obliged, and very much appreciate your concern.”

The captain only grunted, then turned and left the room. The helmsman, however, lingered, his eyes fixed on Baden.

“What? You’ve never seen a Drifter before?” Baden said, glaring back at the stranger.

“Uh ... I’m sorry,” the man answered. “I didn’t mean to stare. I had something else to tell you ... the both of you.”

“Well, what is it?” Baden answered gruffly.

The man did not let himself be put off by Baden’s curtness, though it did make him a little nervous.

“I ... I do not think your troubles are over yet,” the helmsman answered.

“And you think that’s news to us?” Baden retorted.

Denith shot Baden a stern glance again, then turned to the man.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I mean to say that, while the captain has pledged to keep you safe so long as you are aboard this ship, you are likely to get murdered as soon as you step off of it.”

Denith looked a little surprised at the man’s bluntness. “What makes you think that?” he asked.

“Something about that slip of paper leads me to believe that if your assailant aboard this ship did not complete his task, there would be others waiting to do it for him.” The man hesitated a moment. “I believe I may have a way to help you.”

“Why would you help us?” Denith asked.

“Well, I don’t particularly like Traders, and you are not Traders. That is one thing you have in your favor. Also, I have never much liked the Watchers. I have heard of your Warrior Guard and their Protected Territories. My family lives within them, though I have not seen them much. But they have written of it, and said many good things concerning your Warriors, and also concerning the Drifters who live and walk freely among you. When I saw your companion, I knew you must also be from these Territories, and now I have heard the truth for myself.

“The captain concerns himself little with such things. He is a man of the sea, as am I. The politics of land do not mean much when all you see around you most of the time is water. He has always been leery of the harbor we just left, but what is he to do? Many Traders these days wish to go there, perhaps precisely because of its lack of Watchers. And it is still the best place from which to leave for the Seaport Islands.”

“I see,” Denith answered. “So how would you propose to help us?”

“I believe I have come across a way to get you off this ship, provided you are willing to play along.”

“I’m listening,” Denith said.

“Well, whoever is after you is not going to rest until

you are dead, right? So all we have to do is convince them that you did, in fact, die.”

“How do you propose to do that?” Baden asked skeptically.

“It is an old Trader trick to smuggle goods into the Baron lands in coffins, and we so happen to have some coffins aboard this ship,” the man continued. “If we were to spread the word that you died from your wound, we could carry you off this ship in a coffin, and no one would know the difference. And then, whoever on the islands is keeping an eye out for this ship will see that you are dead, and that’ll be all there is to it. We can say that you got into a drunken brawl with your assailant, and that he fell overboard in the process, but not before dealing you the wound that killed you.

“And as for you,” he said, turning to Baden, “you’ll just have to look glum and sour, which doesn’t seem to be that difficult for you to do.”

Baden glowered at the man, who nevertheless couldn’t help softly chuckling to himself. Denith, too, broke into an amused smile.

“And what of the captain?” Baden asked, trying to turn the attention away from himself.

“I think the captain has said his final word,” the helmsman answered. “Dead or alive, he’s not going to concern himself with you any longer. He has pledged to get you safely to shore, and he shall. After that, he washes his hands of you. And he will not speak of the affair either. He does not involve himself in the intrigues of land people if he can at all help it, especially when they are dangerous ones.”

“And what happens to the coffin after we carry it off the ship?” Baden asked.

“You’ll have to escape on the way to the embalmer.”

“I’ll have to escape?” Denith asked. Suddenly the idea was sounding a little more complicated.

“Yes. You can’t stay in the coffin. For it to look real, the coffin will have to be taken straight to the embalmer when we dock, before it goes anywhere else. If you’re still inside when it gets there, well, besides giving the embalmer an awful surprise”—the helmsman chuckled again—“word of it will spread, and it will be known that you’re still alive.

“When the coffin reaches the embalmer, you must not be in it. That way, it will simply be looked on as an error. Sometimes coffins filled with goods accidentally end up at the embalmer. If your coffin arrives there stuffed with any variety of odd items, which I can provide your friend with before we disembark, nobody will think anything of it, and you can be safely on your way to wherever it was you were going. By the time they go back to investigate and look for any other coffins aboard this ship, you’ll just have to make sure you’ve gotten yourself safely off these islands somehow. Then I will feign ignorance and do what I can to cover for you here.”

“I think I’m beginning to see the wisdom of your plan,” Denith answered. “Thank you for your help, and your concern.”

“Think nothing of it,” the helmsman replied as he turned towards the door. “It will be a pleasure helping you to outwit whoever is after you, and will make an intriguing story to someday tell my grandchildren.”

- 13 -

THE SURPRISE

Shortly after the first glimpses of the Seaport Islands came into view, Denith dutifully climbed inside the coffin that had filled up a good portion of their small berth since their helmsman friend had brought it down.

Together, Baden and the helmsman loosely tapped some nails into the lid, inserting small chips of wood between the lid and the coffin to allow some air to circulate inside. Baden repackaged their belongings, so that he could carry as many of their most essential items as possible. Denith kept his sword and the keys with him in the coffin.

By the time much of the rest of the ship had been unloaded, all was ready. When the men came to carry out the coffin, evening had already fallen. Baden and the helmsman followed the bearers reverently off the ship, and watched as the coffin was placed on the back of a covered wagon that had been summoned from the embalmer.

It was all Denith could do to keep himself calm inside the coffin as it was jolted from one position to another. The wound in his shoulder pained him as he tried to brace his arms against the sides of the coffin to keep from bumping into it too roughly. It was not

a very pleasant resting place, and the small slits only allowed for a minimum of air. The inside of the coffin quickly grew hot and stifling, and Denith began to feel claustrophobic.

He suddenly became aware of a commotion around him, though in his hollow chamber it was difficult to make out any words of the heated conversation that appeared to be going on outside.

He could make out the voice of the helmsman speaking the loudest, and caught words like, “drunk ... fight ... overboard ... killed ... coffin ... servant ... instructions.”

Soon the debate died down, and Denith could feel other sacks and items being dumped aboard the wagon next to him. Then the wagon began to move. Each jolt and bump along the way shot fresh, stabbing pangs into his shoulder.

After some time the cart slowed down, and Denith heard the sound of a knife wedging its way between the coffin and its lid. Then slowly, and ever so quietly, the lid was loosened and lifted off the top.

“Careful,” Baden whispered, as he placed his arms into the casket underneath Denith’s shoulders to help him up. “Slowly now.”

Soon Denith was sitting up. His muscles ached from the many painful hours in the coffin. It was dark around him now as well. Night had fully fallen, and they were traveling along a deserted roadway. Baden gingerly helped Denith out of the casket, trying not to make any noise that would alert the driver sitting up at the front of the wagon.

“The helmsman took him for a drink while I managed to get myself and a few extra items on board,” Baden explained in a whisper. He proceeded to fill up the coffin with the items strewn around, again taking care not to make any great noise, and then refastened

the lid loosely to the top of the casket.

As the carriage turned a corner, Denith and Baden tossed their belongings out the back, and then quietly threw themselves out as well. Denith winced with pain as he hit the ground shoulder first, but he held his tongue. When he finally stopped rolling, he was lying on his back. He did not feel like moving another muscle.

Baden was quickly at his side.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I think I just need to lie down for a little while," Denith said weakly. "Are we safe?"

"I think so," Baden answered, gathering up their bundles, and then stretching himself out on the ground beside Denith. "The wagon just kept on going. I don't think the driver noticed a thing. Good for us. Though I bet that embalmer won't be all too happy to have stayed up till this late hour for a coffin load of odd artifacts wrapped in old mariner's clothes."

Denith broke into a smile.

The two men continued to lie on the ground a while.

Soon Baden stood up, gathered a couple of blankets from inside the bundles, and threw them over Denith.

"What are you doing?" Denith asked.

"We're a good ways from any inns or taverns here, and considering the circumstances, that's probably a good thing. And you're too weak right now to walk anywhere. Go to sleep, Denith. I'll keep watch. Besides, how long has it been since you've spent a night out under the twinkling stars, like a true Drifter?"

"I suppose you're right," Denith answered, feeling no strength to argue otherwise.

"In the morning we'll find a safe place to hide you, and then I'll make my way to that jewelry shop to con-

tact Amy, explain our predicament when she comes, and then find the safest way to get you into Hassak unnoticed,” Baden continued.

“All right,” Denith responded weakly, adding, “so long as it has nothing to do with a coffin.”



“Denith, are you all right?” Amy could not suppress her motherly concern at the sight of Denith bandaged up and looking pale—especially in contrast to the dark, Baron complexion she had become used to regarding as normal.

Denith managed to sit up. “I’m fine, Amy ... just a little tired from the long trip, that’s all,” Denith answered with a smile. “I hope you’ve managed to arrange something a little more comfortable for the ride to Hassak.”

“A carriage is already waiting to take us, but you’ll have to be disguised. I have bought a fine selection of Baron clothes and head coverings for the both of you. You’ll accompany me as if you were my servants. I hope you don’t mind, but for the sake of appearances—at least until we’re in Hassak—you’ll have to do as I say. Baden, since you’re the healthiest, you can just keep holding that fan.”

Denith looked over at Baden. He was already dressed up, and had a sheepish look on his face as he held a long stick with several fluffy feathers at its top in his hands.

“Now, let me help you get these clothes on,” Amy said with a pleased smile, as she reached over to help Denith out of the shirt he was wearing.

Her hands brushed lightly over his exposed skin, and softly caressed the bandage that covered his wound. “We’ll have to get that looked at once you’re at my place,” she said softly.

Soon they were on their way. As their driver sped

them towards the island's edge, where a boat was waiting, Amy updated Denith on all that had happened since she wrote her letter.

"Lord Haminor passed away a few days ago."

"I'm so sorry," Denith answered.

"As am I," Amy continued. "He so much wanted to see you. Fortunately, his passing was a peaceful one. He spoke very highly of you before he died, calling you his own son."

"He was a good man," Denith answered. "That was easy to see. So what are you going to do now, Amy? Will you come back to the Commonlands?"

"I don't know, Denith. It's a good life I have here, better than anything I used to know there. Oh, I know you're making it a better place. But here, within this city, I'm known. I have friends, contacts, influence. Who knows, I may just decide to visit your Protected Territories one of these days, and see Keren again."

"She would like that," Denith answered. "She misses you."

"I've missed her too, Denith. And I've missed you."

She moved to snuggle up a little closer to him, but Denith reached out his hand and stopped her. She looked at him searchingly.

"Careful," he said. "My shoulder is still a little sore."

"Oh, of course," Amy answered. She decided to stay where she was for the moment.

For the remainder of the journey to Hassak Amy kept her companions busy as they recounted the progress they were making on the wall and answered her questions about what it was like for the common folk of the Protected Territories to be working with the Barons. She asked what sort of men the prisoners were, and how they handled the work and being among

their enemies. Then she had a multitude of questions about Keren, Barthol, Kurt, Elden and Miria, and was delighted to hear that her second grandchild was on the way.

By the time they reached Hassak, even this short trip under the hot sun had taken a heavy toll on Denith. Weakened and exhausted, he had fallen asleep on Amy's lap. When they reached her house, two servants carried him immediately into a bedroom, where he slept the rest of that day, the following night, and well into the next afternoon without waking once.

When he opened his eyes, Amy was again bending over him, sponging his head with a cool towel. He looked down to find that he was without a shirt, and without his pants as well. A towel wrapped around his midsection was his only covering.

"Wh ... where am I?" he asked hazily.

"You're in my house, in Hassak," Amy answered gently. "You've slept solidly for almost a day and a half. I think your wound may have tired you more than you admitted." She smiled mysteriously.

"Where are my clothes? My keys?"

"Don't worry. The keys are safe, as is your sword. I've had your clothes washed—and you as well, while I was at it. A physician came by to look at your wound."

Denith looked a little alarmed, but Amy broke into a small laugh.

"You have nothing to worry about," she assured him. "Baden watched the man very carefully, and more than once had me question him on the herbs and ointments he was using to treat you."

"I can imagine that," Denith answered, managing a weak smile of his own.

"How do you feel?" Amy asked.

"Achy," Denith answered. "But I don't feel any pain

in my shoulder.”

“That’s good. The physician will return later this evening. He’ll be happy to find you awake and feeling better.”

“You washed me?” Denith asked in surprise, as that thought suddenly settled into his consciousness.

“Come now, Denith,” Amy chided as she stood up to rinse out the towel in her hand. “There’s no need to get all excited about nothing. I couldn’t exactly leave you all dirty and sweaty sleeping as long as you did. In the meantime, your wound is just beginning to heal, so you’ll have to lie still a little longer. Let me get you some food. You must be hungry.”

As Amy turned for the door, a small smile spread across her face, though Denith couldn’t see it.



It was a few days before Denith had recuperated sufficiently to be up and about again. His arm, for the moment, still had to remain in its sling.

“I’d really hate to think that you came all this way for nothing,” Amy told him shortly after he’d risen and eaten a light breakfast. “After all, you came to see Lord Haminor, but now he’s dead. Still, rest assured that your voyage here has not been in vain. Prince Beldannah asked to meet with you at his palace as soon as you are well enough to travel there. I have told him that now you are. Unless you have other plans, we could be on our way shortly. He is sending some men to escort you.”

“Whatever for? I’m sure it would not be all that difficult to find my way to the palace.”

“He was concerned for your wound, and wanted to make sure of your comfort.”

“Comfort?”

“Don’t worry about it. I suggest you ready yourself. They could be here at any time.”

“Very well,” Denith answered, as he returned to his room.

Not more than half an hour later, Amy’s voice sounded at his door. “Are you ready, Denith? They’ve come for you!” There was a strange tingle of excitement in Amy’s voice, though Denith did not think much of it. She seemed easily excited into various states of emotion, he had observed.

He emerged from his room dressed in the full regalia of his commander’s uniform. Even with his arm hanging in a sling, he was still an impressive sight. Nevertheless, Amy could not stop herself from walking up to him and adjusting the knot of his sling, and arranging the folds of his garments here and there.

“There, now you’re truly ready,” she whispered. “Come with me.”

He followed her buoyant step to the front of the house, where he was met by eight men standing at attention. On their shoulders they carried a covered and plush-looking chair mounted on a platform supported by padded poles that the men held on their shoulders.

“What’s this?” he whispered to Amy.

“Your escort,” Amy whispered back.

At the sight of Denith, the men immediately bowed low to the ground, lowering their litter in the same movement. Denith now noticed a small stepway in front of the litter. Amy motioned for him to get in.

Denith was unsure, looking first at the men, then at the litter, then back at Amy.

“Go on,” Amy answered. “They are more than able to carry your weight.”

Gingerly, Denith mounted the first step. The platform held steady. He climbed the next, and was soon seated on the comfortable chair atop the litter.

At a signal from Amy, the men stood up.

Denith’s stomach felt a little tingly at first from the sensation of being so swiftly moved upwards, but

after that he found himself in a most comfortable position.

“Wait! You’re not coming?” he called back to Amy, who remained standing in front of the house. “And where’s Baden?”

“Don’t worry about anything,” Amy called back. “You’ll do just fine, I’m sure!”

With that, the men bearing the litter began making their way down the hill, and towards the streets that would lead Denith to the palace once again.

It was indeed a comfortable ride. The bearers’ even pace and coordinated turns were such that Denith felt nary a bump the entire way to the palace. He also noticed that people in the streets moved respectfully out of the way wherever they approached.

After some time they reached the large palace courtyard. Denith remembered it well from his previous visits. Little had changed, and the sight of it still impressed him as much as the first time he’d seen it.

Rather than stopping in front of the palace, the men continued bearing the litter upwards along the wide stairs that formed what seemed to be the palace’s main entrance. The chair only slanted slightly as they climbed, and not enough to make Denith any less comfortable.

I could get used to this, he thought. *It’s certainly better than being carried in a coffin!*

The bearers finally stopped before a high, arched doorway. Two large and heavy-looking doors stood closed before them, ornately decorated with gilded patterns and inscriptions. A messenger to the side of the hall disappeared into a small hallway behind him, and a few short moments later reappeared and nodded to the men bearing the litter.

Before Denith realized what was happening, the doors before him opened, and the sound of trumpets announcing his presence echoed through the large

chamber before him, and out into the hall where he waited. As if that was their signal, the men again stepped forward, through the door, and into the center of the room which Denith now saw was filled with Baron dignitaries and nobles. Directly in front of Denith, seated on his throne, was Prince Beldanah. And beside the prince ... stood Baden!

The men now lowered the litter, and Baden stepped down from beside the prince and motioned for Denith to dismount. Baden met him in front of the litter.

“What’s going on here, Baden? What’s all this about?” Denith whispered when his trusted friend was beside him.

“You’ll see,” Baden answered with a satisfied grin, and then cast his eyes towards the prince. “He’ll tell you all about it.”

Placing himself behind Denith, Baden nudged him forward, and Denith walked up to the prince, who rose when Denith drew near.

“Sir Denith of the Commonlands,” the prince began in a formal tone, “you have been summoned here today before this noble body of our people to receive that which is rightfully yours, in accordance with the will of one who sat often in our councils, and who before his death decreed it so. Into my hands he passed his dying request, and asked that it be granted in the presence of all as a symbol of the friendship of our two peoples.”

Denith looked around, still unsure of what was happening. There were a few suspicious glances on the faces of those seated around him, but most simply bore expressions of interest and curiosity. The prince himself seemed to be absorbed in the duty he was officiating.

“And so, by the wish of the late and respected Lord Hamenor, and with the blessing of my father, the king, it pleases me to bequeath to you, Sir Denith, the full estate and properties of Lord Hamenor, that he left to

you at his passing.”

Denith’s mouth dropped. He could not believe what he was hearing.

“In accordance with the customs of our lands, and the wishes of Lord Haminor, you hereby inherit the right to his titles, his place of honor among our people, the privileges of his house and name, and all that pertains thereto. Will you step forward to receive this honor?”

Denith remained firmly rooted to the ground, unsure of what to do.

“I ... I do not know what to say. I am honored that Lord Haminor would think so highly of me, even though I only had the privilege of meeting him once, and that for a short time. I would hardly feel worthy to inherit his estate, much less the honor of the name and rank of so great a man among your people.”

The prince now took a few steps closer to Denith, who—in this very formal setting—could not stop himself from instantly kneeling before him.

“What is honor,” the prince began, “but the respect of a man that resides and grows in the hearts of those he has served? The more he serves, the greater his honor. You may have known Lord Haminor for but a short space, but he knew much more of you. He trusted the man who had carried his sword with dignity and honor, and it was his wish that this same man be the one to bring our lands together, to show our people that honor and integrity can be found on both sides of the waters that divide us.

“And from all we have known and all we have seen, you have only proven, as so often was the case, that Lord Haminor spoke truly and honestly and fairly. It is we, Sir Denith, who are humbled by your presence and by the deeds you have done for and among your people.”

At this, the prince took hold of Denith’s arm, and lifted him to his feet.

“It is we who would be honored by your acceptance of this title, and all that comes with it. I think you are more than worthy of it.”

Denith looked around. Many of those around the room were nodding their heads.

“Then what can I do but accept?” Denith finally said.

The prince broke into a large smile, and turned and walked back to his throne. An aide held out a velvet pillow. The prince took something off of it, and held it in his hand.

“Approach, Sir Denith, and receive what is rightfully yours.”

Denith slowly walked up to where the prince was now standing, and knelt before him.

The prince again took hold of Denith’s right hand, and this time slipped a large, golden ring onto one of his fingers. Engraved onto the ring was an image of a large bird, its wings half folded, and a Baron sword in its talons.

“This ring belonged to Lord Haminor. It carries his seal, which has now become yours, and the symbol of your new inheritance. Rise, Sir Denith, as a warrior of your people, and a lord among ours.”



Denith stepped out of the palace, dazed at all that had just happened. Amy was there to greet him.

“Did you like your surprise?” she asked.

“You knew of this all along, and told me nothing?” Denith asked.

Amy smiled. “It wasn’t easy, and I wish I could have been there to see your face. But the customs of these people will not allow me into that room on an official occasion such as Lord Haminor wished for this moment to be.”

“And Baden,” Denith said, turning to his companion. “You knew of all this too?”

“It was mainly the prince’s idea to keep it all a secret

from you," he answered. "And of course Amy agreed right away. Who was I to betray their plans?"

"Well, Lord Denith," Amy said, rolling the title off her tongue with a hint of amusement, "as the master of Lord Hamenor's house, your first duty is to attend the banquet that will be hosted there in your honor this evening. So, before anything else, I'm going to take you to Lord Hamenor's tailor, and get you a Baron suit befitting your new station here. This Commonland uniform is impressive, but it simply will never do for a dinner party."

"But I..."

"...don't really have any choice in the matter," Amy said, finishing the sentence for him. "If we're to get you fixed up respectably enough in time for this dinner, we'd best be on our way."



Denith and Baden dutifully greeted each guest as Amy introduced them. There were a few he recognized. General Zarnik had come, as had Lord Hanawah and Lady Isme. The others were various lords and nobles that had been in attendance at the ceremony earlier in the day.

Last of all, Prince Beldanah and Princess Suranis arrived together.

The prince left off any appearance of formality, and heartily greeted Denith.

"It's good to see you looking so well," he said, grasping Denith's right hand firmly. "How is your wound?"

"Recovering well, thank you."

"Your Baron companion, Kurt ... he is not with you this time. Is he well?"

"He is well," Denith answered. "I needed him to stay back to take care of things in my absence."

"But of course," the prince answered, as the group moved to the main dining room.

The meal progressed with much conversation, Amy

again doing much of the translating of comments back and forth between those guests who could not follow the conversation and stories being exchanged by the prince and Denith, who were the focus of most of the attention.

It seemed the end of the evening came all too quickly, and it was time to bid goodnight and farewell to the guests. Though for all appearances it had been a simple affair, as the prince told Denith in parting, “This day marks yet another step along the path of strengthening the friendship of our two peoples.”



Denith lay on his bed, fully dressed. He was weary but satisfied with the events of the day, and still a little dazed from the drink that had been served in abundance at this grand occasion.

He reached over gingerly with his left hand, which he could still not move too freely, and pulled Lord Hamenor’s ring from his right hand to inspect it more closely. He was interrupted, however, by the sound of his door being opened.

Sitting up, and lifting a candle to see who was there, he quickly noticed Amy standing by the door.

“Amy ... what brings you here at this late hour of the night?”

“Why you, my lord. I thought I should come and see how your wound is doing.”

Denith raised his eyebrows. “My lord?”

“Why yes,” Amy answered matter-of-factly. “As the inheritor of my husband’s house and titles, you have also inherited me. I am part of his properties, and all that pertains thereto.”

“Well, in that case I gladly set you free,” Denith answered with a chuckle.

“Free to do what?”

“Um ... free to go—back to the Commonlands.”

“Denith, you know I want to stay here. Besides, you’ll need someone to look after this house for you

while you are away.”

By this time Amy had seated herself beside Denith on his bed, and was undoing the sling that held his arm in place. Her hands traveled underneath his shirt as they removed the vestures that covered his chest. Soon Denith lay on his stomach as Amy applied some salve to the wound on his shoulder. Her hands softly caressed his bare back in the process.

“The wound has certainly been healing well,” Amy remarked. “But you’ll have to keep that arm in its sling a little longer. Soon you’ll feel as good as new.”

“I already feel as good as new,” Denith answered dreamily. “It’s like suddenly I’m a whole different person.”

“Yes, you’re a lord now,” Amy said, adding with a slight chuckle, “a Warrior Lord, no less. Hmm, that has a nice ring to it, don’t you think, ‘Denith, the Warrior Lord?’”

“You’re crazy, Amy,” Denith answered.

“Perhaps,” she answered softly, as her hands moved to caressing the rest of his back.

“Mmm, that feels good,” Denith moaned.

“I know,” Amy whispered back. “Just relax, and let your body enjoy it. I think you could use it, after a long day like today.”

Denith merely grunted his approval.

“Tell me, Denith, how is it going these days between you and Keren?”

“Well enough,” Denith answered. “What makes you ask?”

“I was just wondering whether or not you feel lonely, being here without her.”

“I have often been away from home even when I am there, so it is not much different for me being here.”

“And Keren is all right with that?”

“She does well in looking out for herself, and for Barthol.”

“Even now that she is with child again?”

“That is why I asked Kurt to stay and be with her.”

“And what of passion, then?” Amy asked.

Denith shrugged his shoulders.

“It means so little to you?”

“I have found little time to let it mean more,” Denith answered.

“And Keren?”

“I believe she is happy. She has many friends, especially Kurt. They find much in common with one another.”

Amy raised her eyebrows, and for a moment stopped her kneading of Denith’s back.

“And what about you, Denith? Are you happy?”

Denith hesitated for a moment.

“Keren and I have a good life together, a life we both have accepted. There is love, in its own measure. We have a home and family. Perhaps the contentment of that is happiness. But in my heart ... it’s difficult to figure out what I feel or don’t feel, so I try not to think of it much.”

Amy nodded. “Ah, affairs of the heart. Indeed, they can be very...”

“Confusing,” Denith interjected.

“To the contrary,” Amy answered. “They’re very simple as long as you don’t dwell on them too much.”

Denith was not quite sure he agreed, and shrugged his shoulders before changing the subject.

“Amy, you must come at least once for a visit to the Commonlands. Keren is expecting your second grandchild, and you have not yet met the first.”

Amy hesitated ever so slightly before answering. “I’m not sure, Denith.”

“But why? You are free to go, aren’t you? Or perhaps,” Denith said triumphantly, “as your new lord I could command you to go.”

“Yes, you could. It’s just that I have not been feeling very well of late.”

"Oh?" Denith asked.

"It's nothing serious. Perhaps it's just the strain of Lord Haminor's death. But I do not feel strong enough to endure the rigors of such a journey quite yet. Perhaps when I feel better."

"Very well!" Denith said, unwilling to yield totally to her wishes. "I suppose it can wait. But as soon as you are well again, we shall issue you an official invitation to be a guest in our new walled city. You won't be able to refuse that."

She laughed. "I imagine not—especially if it comes from the *Warrior Lord* himself," she said with a wide grin.

Denith only shook his head.

Amy's hands stopped their massage, and Denith turned over to look at her.

Amy smiled at him kindly.

"Feel better?" she asked.

"Much better, thank you," Denith answered.

"It is getting late. I should go," Amy said.

Denith felt a twinge of disappointment. It felt good to be around Amy. He could be himself. It brought back nostalgic memories of a simpler time, when they had been together on the Bluffs.

"Good night, Denith," Amy said, interrupting Denith's thoughts as she leaned over and planted a soft kiss on his lips.

"Good night, Amy," Denith answered, a hint of longing in his voice.

After Amy left the room, Denith slipped Lord Haminor's ring back onto his finger, and studied its workmanship. The black figure of the taloned bird and sword was carved into a curiously smooth, opaque yellow stone that formed the face of the ring. But his thoughts drifted elsewhere, to Amy, and how much he had come to enjoy her presence.

He felt as if he'd found a friend different from anyone else he'd ever been with. Yes, Baden and Kurt were

dependable, and he could talk with them, but not like he could talk with Amy. Perhaps it was because she was of his own kind, and a comforting reminder of a familiar past that was so different from the future he had chosen to follow.

A realization dawned on him. *I am happy when I'm with Amy!*

The thought, once formulated, awakened a flurry of emotions within him.

What am I feeling? he questioned inwardly. Is this love? Is this passion? Is this what I have been missing? But why do I feel it now ... and for Amy?

“Hello, Denith!”

Denith looked up, startled.

All at once, he caught sight of Faethé, and almost lost his breath. It had been a good while since he had last seen her, and he'd largely forgotten the transcendent beauty that always came with her appearance.

“Faethé! It's been such a long time,” Denith exclaimed. “What brings you here, and now?”

“I have always been here, Denith, with you,” Faethé answered with a kind smile. “But the answer to why you can suddenly see me is because there is something that I must tell you, something I must warn you about.”

Denith looked up, startled and curious.

“This is not the time for your heart to be taken with feelings and memories of your past. There are matters of much greater importance to be kept in mind, and you cannot allow yourself to be distracted by feelings that will only grow larger by thinking on them, when there are much greater issues at stake.”

“Greater issues?” Denith asked, surprised.

“The battle still rages, Denith. You seem to have forgotten all about the attack of the dark forces that almost cost you your life, and could have ended your journey before it had a chance to truly begin. There is still so much ahead of you, Denith, and so much

THE SURPRISE

to be done. There is still much truth to be given, and much darkness to be dispelled.”

Faethé was starting to fade from sight. “Oh, Denith, you still have so much to learn!” she said with what could have been a sigh, and then she was gone.

A TIME OF TROUBLE

“Good morning, gentlemen!” Amy breezed up to the table. “And did everyone sleep well? Denith?” She smiled broadly.

The sudden swell of emotion that accompanied Amy’s cheerful entry and greeting caught Denith by surprise, and Baden noticed that he was momentarily at a loss for words.

“Uh, I slept very well, thank you, Amy,” Denith finally managed to answer.

“Baden?” Amy asked.

“Yes ma’am, I slept well,” he answered.

“Good,” Amy replied as she left the room to tend to the matter of their breakfast.

“What’s with you and Amy all of a sudden?” Baden asked in a whisper.

“Amy and me?” Denith answered. “Nothing ... nothing at all. What makes you ask?”

“Look at you ... you’re turning red,” Baden said, blunt and unthinking. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“As I recall, there’s something you still haven’t told me about either,” Denith taunted in return.

The exchange was interrupted by Amy’s return to the table, a servant following behind her with a tray

of food.

“So, what are you men planning on doing today?” she asked as casually as ever, though her face remained as lit as it had been when she had first come in.

Denith cleared his throat, hoping to make his voice sound its manly self. “Uh, I haven’t given it much thought,” he said, perhaps a little too deeply. Then he reached for some food to keep from engaging himself in the remainder of the conversation.

Baden followed his lead, and the meal proceeded for the most part in silence. Baden knowingly watched Denith and Amy, noting the way their gazes would accidentally meet across the table and then how they would diligently avoid each other until their next chance encounter.

In the midst of the meal, Leonor hastily entered the room and whispered something in her ear. Amy stood up.

“Gentlemen, the prince is here to see both of you on what he says is an urgent matter. He is waiting in the parlor.”

Denith and Baden hastened to the parlor. The prince looked grim, and was without his official retinue of attendants.

“I hope I have not interrupted you gentlemen at a bad time, as the news I have come to tell you may well be bad enough on its own,” the prince said.

“What is it?” Denith asked anxiously.

“We have just received reports that Lancer has launched a surprise attack on your Protected Territories. Fortunately, your informers were able to bring news of the approaching force, and your Warriors and my men together have managed to gather most people into the safety of the walls as they stand now. But while Lancer’s men have not made any move against

the walls or the city itself, they have effectively trapped the people inside, and no one can get in or out.

“It also appears that the news of your supposed death has spread, and has struck fear and hopelessness into the hearts of many of the people there, if not your Warrior Guard. But there is little they can do to encourage the hearts of the people.”

“Keren! And my family!” Denith’s heart quickened. “I have to go back!”

“But there is no way into the city. Even if I sent a large contingent of my own men with you, it would still not be enough to break through the lines of Lancer’s men. There are simply too many of them.”

“There is no need to break through Lancer’s lines,” Denith answered, looking at Baden, who returned a blank stare. “We know a way to get inside undetected.”

The prince raised his eyebrows.

Denith continued. “What I tell you now I tell you in the strictest confidence. It is a secret even few of our own people know. But there are passages of tunnels that lead underneath our city. They are used mostly by the Drifters when they find reason to hide. The entrances to these tunnels are well hidden, but they can be used to get into our city—and out of it again—without anybody knowing.”

“I would feel safer about arranging your return if I knew what you planned to accomplish within your city—especially when there are those within it who obviously should not be trusted,” the prince answered.

“Which is all the more reason for us to return,” Denith maintained. “Think of what they could do within our walls at this very moment.”

“Do you think you could stop them, or even discover who they are?” the prince asked.

“I have to try,” Denith answered. “I can’t sit here

and do nothing, knowing that my family and my people are suffering.”

“They are not quite suffering yet. There are many provisions within the walls, and they will last for some time.”

“And what if Lancer decides to attack?” Denith asked anxiously. “I have to go to my people. It was my death that Lancer was waiting for. It is the lie he is using to dishearten our city. Even if there is not much I can do, I have to go back to show myself.”

“That could do more harm than good at this point,” the prince answered. “Have you considered that perhaps you can do Lancer more damage by letting *him* continue believing that you are truly dead?”

“Dead or not,” Denith answered, “my people are under attack, and I must go and be with them, to help them in whatever way I can—and to stop whoever it is that would betray them like they have betrayed me.”

“Very well. I see you are convinced of what you think you need to do. I will arrange for your return as speedily as possible. But do be careful.” With that, the prince turned and left as hastily as he had come.



As the light of the rising sun became visible over the distant eastern walls of the city, the prince and a small retinue of horsemen rode up the path to Denith’s estate, to escort him and Baden to the ship that would return them to their own lands.

Denith and Baden stood outside, ready and waiting for them. They quickly loaded their bags and mounted the horses that had been brought for them, and with a few words were off once again, galloping through the near-empty streets of the city, and towards the gates that would lead them once again to the secret Baron harbor.

When they arrived and their bags and supplies had

been loaded, the prince pulled Denith aside.

“The news of Lancer’s attack has not been taken lightly among our people, and it is as much our struggle as yours because some of our chief craftsmen are with you. We shall do what we can to help, but it will take some time to gather our forces and prepare our ships. Even then, it is a march of seven days before we would reach your city.

“Nevertheless, we are committed to helping you, and shall send such reinforcements as we can gather. But there is much concern that we make no moves onto your land until we have heard assurances that Lancer’s eyes and ears are no longer within your city. That could bring unexpected danger to our forces, which is a risk the Upper Council will not allow us to take at this time. It is clear to all that Lancer has greatly increased in strength, and there is no telling what he could do to us before we ever reached your city if he knew of our coming too soon.”

“I think I understand what you’re saying,” Denith answered. “But how will I get news to you when we have discovered this matter?”

“You once asked how it was that we Barons could learn things from your lands as quickly as we do. Now you shall find out.”

The prince nodded towards a man standing in front of a large, pillar-shaped cage that was covered by a rough cloth, and rose almost to his waist. At the prince’s signal, the man lifted the cloth to reveal a shifty black bird. Its large wings fluttered for a moment, and then folded themselves again. Denith looked on curiously. The bird’s long beak was slightly curved at its end, and its wings folded along sharp points that rested eerily atop the bird’s back. It looked very much like the bird depicted on the signet ring Denith had been given by the prince a few days ago.

“You may know this creature as an eeghaw,” the prince explained.

Denith’s eyes grew wide. “An eeghaw? But I thought they were...”

“Used by the dark forces?” the prince answered. “Yes, in your lands they are. But the eeghaws we train are of a larger and stronger breed, and they provide us with much the same service that the eeghaws of your lands provide their masters. Our eeghaws can cross the waters as swiftly as our fastest ships, evade almost any means of capture, and find their masters with uncanny precision after they have carried messages back to wherever they must go. From now on, you will be this eeghaw’s master.”

Denith looked back at the bird, and its large cage. He now noticed a long, thick glove lying at the cage’s base. With another nod from the prince, the man standing behind the cage opened a latched door and reached in. He pulled out the glove and handed it to Denith.

“By putting this on, you tell the eeghaw that you are its new master.”

Denith slid the glove onto his right hand. It reached almost to his elbow.

With another flutter, the eeghaw hopped through the opening. With a stretch of its wings, the bird leapt into the air and then landed heavily on the glove on Denith’s arm. Denith watched with nervous curiosity as he felt the bird’s gaze intently scrutinizing him, and its beak pecking first at his clothes, and then at his ears and hair. When it was done, the creature pushed itself off from Denith’s arm, and came to rest in front of its cage. Then of its own accord it hopped back inside, and the man closed the latch.

“Once you arrive in your own lands, you may set him free. He will never be far from you, and will take

care of himself." The prince pulled a whistle from a fold in his garments, and a hollow round container with an insignia on its side.

"This whistle," the prince explained, "will call the bird to you. Seal this tube with your message inside, and attach it to the eeghaw's feet. He will recognize the tube's insignia, which is mine, and not rest until your message has been delivered to my hand. When the bird returns to you, you will know that your message was delivered safely."

"And if it does not return?" Denith asked.

The prince looked genuinely surprised by Denith's question. "They always return."

Soon after, when the ship stood ready to depart, Denith and Baden went aboard. As they waved farewell to the prince, the moorings were loosed and the ship began maneuvering out onto the open waters, and towards the Commonland coasts.



Edward watched anxiously as the latch of the basement room was opened, and the figures of two hooded men emerged from the shadows beneath it. Had he not known the tunnel Drifters to be as trustworthy as they were, he would have instantly found reason to distrust these strangers and their suspicious entry.

But all doubts flew as soon as the first figure removed his hood, and opened his cloak to reveal his Baron sword and commander's uniform—to which a large and colorful new Baron insignia had been added, draped over his chest and tucked behind the belt of his scabbard.

"Denith! I can hardly believe it! You're alive!" Edward gasped. "This is wonderful! Everybody needs to know!"

"No!" Denith replied in an emphatic whisper, motioning Edward to lower his voice as well. "No one is

to know—at least not yet! Is Kurt here as well?”

Edward was a little taken aback by the force of Denith’s words, but managed to regain his composure. “He is outside, keeping watch. The message was very mysterious, you know. We didn’t know who to expect.”

“Good! You said you had a secret place ready for us?”

“Yes ... a small room beside my study. Only I ever use it. It’s not much more than a large closet, but you can stay there as long as you need to stay hidden. We can enter from the back of the house, where no one will see.”

“Then let’s go,” Denith commanded, putting his hood back on.

Edward nodded, and led the way.

Kurt watched the two hooded strangers follow Edward out of the barn, and into the darkness of the night around them. Ever so watchfully, he shut the door after them and turned to follow behind, not suspecting who these strangers were.

It wasn’t until they had all convened in Edward’s study that the men removed their hoods and cloaks, and Kurt found himself standing, his mouth agape, before Denith and Baden.

“Kurt, it’s good to see you again!” Denith beamed. “How is my household?”

It took several moments before Kurt could collect himself enough to offer any response.

“D-D-Denith! It’s you!” Kurt gasped. “And Baden! But how?”

“It’s a long story,” Denith answered, “and one that is not quite finished yet, I’m afraid.”

“Keren!” Kurt suddenly blurted out. “She has to know! I have to get her!”

“No!” Denith answered sternly, laying hold on

Kurt's shoulder. "She cannot know. Nobody but those of us in this room can know. That's why you are here, and they are not."

"But ... she has been devastated ever since the news of your death—your parents too."

A look of pain crossed Denith's face, but he knew there was little he could do about it for now.

"There is someone within the walls of this city who is working for Lancer. That's how I almost came to be killed, and but for a miracle I would not be standing before you today."

"Working for Lancer? From our city?" Edward said, a look of horror on his face. "But who? How?"

"We don't know," Denith answered. "That's what we have returned to find out."

"But surely you don't suspect Keren, or your own family?" Kurt asked in shock.

"No, I don't. But it is very likely that whoever it is is also watching them closely. If Keren or my parents were to discover that I am still alive, the change in their countenance would quickly be noticed, even if they tried to hide it. That is why this secret must stay within these walls, at least for now."

"Very well," Kurt acquiesced. "But it will be a difficult secret to keep. Those of your family were not the only ones to be disheartened by the news of your death."

"How is the city?" Denith asked.

"Well enough for the moment," Kurt answered. "It is a large force that Lancer has gathered, but their numbers seem to be their only strength. They have stopped short of attacking the city itself. They seem intent on waiting until we grow weaker, and have spent what little resources we have within these walls. I think this time Lancer is eager to avoid as many casualties on his side as he can."

“That could work in our favor, because at least it gives us some time.”

Denith proceeded to fill Edward and Kurt in on the details of what had happened, and finally pulled out the scrap of paper with writing.

“It is a woman’s writing,” Kurt observed immediately.

“That’s what I said too,” Baden answered.

“Do you recognize it?” Denith asked.

“I don’t know ... maybe,” Kurt answered.

“Well then, whose is it?” Baden asked impatiently.

“No, I say no more,” Kurt answered.

“What?” Denith said. “Our lives have been endangered. This whole city is being endangered—and you say no more?”

“Just because the handwriting looks a little familiar doesn’t mean I know who did it,” Kurt replied. “And I don’t want to implicate just anybody without a cause.”

“Without a cause? This is hardly without a cause, Kurt!” Denith said. “Lancer has an informer right in our midst, and this attack could well be the first of many if we do not find out who this informer is.”

Kurt let out a sigh. “Then perhaps you need look no further than Celor.”

“Celor!” Denith exclaimed. “How?”

“Not directly, but indirectly. He’s one of the few who knew anything about your journey at all, and there is a woman who could have inadvertently gotten this information from him.”

“Who?” Denith asked.

“Her name is Zenda,” Kurt answered. “I never liked her much, which is why I hesitate to speak of her. I don’t want you to assume her guilt just because of my personal dislikes or suspicions. But the fact is that she is one of the few people outside the Guard that Celor has contact with.”

"Zenda? In this village?" Denith asked.

"You know her?" Kurt asked.

"I know of her ... that is, Celor mentioned having met a woman by that name long ago. But he said nothing of her now living here."

"That is probably because he does not like to speak of her publicly," Edward explained. "I know of her as well. She is not a very pleasant woman, but one who apparently means a great deal to your uncle, or else that he owed a great favor to. He brought her here after rescuing her from what he said was certain misfortune—I don't recall the exact circumstances. But she has been among us ever since. Even so, I doubt she could be the one behind such a deliberate scheme. She is weak of mind, which is why most people tend to avoid her. I imagine it is only out of sympathy and obligation, and perhaps a desire to help her in some way, that Celor sees her as often as he does."

Denith was silent for some time before speaking again. "Seeing as she is our only suspect so far, and a woman at that, I suggest that we at least try to find evidence of her handwriting, to see whether or not it matches."

"And how do you propose to accomplish that?" Kurt asked.

Edward cleared his throat. "I know of at least one person who may be able to help."

"Who?" Denith asked.

"She may be the only woman I have ever known Celor to be interested in, but Celor is not the only man she has been after." Edward glanced knowingly towards Kurt.

"Kurt?" Denith and Baden exclaimed at the same time.

In spite of his darker complexion, Kurt's face appeared to be turning a slight red.

"Is there something you haven't been telling us about?" Baden taunted.

Kurt shifted on his feet. "She has made advances towards me in the past, though fortunately I have been able to avoid her thus far. She's not a very pleasant woman. More than once she's had Celor assign me to tend to personal duties for her. I tried to get out of them whenever I could."

"He would be the perfect one to, shall we say, get in her house tonight?" Baden suggested.

"Tonight? Why tonight?" Kurt asked, dismayed.

"Because the sooner the better, and if you manage to bed her in the process, you may be able to find out a little more about where her loyalties lie," Baden answered.

"Though if she *is* working for Lancer, and you suddenly throw yourself at her, she might become suspicious. You'd have to be careful," Denith said.

"You'd have to be drunk!" Baden said with a grin.

"That's not a bad idea," Edward chimed in.

"No, wait!" Kurt protested.

"We may not have time to wait, Kurt," Denith said. "I know it may not be a pleasant prospect for you, but if there is anything behind her presence here, we need to know right away, and crazy as it may sound, this may be the safest way to find out."

Kurt groaned. He was sorry he had ever mentioned anything about Zenda.

"I'll see what I can do," he finally mumbled.



Kurt moved stealthily across the dusky lawn towards the light that shone through the small, lone window to the side of the house. He had seen movement in it from a distance and knew Zenda was home. But was she alone? He crept closer, mulling over his plan, and grateful that her house was as secluded as it was.

Soon he was close enough to look in. He did so carefully. There she was, seated before an oaken table, a quill in her hand and a piece of parchment

in front of her. Whatever she was writing, she looked very intent about it.

Even the sight of the back of her head, and the dark, wavy hair tinted with red that covered it, sent a shudder through Kurt. He did not at all anticipate what lay ahead.

He heaved a sigh, backed away from the window, and made his way back to the street that passed a short distance in front of her house. He pulled out a bottle of drink and poured it over his clothes. The last remaining sips he held in his mouth to stain his breath until his tongue burned, before swallowing the bitter liquid with a gulp.

Finally, he carried the bottle loosely in his hand, and with one last look to make sure no one was watching, he began swaggering down the road and croaking out the best he could make of a lonely man's drunken tune, all the while watching the house from the corner of his eye, and waiting expectantly, and yet reluctantly, for the door to open.



All eyes were fixed on Kurt when he entered the room with a grim face, and placed a half-written sheet of paper on the table before the others. His movements seemed labored and heavy.

"What's this?" Denith asked.

"Just what you wanted," Kurt answered in somber tones.

Denith, Baden, and Edward crowded around the small piece of paper. The penmanship was identical to the writing on the scrap of paper from the ship, and the words were equally incriminating.

To the Lord General Lancer:

Morale within the walls is steadily decreasing. Supplies are plentiful, but will not hold out forever. The people are becoming fearful, wondering when and if your forces will attack. So far the

silent display of your power has been most effective. I have heard many wonder, and I myself spread this wonder to still others, how we ever came to place ourselves under the protection of Warriors other than yours, who have now effectively trapped us all within these walls that were meant to be a refuge. It is only a matter of time before the people will be ready to rise up against the Council and the Warrior Guard, especially seeing as their hero with the Baron sword is no more.

Celor is becoming more intent to simply bide his time in the blind hope that you will eventually give up and leave the city alone. His simple trust in the goodness and people of this city is pitiful...

That was all that was written, but it was more than enough.

“Where did you come by this?” Denith asked.

“Was it Zenda?” Edward pressed.

“It was her,” Kurt answered.

“And where is she now?”

“Probably still sleeping,” Kurt answered, “as she was when I left her.”

“So what did you *do*?” Baden asked eagerly.

“Do I have to tell you *everything*?”

“Yes, *everything!*” Baden persisted.

“I did as you suggested,” Kurt began. “I pretended to be drunk. She was there, at her house. I watched her for some time, and saw that she was writing—this same letter. I covered my clothes in drink, and made drunken noises outside her door. When she opened it and saw me, and saw that I was clearly very inebriated, she did not hesitate to take full advantage of the situation.” Kurt shuddered at the memory.

“She is a strange woman. She took me into her house and coaxed me to drink even more, this time

with her. I convinced her to lie down, and to let me bring the drinks to her. She thought it amusing that I would play her servant, and so she let me. I had no intention of letting this woman have me, so I brought a vial of sleeping powder with me.”

“Sleeping powder? Where did someone like you get sleeping powder from?” Baden asked curiously.

“I’ve had it for awhile,” Kurt answered. “I got it from some Drifters that I occasionally do business with—though really, I can’t imagine what you Drifters would use it for.

“I put some of this powder in the drink I prepared for her. It still took a while before it began to take effect, and all the while I pretended to be drinking along with her, and intending to make a full night of this drunken encounter.

“Naturally, I was very much myself the whole time, and barely touched the drinks I poured myself. She, on the other hand, partook heartily of the brews I brought her, and quickly became very giddy and talkative. She was so full of her topics of conversation that I don’t think she ever noticed the fact that my glass never emptied itself very much before I went to ‘refill’ it. Her words gave her away before I even found this letter.

“She talked much of her desires and lusts towards the younger men of the Guard, saying that she really only uses Celor in order to get to the others. I suspect that I am not the only one she has made advances towards.

“Whatever the case, she did not speak very highly of Celor, and freely aired her resentment about the way most of our Warriors have tried to avoid her in spite of all she has done to try to entice them. She made much of her own loneliness and need for companionship. I did what I could to sympathize with her, and most of all to keep her talking until the powder would take effect. It did soon enough, and from one moment to the next her body was lying limp on the bed, where I

was more than content to leave it.

“That’s when I searched the house and found this letter. I left right away to come tell you about it, though not before changing my clothes to get rid of that sickening odor of drink mixed with perfume that was on them.”

“You’ve done well, Kurt,” Denith said. “I know it must not have been easy for you.”

“So all of this is going on right under Celor’s nose, and he never realized a thing!” Edward said with disgust.

“Celor’s tired,” Kurt said in Celor’s defense. “He’s getting old—too old for this type of thing. And this woman ... well, she does have a way about her. She can be quite persuasive.”

“We will have to bring this to Celor,” Denith said. “That’s not a very pleasant prospect. But I believe the sooner he knows, the better it will be—for him and for us. And then we can decide what we are to do about her.”



The persistent knocking on his door startled Celor out of the sleep he had just begun to fall into. With a weary sigh, he went to his window and peered out into the street below to see who would be calling on him at this late hour.

The figure’s long cloak and overhanging hood prevented Celor from seeing much, nor did the figure ever look up. Celor growled and headed down to the door.

“What is it?” he demanded wearily.

“Celor, it’s me!” Denith whispered, pulling back his hood so that the glow of the small lamps burning outside the door illumined his face.

“Denith!” Celor gasped, his face turning a ghostly white in the night air. “B-but ... how?”

“Inside,” was Denith’s only answer.

Celor quickly stepped aside to let Denith in, and

with a furtive look outside, closed the door. Denith proceeded straight to the inner room, with Celor eagerly following. When they found themselves inside Celor's secluded study, Denith cast off the cloak to reveal his full uniform.

"It's good to see you again, Uncle," he said warmly.

"I can't believe it's really you," Celor said. "No, I must still be dreaming. I am dreaming. You've come to haunt me from the other world, is that it?"

"No, Celor, it's really me," Denith assured him, walking over and laying a hand on his shoulder.

Celor put his hand to his head. "I ... I think I have to sit down."

Denith scooted a chair in the man's direction, and took one himself as well.

"I thought you were dead."

"I had to let them believe that."

"Who?"

"Lancer's people. They tried to kill me aboard the ship."

"But how could they have known? Your passage was a secret one."

"Not secret enough, I'm afraid," Denith answered.

"Edward!" Celor suddenly exclaimed. "I always knew he talked too much. This is not good—certainly not now!"

"It wasn't Edward," Denith said, and then hesitated.

"It wasn't?"

"I'm afraid I have some bad news."

Celor was quiet, waiting for Denith to continue.

"I really don't know how to say this, Celor. It's very difficult. In fact, it's so difficult that I don't think I will say anything. I just ask you to read this." He thrust the half-written sheet of paper on the table in front of Celor, and silently turned to inspect an ornament on the wall, waiting for Celor's reaction.

“How did you get this?” Celor asked.

“Do you recognize the writing?” Denith asked in return.

“Should I?” Celor answered.

“It’s written by someone you know ... a woman.”

For a moment Celor looked puzzled. Then his eyes grew wider, and he looked at the paper again.

“It was found in her private apartment.”

“You ... went to ... Zenda’s place?”

Denith said nothing as Celor scrutinized the letter again, and the sickening realization of truth swept over him. Each word suddenly became an icicle that stabbed his heart over and over each time he glanced at the page. The effusive bleeding of his emotions put tears in his eyes. He sank in his chair and buried his head in his hands.

“I never knew ... I never thought it could be like this,” he mourned.

“I know. I’m very sorry. I realize you did not mean for it to happen this way. It wasn’t your fault that she deceived you. Now that we know the truth, the only thing that matters is what we’re going to do about it.”

Celor seemed not to have heard. He only muttered over and over again, “I’m sorry, so sorry. How? Why? She was my light. She was my angel. Why me?”

Denith sat for a good while trying to console him, to little avail. Finally he decided there was little else he could do but go. The matter of Zenda would have to be taken care of without Celor.

But then what is to become of Celor? Denith thought sadly as he closed the door of Celor’s house behind him.



“She’s gone!” Kurt exclaimed, as he emerged from the house. “Everything’s turned upside down in there. It looks like she left in a hurry.”

“But I thought you said she was sleeping,” Baden

said.

“Maybe your sleeping powder doesn’t last as long as you Drifters claim it does,” Kurt snapped back.

“Gentlemen!” Denith rebuked them. “This is not the time for petty squabbles! We need to find her.”

“That won’t be difficult,” Edward answered.

The others all turned to where Edward now stood. “It looks like she was in quite a hurry—she’s dropped stuff all over the place.” He triumphantly held up a scarf, only slightly moist from the evening air.

“Over there! Something else!” Baden called, spying another object a short distance away. “She’s making for the walls.”

The men jumped back on their horses, racing along the trail it appeared the woman had taken. Several other items finally pointed to an unfinished section of the wall, and the men found a single ladder leaning up against it.

Kurt quickly clambered up the ladder, and looked around. The scene was quiet, and calm. The stars shone brilliantly overhead. The flicker of distant torches revealed the presence of Lancer’s men encamped for the night.

“Perhaps she misled us,” Kurt answered. “Maybe she dropped those things deliberately to lead us here.”

A sudden shriek in the air above caught Denith’s attention. It took several moments of looking before he discerned the dark shadow moving in circles across the backdrop of stars.

“An eeghaw!” he proclaimed. From its more scrawny appearance, it appeared to be a common one.

The others looked up.

“From the way it’s circling, its master must be close by,” Baden observed.

“It’s a trap!” Edward said.

“No, I don’t think so,” Denith answered. “It wouldn’t be shrieking if it was. It’s trying to get attention.”

Denith himself clambered up the ladder, and stood on top of the wall next to Kurt. He knelt down and peered intently into the darkness on the other side of the wall, until slowly, the grotesquely contorted outline of someone who had fallen from the height of the wall into the empty moat below became visible. Denith pulled himself back, then silently descended the ladder. He mounted his horse as the others all looked at him.

“Let’s go,” he finally muttered. “Zenda’s dead.”



Back in the small room next to Edward’s study Denith lay on his bed, trying to fall asleep. Baden’s occasional customary snore next to him proved that the Drifter had not found sleep too difficult. But Denith lay awake; his eyes open, staring blankly at the featureless ceiling above him.

It had been several hours since he had sent his eeghaw with a note to the prince. It would be several days at the least before it would return with news from the prince. It was a long time to wait, but still everything seemed to be happening so fast. He felt as if the whole world was spinning around him furiously. He wanted to reach out and grasp it with his hands and slow it down, but he couldn’t.

The heartache of his family, the wickedness of this woman, the error of his uncle, and the predicament of the whole city; it all fell upon him like a great weight, ravaging his mind and heart with their compounded intensity.

Oh Faethé, his thoughts screamed out, what is happening to me?

No sooner had that thought formed, than from one moment to the next everything was suddenly calm. The turmoil had ceased. Instead of a spinning movement, Denith felt as if he was floating, ever upward, first slowly, and then faster and faster, until the world and its troubles lay somewhere far below, behind him.

Then came the music—the soft, whispering melodies of the other world.

“The whispers,” he mouthed softly.

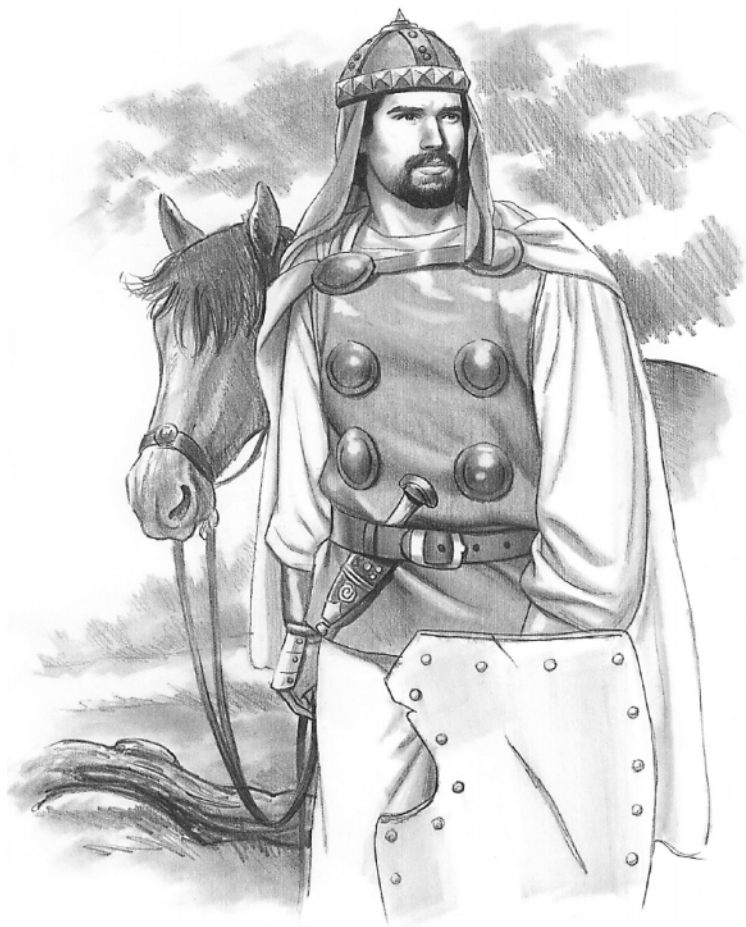
Yes, Denith, we are here with you. The voices echoed in his mind, sounding like a multitude of melodies playing at the same time, each with its own tune yet blending harmoniously into a consistent message. *There is nothing to worry about. All of these things are only part of the plan. You cannot allow the forces of darkness to fill your mind with their confusion.*

The days are getting darker. Their power is becoming stronger, and there is a battle that will have to be fought and won. But you cannot win it on your own, nor is it your responsibility to bear these weights. You must learn to bring these matters to us, and not try to solve them on your own, or else you will continue to find yourself strapped with the weights of darkness that are too heavy for any man to bear.

Let us bring you relief and rest, and the knowledge of how this battle is to be fought and won. To go forth on your own would be foolishness, for you do not know the forces you stand against. Their powers are greater than your own, but not than ours. So let us do the worrying, and let us bear these weights. You must only play the part you have been given to play.

With that, the message ceased, the melodic whispers faded, and Denith was asleep.

THE SEVEN KEYS — WARRIOR LORD



Kurt

- 15 -
RELIEF

Denith woke with a feeling of great relief and refreshing. The night's sleep had done him good, and he felt strong enough to face the day ahead of him again. He caught himself with that thought. *No, I am not strong enough*, he inwardly corrected himself. *Please, Whisperers, grant me the strength to play the part I must play today—whatever that part may be.*

His silent acknowledgement was answered with a thought that made him jump up and excitedly dress himself. Before Baden was awake enough to realize what was happening, Denith had gone, and was wending his way along a familiar path from Edward's house to his own.

Hiding himself behind a nearby bush, he quietly observed the humble wooden cottage, and plotted how to make the most of the surprise he knew his appearance would come as. He finally found his chance. The back door opened and Kurt emerged carrying a large ax. He moved over to a pile of logs and began chopping them.

"Psst!" Denith hissed from his hiding spot. It took a few tries before he caught Kurt's attention.

"Denith!" Kurt exclaimed in a hushed whisper. "What are you doing here?"

“It’s time, Kurt,” Denith answered. “She can know. Where is she?”

“Uh ... in the kitchen. I was just bringing some wood for her to—”

“Quick! Load me up!” Denith said, holding out his hands. “I’ll bring it in.”

Kurt quickly loaded up as many logs and branches as he could, until they effectively hid most of Denith’s face. Denith carefully held them, and made his way over to the door.

“Why, Kurt,” he could hear Keren’s voice say, “what on earth did you bring in so many branches for? We don’t need...”

Keren never finished the sentence, as by this time Denith had dropped the entire bundle on the floor in front of him, and found himself staring into Keren’s shocked gaze.

They stood still for several moments, then Denith leapt over the scattered pile of logs, twigs, and broken bits of bark to hug his wife.

“It ... it’s really you!” Keren exclaimed, her chin quivering as she pulled herself back to look again. Her eyes were still wide and unbelieving.

“I’m home, Keren. I promised I’d come back, didn’t I?”

“But you were ... oh, Denith, it’s good to see you again!” She threw her arms around him again, tears bursting from her eyes at the same moment.

Kurt, who had followed Denith inside, quietly attempted to pick up the scattered logs and wood from the floor. Keren noticed it. “Oh, Kurt, look! Denith is back ... he’s alive.”

Kurt smiled.

“You ... you already knew,” she suddenly realized. “For how long?”

Kurt looked at Denith.

Denith answered for him. "A few days. There were some matters to be taken care of before I could reveal myself. But now I'm here. I sure have missed you."

"I never thought I would see you again. And then your children would grow up ... oh, Denith, it was terrible."

"Shh! I'm here now," Denith said, trying to soothe her. "The other world has been watching out for me—for all of us. We have nothing to worry about."

With great delight, Keren set about to present Denith a breakfast such as he'd never had before, as he spoke of his latest adventures among the Barons, and how as Amy's son-in-law he had now inherited all of Lord Haminor's estates and titles.

Breakfast was cut short by a heavy knock on the front door. Keren rose to answer.

It was Edward. "Good morning, Keren! It's a pleasure to see you looking so fresh and happy!"

"Oh, Edward!" Keren exclaimed, "It's wonderful! Denith is alive! He's come home!"

"Ah, so this is where he went!" Edward said. "I should've guessed."

"You ... you mean you knew he was alive too?" Keren asked. "How many other people did he tell before coming to me?"

"Keren, I must see Kurt—and Denith too, if he's here. It's urgent."

By this time Denith had recognized the voice, and made his way to the door himself.

"Denith," Edward said. "I have bad news. It's Celor!"

"What about Celor?" Denith asked, looking concerned.

"He's gone out—to attack Lancer!"

"No! We must stop him!" Denith exclaimed. "I have sent a message to the Barons. They are coming to

our aid.”

“I’m afraid it’s a little late for that. He’s already rounded up as many Warriors as he could find horses for, and they have all gathered by the western gate.”

“I have to go!” Denith said.

“No,” Kurt answered, stepping up behind him. “You cannot just show yourself like that yet. I don’t think this city will be able to handle two uproars at a time. Let me go. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Then hurry!” Denith said.

Quickly, Kurt fetched a horse and rode alongside Edward to the scene of Celor’s attack. Climbing up the walls, they were just in time to see Celor, on a white stallion, charging ahead of a group of Warriors on horses. They watched anxiously as lines of Lancer’s men and horses scurried to arrange themselves against the oncoming attackers.

The sound of trumpets and the clashing swords soon echoed up the walls, and the men watched in horror as still greater numbers of Lancer’s men came flooding to the scene to take part in the battle, until the mounted Warriors who had accompanied Celor found themselves surrounded on all sides. They fought well, and were inflicting many casualties, but the numbers were too great. It was only a matter of time before they would be overwhelmed. As if they had realized the same thing, the Warriors suddenly turned and began fighting to free a route of escape back to the safety of the walls and the city. It did not take long for them to break through and they came charging back towards the gate on their horses, ignoring the taunts of the Watchers they were retreating from, but who did not find the courage to pursue them.

Kurt sought hard to find Celor’s horse amidst all the confusion of the retreating Warriors, but soon gave up to make his way to the entry of the gate as the

Warriors came riding back in—many of them wounded and bleeding heavily.

“Where’s Celor?” he shouted, but his voice was lost in the clamor of galloping horses and the cloud of dust they stirred up.

Women came pouring out of the houses to tend to the Warriors, as Kurt frantically searched the ranks for any sign of their Commander-in-Chief.



“Any news of Celor?” Denith anxiously asked as Kurt entered the room.

Denith was surprised to suddenly see several other commanders enter the room behind him, though they showed no indication of surprise or even emotion at seeing Denith.

“I’m sorry, Sir Denith. The General didn’t make it. The retreat was sounded as soon as he had been knocked from his horse, and they hastened to bring him within the gates as soon as they could. But he died only moments after.”

Denith was at first startled to hear Kurt use his official title of *Sir*, and then hung his head at the news of Celor’s passing.

“Before he died, he gave orders that the command of the Warrior Guard be passed to you, Sir Denith. These men are witnesses of his words, and are now witnesses of the fact that you are indeed still alive.”

“The command of the Warrior Guard to me?” Denith asked. “But what will I do?”

“The task that lies before you now is to ensure that General Celor did not die in vain, and that the cause for which he gave his life will not be lost!”

“Do the men know that I am alive?” Denith asked.

“Rumor is already beginning to spread—which is good. The people need something to infuse new hope

into their ranks. First they lost you, and now we have lost Celor, and twelve others. But if they see that—”

“I cannot show myself,” Denith answered, cutting Kurt short. “I ... I cannot be a general over these men. I am not yet ready.”

“Ready?” Kurt asked. “What do you mean, ready? There isn’t time for this, Denith. If you are not ready now, when will you be?”

“I don’t know,” Denith answered. “But there is little I can do until the Barons come.”

“So what do you want *us* to do?” Kurt asked, perplexed.

“Spread the news that the Barons are coming to our aid. At least the people can believe and hope in that much. In the meantime, tend to the wounded and sharpen your swords. We want to have an army to speak of when the Barons arrive.”

“Yes sir,” Kurt answered. Then, with a short bow he turned and left, followed closely by the commanders who had accompanied him.



The relief and hope that Denith had started his day with had now all but vanished, as the news of Celor’s death weighed heavily on his heart. He had left his own house, leaving Keren with a stern warning not to speak of his presence, and returned to his hiding place by Edward’s study.

Baden, he was told, had returned to the tunnels to discover what news he could of what was happening outside the city, and had not said, nor had he known, when he would be returning.

So Denith found himself alone in the secret room, lying on his bed, again trying to make some sense of all that seemed to be happening so quickly.

Although he did not see her, he knew Faethé was there with him this time, and he allowed the questions

of his heart to pour forth openly, knowing that they would be answered.

Oh Faethé, why did Celor do as he did? Why did he have to die? What am I to do now?

He felt her answer return deeply in his heart.

It was Celor's time, and a matter of honor for him. He has lived with much remorse and much regret. The news that he had endangered so much by his indiscretions was but one more failure for which he could not forgive himself. It was this woman who persuaded him not to attack Lancer to begin with, but to hold back, to keep the troops within the walls of the city, to trust its goodness to save it.

When he discovered the truth, and that all this time he had been playing straight into the hands of Lancer, there was only one thing he could do and that was to try and make it right. It was his choice, Denith, and one that he made willingly.

You mean he knew he was going to die? Denith asked inwardly.

It was we who gave him the option to go or to stay, the unspoken answer came back. Yes, Denith. We appeared to him once again, to allay his fears, to speak to his heart. But his heart was set on one thought, to atone for his failures by facing Lancer's forces himself. It was the only way he wanted to go, and so he was granted his wish, which has brought you and your forces a greater chance.

Lancer has now grown bolder in himself, and thinks himself more powerful than he truly is. It is this very confidence that will be Lancer's downfall, and it was for this purpose that Celor did as he did. And now he is with us, and at peace with himself, knowing that he has done what he could and that now it is up to you to do what you can to further the cause he gave his life for.

“But *what* must I do?” Denith asked aloud.

All at once, the pillow his head rested on felt like a lap, and a soft hand reached down and stroked his head, wiping the tears that had begun to roll down his cheeks.

“It seems such a difficult question, doesn’t it, Denith?” the familiar voice answered, clearly audible now that Faethé had appeared. “You are so young, and yet you have suddenly become not only a lord, but a commander of the armies Celor has gathered on our behalf.”

“I cannot lead them,” Denith protested. “Many of the commanders have little respect for me. Some of them even resent me!”

“If you cannot face these, how do you ever hope to stand up to Lancer? But they will respect you. When they see you returning to their city at the head of the Baron army, they will know that you are indeed worthy of inheriting Celor’s command, that this has become your destiny, as once it was Celor’s.”

Denith slowly raised himself up, and turned to find himself looking into Faethé’s face.

“Wait a minute! What do you mean, returning at the head of the Baron army? I’m here already.”

“Yes, you are here. But you must go. You must join them, Denith. You must let the people see you returning with the Barons. It is for this reason that we put in the heart of Kurt to stop you from going to see Celor, and why we put it in your heart to forbid Kurt to announce your presence. As they see you riding beside the prince, they will better recognize and accept your authority over them, and the power that we have given you to defeat Lancer and all the forces that he shall seek to throw against you.”

Denith was startled at the unexpected news, but before he could ask anything further, the vision of Faethé began to fade, and the echo of her voice disappeared from his consciousness. But in his heart

was an unmistakable sense of purpose, and a clear knowledge of what he was to do next.

The hour had now grown late, and Denith was surprised to find, when he stepped into the study, that it was dark outside. A small lamp softly illumined the room, and the customary tray of food that Edward always brought sat on the small table next to the door, untouched and cold.

Compelled by some strange urge to go outside, Denith quietly crept to the back door that led to the back barn. No sooner had he stepped outside when the heavy flapping of wings caught his attention. Within moments, a large dark shadow had landed on the ground in front of him.

My eeghaw! Denith realized. *It's back already?*

The eeghaw walked a circle, and then tapped one of its legs on the floor just in front of Denith. Denith knelt down to look, and found a message attached to its leg.

Quickly he loosened the roll, and ran back into Edward's study to inspect its contents. It was a note from the prince.

To the Warrior Lord Denith,

You may be surprised to learn that at this moment we are no less than four days march from your city. It was the decision of the Upper Council that the spy within your midst posed little danger to our forces if even you did not know that they had already been dispatched.

So we set sail for your lands shortly after you departed, after I convinced my father to let me join and lead our armies, under the able command of General Zarnik. We have met no resistance along the way, confirming our suspicions that Lancer has this time massed all his forces against you.

It will be a worthy battle, but I am assured

that together with your warriors we shall be able to discomfit Lancer's forces, however numerous, and end this siege so that we may continue to strengthen the wall, and the ties of friendship that bind our nations together.

Until then, may the forces of your other world protect and watch over you, your people, and your city.

*With all regards,
Prince Beldanah*



Denith crept cautiously out from the undergrowth of the Dark Woods near one of the secret exits where the tunnels had taken him. He was a good deal beyond the city walls and Lancer's forces. He looked around, but kept himself low, waiting for the sign that soon caught his ear—the galloping of a lone horse, its rider shrouded in the dusky mist of the early morning air.

Quickly Denith stood up and ran out to greet the rider. The Drifter dismounted, handed the reins to Denith, and without so much as a word turned and vanished into the Dark Woods. Denith mounted the horse and reached for his whistle. He was not sure this plan would work, but if the eeghaw had found Prince Beldanah's camp once, it could find it again. And on a fast horse, Denith might be able to follow it, or at least make for the same direction the bird would fly in.

Denith put the whistle to his mouth. Though he could not hear any audible sound, this time he did not wonder if it worked or not. As before, within moments the dark shadow swooped through the air in front of him and landed at his feet. Denith did not know where it had come from, or where it had hidden, but as the time before it had been close enough to find him within moments.

An extraordinary creature, Denith thought to himself as he reached inside his pouch and pulled out

the round container with the prince's seal. Seeing the object, the large bird perched itself on a nearby rock, and obediently lifted its wings to allow Denith to attach the empty roll to its dark, scaly legs. Then it lifted off, and Denith hopped on his horse to follow the creature, whose wide wings quickly lifted it into the air, where it turned due east.



"Prince Beldanah!" a messenger called, entering the man's tent, "A rider approaches. He is alone."

The prince quickly stood up. Any messengers of the camp always traveled in twos. A single rider returning could only be a sign of trouble. Quickly he made his way to the edge of the forest in which his camp of soldiers was hidden for the night.

A small campfire, manned by men effectively disguised as Drifters, provided one of the few watchpoints around the perimeter of the forest. The prince donned a rough garment and joined the guards around the campfire in their casual arrangement.

The rider approached the small campfire with the same trepidation that those who were now watching him felt.

As he drew nearer the prince stood up, instantly recognizing Denith.

"Denith!" the prince called, rushing towards him. "What are you doing here? How did you find us?"

"Prince Beldanah, it is you. I was beginning to question the way my eeghaw had led me," Denith answered, pointing upward, to where the prince clearly noticed the large bird circling high above them, until it suddenly turned and vanished from sight.

"You followed your eeghaw?" the prince asked, clearly astonished.

"Yes ... I attached an empty container with your seal to one of its feet, and it seemed to understand my intentions. He made it very easy for me to follow him. He flew low enough to where I could always see

him, and whenever I turned onto a path or trail that was taking me the wrong direction, he would return and guide me to another path. But when I saw him circling over this forest, and all I could see was this one small campfire, I began to wonder what he had led me to.”

“Then let me welcome you to our camp,” the prince answered. “Follow me!”

The prince led Denith down a small path into the forest, where he was soon greeted by a host of shelters and tents that had been erected among the trees. “Tonight we rest, and early in the morning, before the light is up, we shall begin our final march towards your city, which we should reach by evening. We shall take up defensive positions against Lancer’s men, and encamp our forces in full sight of their tents while we watch and see what he plans to do, and whether he shall choose to answer our presence with battle or retreat. But now tell me, what brings you here?”

“The Whisperers came to me, and told me I am to return to our city marching alongside you, that this will give the people a greater hope of victory and...” Denith hesitated.

“And what?” the prince asked.

“And greater faith in my ability to command our Warriors,” Denith answered, his voice low and unsure.

“But what of Celor? He is an able commander.”

“Celor is dead,” Denith answered, and then told Prince Beldanah of all that had happened.

“You will make an excellent leader of your Guard, Denith. Tomorrow you shall ride beside me. I shall bring your people their Warrior Lord, and side by side we shall lead them to victory!”

- 16 -

BATTLE OF THE FORCES

Excitement mounted as the force of Barons reached the foot of the last hill, at the top of which they would come into full view of Lancer's besieging forces, and the city they had come to rescue. Denith and the prince had ridden ahead to the crest of the hill, surveying the quiet scene before them.

The as-of-yet-unfinished walls of the city rose proud and firm against the horizon behind them. In front of them, and encircling them from all directions, was Lancer's encampment of tents and barricades, barring any entrance to the city, and preventing any from escaping it.

At the prince's signal, the rest of the Baron forces moved upward, and showed themselves along the full stretch of the hill, from which they then began to descend in synchronized columns until they filled the whole of the hillside, with still more behind them. The colorful banners, shields, and turbans of these Baron warriors in their regiments combined in an ordered and colorful display on the hillside.

The prince and his generals, along with General Zarnik and Denith, watched eagerly for any signs of movement from Lancer's camps, but aside from small groups of men turning from the city to stare at the

ominous columns behind them, there was none.

“Let us hope that Lancer gets the message,” the prince said to Denith. “Once he sees that it is more than a simple friendship between our people, but that our people are ready to fight for yours and with yours, as true allies, he may be forced to concede defeat. I am hoping this does not have to come to battle, though our men are prepared and ready to fight if it shall come to that. But let us hope that Lancer will see the folly of engaging in such a battle, and retreat of his own accord. The morning should make apparent his decision.”

With the sun already beginning its descent towards the walls on the horizon, Denith knew as well as the prince that the day was too far spent to engage in battle, and while the Baron forces were kept at the ready, the work of setting up their own encampment on this hillside was soon underway.

But as Denith himself watchfully observed Lancer’s encampment, he felt uneasy. Somehow the idea of Lancer simply retreating back to his own lands did not seem very likely. He was sure that Lancer must have already seen and known of the approach of such a large army, even if they had tried to remain hidden by marching largely at night, and taking cover in the abundant forestry by day. Only this last part of the march had been carefully timed to bring them in sight of the city just before the day’s end, to preempt the chance of an immediate battle and give the men a chance to rest, as well as Lancer a chance to avoid this battle by peacefully retreating.

But surely, Denith mulled in his mind, Lancer would have seen or known of their approach, and could have had time to break camp already if that had been his intention. Even now the camp of Watchers remained quiet, and largely unmoved. Denith’s hand wandered

to the hilt of his sword, inspecting its familiar feel in his fingers. It brought him a measure of comfort and assurance, and his grip tightened resolutely. If it did come to battle, he too would be ready.

When the camp had been fully set up, and guards posted at every corner and at various watchpoints all around, Denith moved himself to one of the frontmost posts to keep watch as well.

The night was silent. A waxing moon cast a silver-blue shade across the landscape before them, lending an aura of peacefulness to the scene. In the distance, a ring of torches surrounded the Watcher encampments and the city. Their distant flickering was almost mesmerizing, as the half-circle they drew on the landscape marked out a battlefield that looked as if it would still be there to greet them in the morning.

Denith awoke with a start. He had fallen asleep near the campfire. It still burned. Everything was still quiet. The guards were softly speaking together, and making motions with their hands, apparently about something they were smelling.

Suddenly Denith was jolted up. He smelt it too. *Toilers*, he realized with alarm, *and they're massing!*

Quickly he ran over to where the prince's tent was located. The Baron guards outside recognized him, but held him short. One of them went in, and after several moments the prince himself emerged.

"What is it, Denith?"

General Zarnik and several other men who had seen Denith coming now gathered around the prince's tent as well.

"I fear our battle may begin sooner than we have anticipated," Denith began. "I can smell a horde of *Toilers* gathering. Their scent is unmistakable, and strong."

The prince sniffed the air himself, and his face

turned sour. "I have heard of these creatures. Are they strong?"

"Only in great numbers, and I fear that is likely what we are about to see. But they are afraid of fire. I suggest we double the guards, and light torches and fires all around our camp—most of all the side facing the Dark Woods. If we can keep these Toilers at bay until sunrise, they will leave. They cannot stand to be around light."

"Very well," the prince answered, and then turned to the men standing around his tent. "Generals, spread the order."

Torches were quickly gathered and lit, and wood was gathered from all places where it could quickly be found, while the stench of the as yet invisible Toilers continued to grow, until the sting of their fumes had woken the entire camp into a confused state of alarm.

They all gathered along the edges of the camp, ready—or so they thought—for whatever was to come.

The sight at first stunned them, and then nauseated them—the hordes of ugly, scantily covered, stinking, sniveling creatures that came crawling out of the shadows of the Dark Woods, covering the ground between the forest and the camp in a moving black carpet that seemed to swallow up what little glow the moon had cast over that field only moments before. There was no end to their numbers, and as the front of the black horde drew closer to the Baron camp, still more Toilers were emerging from the shadows of the forest behind them.

The nervous Baron soldiers clutched their swords and shields, and frantically sought for more torches to place between them and the oncoming creatures.

"Stand firm, men!" General Zarnik called out as

he manned a portion of their defenses together with Denith. "These creatures will retreat with the rising of the sun!"

The Baron soldiers steeled themselves for the inevitable confrontation with these strange creatures of a nether world.

Suddenly, another noise caught their ears—the sound of a great whirring in the air, as of a thousand giant wasps approaching. Another dark blanket of shadow drew near, this time in the air, swooping over the encampment and darkening the silver-blue sky. It was a flock of eeghaws circling the camp, eyeing the Barons like vultures waiting for a kill.

But the eeghaws would not wait. As if by command, they suddenly began diving towards the camp in their full numbers, besetting the men from all sides, grabbing at helmets and garments with their powerful claws, and thrusting their hardened beaks towards the men's armor and faces.

Swords began to swing haphazardly into the air, and birds began to drop, wounded or sliced in half by the razor-sharp swords. But it did little to deter the remainder of the flock, which continued to circle and dive, inflicting what damage they could, grasping burning brands from the campfires and dropping them on tents and bales of hay, starting further fires and bringing confusion upon the entire Baron camp.

Then the Toilers moved forward. Emboldened and frenzied by the confusion their eeghaws were creating, the first of the Toilers began to conquer their fear of fire, and flung themselves towards the flames and the Barons tending them, lashing out with their claws and teeth. They were met by the swift and sure strokes of Baron swords that threw them to the ground, dismembered. A thick, dark blood oozed from their bodies, and its stench drenched the ground into

which it soaked.

They were weak creatures, these Toilers, and easy enough to defeat. But the more Toilers that the Barons struck down, the bolder the ones that remained became, as if the very stench of their own blood spurred them to acts of greater bestiality, until those closest to the creatures became overwhelmed by their sheer number, and the first Baron casualties began to fall.

The Barons pulled back into tighter ranks, gathering any and all torches they could find to fend off these vicious, driven attackers. Whatever bales of hay that were not yet burning were now formed into a large line and set alight, forming a new and thicker barrier of flame and smoke between the Baron force and the frenzied horde of carnivorous demons that some dark power had rallied against them, as Denith had once rallied them against the Watchers. Only the unheard voice commanding them now was much stronger, and the numbers it commanded many times greater.

“There are too many of them,” Denith shouted at General Zarnik above the noise of battle, and the confused shrieks and yelps from the eeghaws and creatures that were being slaughtered all around them. “We cannot fight them off this way. We must launch an attack of our own—against Lancer’s lines, and break through to the city! It’s our only hope of survival!”

The general nodded, and raced over to inform the prince of Denith’s words. Within moments, the sound of the trumpet sounded across the Baron camp, and new orders were shouted in all directions.

All at once the Toilers, still somewhat disoriented in the smoke and confusion, were left behind as the Barons turned to face their next field of battle.

This time, it was Lancer’s men who broke into a panic, as a fully awakened and vengeful horde of Baron soldiers bore down on them in all their haste and an-

ger. The Watcher commanders hardly had time to call for reinforcements and order their men into position before the Baron force hit them with all their might.

The clashing of swords echoed loudly across the plains, and the ensuing battle was watched with much agony and horror by those within the city who had heard the noise of battle and come to see for themselves what was happening from the watchpoints along the walls.

It wasn't long before the tightly driven column of Baron soldiers had forged a path through Lancer's men, and those on the walls heard Denith's call to "Open the gates!"

The gates were quickly opened, and the Barons, leaving a burning camp behind, and fighting the Watchers every last step of the way, rushed to enter the safety of the city they had come to rescue.



"It was a trap," Denith moaned despondently when he stood back beside the prince and General Zarnik. "I should have known from the beginning that the reason Lancer never laid a finger on the city was that he was only waiting for you to come, so he could defeat you as well as us!"

"Denith, we are not yet defeated!" the prince answered. "Yes, we have lost some of our men, but that happens in war. There was no way you could have known that we were going to be beset by such a great number of these netherworldly creatures. By daylight we shall stand a better chance, and now we are safe. Do not berate yourself with thoughts of defeat. They shall only weaken you before the real battle has begun!"

The prince's words did little to encourage Denith.

"I cannot lead our men. Look! I have not even taken command, and already I have put everything we have

worked so hard for in danger,” Denith confessed.

“Denith, we are warriors,” General Zarnik answered. “Danger and adversity are what we have come here to face. We may have hoped Lancer would depart peacefully, but we didn’t come here expecting it. Get some rest. Tomorrow we shall make our plans, and I promise you that we shall make Lancer sorry that he ever dreamed of challenging those who come in the name and power of the other world.”

“But what if—”

The prince stopped him. “There are no what-ifs, Denith. General Zarnik is right. Go get some rest. You shall feel better in the morning when the sun has risen again, and we can clearly see the enemy we have come here to fight, and boldly command the men who shall be counting on us to lead them to victory.”



News of the events of the night before had spread quickly, and before the sun had fully risen many villagers and townspeople within the walls had come to see the hosts of Baron men that had managed to find places of rest and shelter along the streets and clearings nearest to the gate they had entered.

The people also hoped to catch a glimpse of Denith, wondering if it could really be as they had heard, that he was alive and had returned with the Barons in the night. But he was nowhere to be seen.

The more industrious of the villagers quickly began to gather food and drink for the Baron soldiers, bringing them bread and hot milk to fill and warm their stomachs, and renew their strength.

Denith, in the meantime, found himself back in Edward’s secret room, where he had spent the last restless hours before dawn alone and deeply troubled, until sleep finally overtook him, and cast him into a restless dream.

In the dream he stood in front of a gate, Celor towering high on a horse above him, looking strong, armed to the full and ready for battle. Suddenly Denith realized what was about to happen, and that he was about to relive a moment of the past that he had not seen for himself, but of which he already knew the outcome.

“Wait, Celor! You can’t go out there! You’ll get yourself killed!”

Celor seemed oblivious to Denith’s warning.

“Look at these Warriors, Denith. Aren’t they the finest you’ve seen?” he said proudly, motioning behind him.

Denith looked up, and saw a whole line of mounted Warriors behind Celor.

“They do look magnificent,” Denith answered in low tones.

“And ready for battle,” Celor almost shouted joyfully. “Ah, Denith, this is the moment of our destiny. This is the moment where we truly come into our own.”

“But why must you accompany them to the battlefront yourself?” he asked. “Why risk your life unnecessarily? You’re our commander, the leader of our forces. We need you here.”

“Denith, try to understand. I have kept my distance from these battles and these men long enough. It is time I face up to what I have started. It is time I face the battlefield I have spoken of. It is time for us to stop playing with the enemy, to stop hiding from him, to stop hoping he will go away of his own accord. You cannot win a war by always defending yourself, Denith. And this is what these men need to be shown. This is what they need to see. And as their commander, it is my duty to show it to them. This is why I have made the choice I have made. This is why I must ride

with them.”

At that moment, Denith heard the sound of gates being opened behind him. He whirled around to watch them reveal a scene of beauty—fields filled with vibrant flowers and trees blossoming in every color. It was as if he had just stepped into another world. He heard a faint command to “Charge” come from behind him, and then watched as blurred forms of horses charged away in front of him, and vanished into thin air.

Denith became aware of another form approaching him.

“Faethé, it’s you again,” he said, recognizing the beautiful form who seemed to so perfectly match the colorful backdrop that framed her presence.

“Yes, Denith. I have brought you here to see someone.”

“Who?” Denith asked. He did not see anyone else around. When he turned, the walls and the city had vanished as well.

“You’ll see. He’s only waiting for you to get here,” Faethé answered cryptically.

“But I *am* here,” Denith said.

“Not quite,” came Faethé’s response. “Wait a few more moments. You shall see.”

Denith looked around, until suddenly his eyes began to make out a new shape not too far away. It was blurred, but it was there. Straining his eyes to look closer, he realized it had the appearance of a house, a humble cottage. Then he became aware of a figure standing in front of it. He could sense the figure look up, even if his form was still indiscernible, and then the figure started towards him.

The man’s gait looked familiar, though his features remained blurred, until he was standing almost right in front of Denith, and put his hand on Denith’s shoulder. The hand lacked any weight, but brought a warm,

tingling sensation to his shoulder. Denith tried looking into the man's face, but what few features he could discern were unfamiliar to him.

Then the man spoke.

"Yes, I look different now, I know. But it's still me, Celor."

"Celor?" Denith questioned, instantly recognizing the voice, which was unchanged. At the same moment, Celor became distinctly visible.

"You look..."

"Younger?" Celor answered. "Yes, and I feel younger too, without the weights of life that burdened me while I was in your world. Come, let me show you around."

Denith followed Celor's eager and robust steps as he led the way to the house a short distance away, which was also becoming more defined as they drew closer.

"This is where I used to live, with your father, in our happiest years. It is the place the other world has given back to me. Isn't it wonderful?"

Denith looked around. The scenery around him had changed again, and now looked very much like the Bluffs, with its familiar conifer trees and leaf-strewn forest pathways. Celor had left the house behind them and was walking along a path that seemed to be leading to a cliff, and the ocean beyond it. Soon they were standing at the edge.

"It was here that I first met them," Celor said. Denith knew what he was speaking of. "And it was here that they met me again, to take me back to my own house and the place they had prepared for me."

Celor had a contented and youthful look on his face. Denith at once felt envious of the peace and tranquility that pervaded the man's soul, as it did this entire place.

“You shall come here too, in your own time,” Celor told him, as if he read Denith’s unexpressed emotions. “But that is not yet. There is still much to be done, Denith. Even after Lancer’s hold on our lands has been broken, and I assure you, it shall be broken, the greater enemies and shadows will still haunt our Commonlands, and these shall be all the more difficult to dispel. That is your mission. That is the purpose for which your keys were given to you. That is the destiny you have been given to fulfill. And do not let this destiny cause you despair, for you shall be able to fulfill it. The other world will help you to fulfill it, even as they helped me to fulfill mine, as blind to their presence and stupid as I was most of the time.”

Denith cracked a small smile.

“You’d better be going now,” Celor said. “The battle of the forces awaits you, and is about to begin. Do not worry. You shall know what it is you must do.”

With that, the vision faded, and Denith awoke to find that morning had already come.



The prince stood on a lookout point of the wall when Denith drew near. The sun still hung low on the horizon before them, and they could see Lancer’s encampment of soldiers, sleepily silent as if nothing had happened. Beyond them, in the distance, lay the charred remains of last night’s battlefield: a burned and empty camp, from which small and scattered plumes of smoke were still rising. Both men stood silently beside each other for some time.

“The time has come,” the prince finally said.

“May the other world go with us,” Denith answered.

The prince gave one last glance over the battlefield in front of them. “Lancer’s camp does not appear to be expecting our attack,” he said. “But I will no longer

be fooled by what appears or does not appear to be. It will not be an easy battle, but I do believe it is one we can win. I have given instructions to concentrate our forces from this same gate. General Zarnik will lead the men to clear a path through Lancer's encampment as we did last night, and then we shall divide our forces to attack both resulting flanks separately at the same time. We shall drive them back all the way around the city walls, until they are together in one group on the other side of it. That is when you shall charge from the west gate, and catch them from behind with your fresh army of Warriors. Then together, we shall finish this battle, and let us hope that it does not take too long."

"Together," Denith repeated, laying his right hand on the prince's shoulder. "Together with you, and the other world."



In spite of Prince Beldanah's suspicions, the encircling besiegers were indeed surprised by the loud war cry and sudden appearance of hundreds of Baron soldiers streaming from the city gates towards them. The camp broke out in a general panic as commanders attempted to form their men into any semblance of fighting ranks. The opening in the circle was quickly made, and the Baron soldiers swiftly and surely began beating back Lancer's men in both directions as planned.

But the alarm had quickly been sounded, and the remaining Watchers were not caught quite as unawares. As the Barons pressed their advantage further, they met with increasingly strong resistance from Lancer's forces, and casualties began to fall on both sides.

Denith and the prince watched anxiously from an overlooking tower, as more and yet more Barons

marched through the single gate to join their fellows in battle, and the clashing of swords and screaming of men and crackling sounds of burning fires and smoke filled the air. Reinforcements from Lancer's encampments along the other edges of the city soon moved in to help.

It was set to be a long battle.

Denith climbed down to join the men of the Warrior Guard who were readying themselves to emerge from the west gate on the other side of the city.

Though the initial news of Denith's return had brought hope to the men, they now looked glum, not fully understanding why they remained in the city while their Baron counterparts were already enjoying the rush of battle. They wanted to join them, but their orders were to wait. They sat around, nervously pacing back and forth, sharpening their swords and daggers, or polishing their armor, trying to find something to do to fill the empty moments as they waited.

A messenger suddenly came riding onto the courtyard where the Warriors were gathered, and instantly sought out Denith, who was going over plans with Kurt and some of the other commanders.

"The prince requests your presence immediately," the man announced.

Quickly, Denith mounted his horse, and raced back to the other side of the city, where he found the prince still at his watchpoint on the wall.

"Look!" The prince pointed towards the north as soon as Denith stood beside him.

Denith's heart almost stopped cold. From the north, clearly visible as a steady marching column, another army was approaching, as large as the force they were already fighting.

"Who are they?" Denith asked fearfully.

"More Watchers. They must have come from the

Lowlands across the mountains. It seems this is exactly what they were waiting for. I'm afraid we are quickly going to find ourselves seriously outnumbered."

The prince spoke calmly, but Denith could see that the fate of his men was bearing heavily on his heart, and a look of sadness and resignation rested in his eyes.

"Let my Warriors go out and face them!" Denith blurted out. "The path from this gate is clear. We'll engage them before they reach the others. My men are growing impatient with waiting."

"I am afraid the battle is lost, Denith. Your men will only be able to hold them back for so long. Their numbers are too great. Spare your Warriors. We may have to prepare to evacuate this city through those tunnels you spoke of, while we still can."

"No," Denith whispered. "No, it is not meant to happen that way," he said as his voice grew louder and more determined. "We are meant to be victorious. The other world did not want us to build this city only to surrender it to Lancer in the end. No, we must fight, with all that we have, and believe that where we are weak, the other world will be strong for us. They have already given us the victory, Prince Beldanah. We only have to believe it, and claim it."

With that, Denith turned to return to his men.

"Wait! You would march into battle yourself against this oncoming horde? Must we lose you as we lost Celor?"

Denith looked him squarely in the eye. "We shall not be lost. Of that much I am assured. I cannot send my men into a battle I am not willing to fight myself. If the battle is lost, all will be lost, whether I am alive or not."

"I understand."

The two men embraced warmly. "I will be watch-

ing,” the prince whispered in parting.



“Prepare to march!” Denith called out as he rode into the courtyard where the Warrior Guards were gathered. “We are going into battle!”

A jubilant shout arose from the Warriors, who quickly formed into their assigned regiments as Denith updated the commanders on the new plan. When the Warriors and their commanders had all taken their positions, Denith appeared before them, at the front of the courtyard.

He looked across the field of Warriors and felt his heart fill with hope, courage, and pride in these men so eager to engage an enemy force that was threatening their freedom, their families, their homes, their future.

Denith closed his eyes for a moment and then began to ride slowly along the length of his troops. As he did, he took the keys in his hands and held them high for all to see. They glowed brilliantly, like a light clearly visible even in the glare of the morning sun, as a sure sign of the overwhelming presence of the other world that was with them this day. A hush came over the courtyard as all gazed in awe at the sight before them.

Denith lifted up his voice as he rode among the men, and his words echoed across the courtyard for all to hear.

“We have not gathered here today to fight against Lancer or his armies,” Denith began. “No, our fight is much bigger than that. It is a fight against the forces of evil, against forces of darkness that have gripped these lands, of whom these men are but a shadow. The true source of their strength and power comes from the netherworld! They are empowered by evil, and with every victory that they win, this evil makes

them grow stronger.

“But today, that power shall be broken. Today they shall learn that it is not us they are fighting. It is not the Warrior Guard and our Baron allies. No, they fight against a much stronger power, a power that cannot be defeated—the power of a greater world. We have been given the keys to understanding this other world through seeing the colors that it is made of! But just as Lancer’s men cannot see these colors, so they will not be able to see or understand the greater power that is with us, and that will defeat them. Just as there will be a mighty clashing of man’s sword against man’s sword, so too there shall be a mighty battle between the unseen worlds around us. And I can tell you now, even as we stand here, about to face enemies whose numbers are far superior to our own, which world shall be triumphant. Darkness cannot, will not, will *never* triumph over light—and the power of the light is on our side!”

The keys were visibly pulsating as he held them high, glowing brightly for all to see.

“Men, have no fear. Each one of you has someone fighting beside you—someone you cannot see, or touch, or hear. Let them fight through you, and wield your swords—yield to them, and let them take control. Let them win this battle through you, for truly it is more than a battle between Warrior and Watcher—it is a battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil; the forces of light, and the forces of darkness. Our victory today will not be a victory for this city alone. It will be a victory for every town and hamlet of our Commonlands that has until now found itself under the shadow of Lancer’s rule.”

Denith now found himself back at the head of his troops. He replaced the keys and drew his sword, lifting it high into the air.

“On to victory!” he shouted, as he spurred his horse, and turned towards the gate of their destiny.



The prince watched sadly as Denith and his troops rode out to face the oncoming foe.

If these forces of his other world are real, they had better go with him! he thought, though with little hope.

A panting messenger interrupted his thoughts.

“Sire, we have spotted yet another army—approaching from the city’s western edge. It is even larger than the other, and descending upon the city rapidly.”

The prince groaned audibly, looking at his advisors who stood a short distance away. How could they have underestimated Lancer’s forces so greatly? The battle and its cause were surely lost now. Beldanah wondered how to call for a retreat without losing more men than had already been lost, and if there would be any time to evacuate such a great number of people into the secret tunnels before the city was overrun by its invaders.

Perhaps there is no all-powerful other world, the prince mulled sadly within himself. Perhaps there is only this world and a darker one, and it is only a matter of fate that the darker world rules stronger here. It would have been better for us to have left well enough alone. How shall I explain this to my father, and the Upper Council back home—if we ever get back home?

His thoughts of defeat were interrupted by another messenger, panting equally as hard as the last one.

“My lord,” he began, “the great and mighty army approaching the city from the west...”

“Yes?” the prince asked, impatiently.

“They ... they are all Drifters, my lord. Thousands of them. Lancer’s men are already fleeing from before

them!”

“What?” the prince asked, astonished.

Quickly he ran down to where his horse was saddled, and raced with the messengers to a watchtower on the other side of the city, where he found it exactly as the messenger had described.

The Drifters had thrown themselves savagely and fearlessly into battle, striking at Lancer’s forces from behind their lines with little form of centralized organization, but with no lack of courage or dexterity. It wasn’t long before any Watchers who could fled the scene, leaving their camp entirely uprooted, and the Baron and Drifter warriors suddenly found themselves face to face with no one but each other. The battle was over.



Lancer stood at the crest of a nearby hill, watching the scene before him in disbelief. Where his Watchers were supposed to be slaughtering a weakened army of Barons and Warriors, the Barons and Drifters were slaughtering his men, most of whom were now fleeing the fields of battle in all directions.

Where had all these Drifters suddenly come from, and in such numbers? Never in all the history of the Commonlands had so many Drifters been seen together—and certainly not fighting together.

“He said it couldn’t fail ... and I believed him,” Lancer muttered to himself. “I should have known better. The promises of that shifty creature were always too good to be true. Where is he now, I wonder?”

But he did not have a lot of time to ponder his own question. He could see Denith’s small force of Warriors approaching his own advancing army. They did not pose much of a threat. The greater danger, he realized, would come when the Barons and Drifters had finished fighting for the city, and would turn to attack

his second column. He had gathered nearly every last regiment of Watchers from the Commonlands together for this battle—and now it was to no avail.

Without hesitation he spurred his horse back to the head of the column, and barked the orders for them to turn about and march away from certain defeat.



As they crested the last hill that put them in full view of Lancer's second army, Denith reined in his horse and held up his hand for the Warriors behind him to stop. The column was regrouping into a new formation, and turning to march in a new direction—away from the scene of a battle that had already ended. To the side of the column Denith spotted a lone man on a large black horse.

As if the man sensed that he was being watched, he turned to face Denith, and the line of commanders and Warriors that now stood beside him atop the hill.

The man's long and challenging gaze sent a shudder through Denith's body, even at this distance. *Lancer!* Denith realized instantly. *It's him!*

The other commanders drew back, suddenly realizing the size of the force they had been approaching, and how greatly Lancer's column outnumbered them.

Kurt approached Denith.

"Denith, the battle is over. Lancer has been defeated. The Drifters came from the forest in great numbers. Lancer's camp was totally uprooted."

"The Drifters? But how ... Baden!" Denith answered his own question before he had fully formed it.

"We can't let Lancer get away!" he continued excitedly. "This is our chance to strike him a blow from which he will never recover! Let's—"

"Wait, Denith!" Kurt interrupted. "We need not fight this battle alone. If we regroup with the others, we will

have a better chance.”

“But by the time our forces regroup, Lancer’s forces will be well out of our reach. We will not have the strength or speed to overtake him!” Denith protested.

“And we do not have the strength with us right now to defeat him,” Kurt answered. “You will only end up getting yourself killed like Celor. The day has been won, Denith. Accept that much. You cannot hope to win all your victories in the same day.”

Denith hung his head. He knew Kurt was right, but that did not make it any easier to accept. The disappointment of a Warrior who had missed his battle bore deeply into his heart.

Reluctantly, he turned and led the men back to the city, where the jubilations of victory had already begun.



“We must send troops after Lancer,” Denith persisted when the extended council of war had reconvened inside the city.

“His army has been seen heading back towards the Heartlands,” Baden said.

“He will be heading towards Danar,” General Zarnik answered. “It is his city.”

“Then we must march on his city!” Denith declared. “We can defeat him while we are together, and bring an end to the reign of those who rule our lands in the shadow of the netherworld.”

“You would march on his city?” the prince questioned. “That could be a march of months, across unfamiliar territory.”

“It is not unfamiliar to us,” a Drifter warrior chief answered. “And it need not be a march of months if we reach him before he passes the Edges. We Drifters know the swiftest and surest routes across these

lands. It will not be difficult to cut his forces off before they reach their own lands. Beyond the Edges it is darker, and their powers grow stronger there.”

“I am not sure that I can offer my men to accompany you on such a distant venture,” Prince Beldanah cautioned. “Our mission was to liberate this city, and to protect our people who were trapped among yours. This has been done. Already we have suffered more casualties than we expected, and I shall have to answer for them before our Upper Council. I do not know what they would think of me sending our forces even deeper into your lands for a battle that, from what I have seen, is now well within your own capabilities to undertake.”

Denith nodded.

Prince Beldanah continued. “I shall authorize a small force to remain here as part of this city’s protection, until such a time as the walls are completed. General Zarnik has already informed me of his desire to remain among you to command such a force.”

“You shall be most welcome,” Denith answered, turning to the Baron general. “Prince Beldanah, we owe your forces and your people a great debt of gratitude for the victory that has been won this day. We do not expect you to stay longer, and understand your need to return to your own lands. Even so, we shall miss you.”

Denith spoke in an official tone before the Council, but the prince read the greater meaning behind his formal words. A deep friendship had blossomed between these men. Each had strengthened the other in his moment of weakness. The prince would miss Denith as well, but he knew this city was being left in good hands.



It was an electric moment as the two men came

face to face—Lancer sitting high and proudly on his black stallion with an entire army behind him, and Denith on his chestnut gelding, the insignia of his Baron lordship displayed prominently on his chest and the round Baron shield he held in his hand. He stood alone, blocking the way Lancer's army was to pass.

Lancer was stunned only momentarily, and quickly regained his composure. He raised his hand to stop the long procession of men following behind him, and rode his horse nearer to where Denith waited.

"So you are the mighty Warrior with the Baron sword, and those keys that started all this trouble. I should have known better than to trust the killing of you into the hands of some hired underling," Lancer sneered with obvious disdain.

"Your time has come to an end, Lord General Lancer. A new era is about to begin—an era where the truth and knowledge of the colors and the other world shall be known far and wide. The days of your rule of shadow are over."

"You are a dreamer, Denith," Lancer answered back. "These things you think you see are but an affliction that has infected your brain. If it weren't for the fact that you have made me hate you so much, I would pity you at this moment. But right now, I only look forward to the chance of personally seeing to your execution."

"It is you who are dreaming, Lancer. It is you who are trapped in a world of false reality, of the shadows you have been serving. It is you who are blind to the truth, and who cannot see that the powers that are with us are much greater than the powers that have taken hold of you."

Lancer was starting to get impatient, wondering whether there was going to be more to this challenge than words alone. With a small, almost hidden move-

ment from his hand, four horsemen rode up beside him.

Denith made a small signal of his own, and suddenly the bushes all around and in front of Lancer came to life, and the path before his army filled with innumerable Warriors and Drifters, their swords drawn and ready for battle.

Lancer's hardened face showed no sign of surprise. He simply turned to the men beside him. "Kill him," he ordered calmly.

The four horsemen took to the charge, and spurred their horses directly towards Denith.

Denith quickly drew his own sword, and raised it high.

"ATTACK!" he shouted. A loud war cry echoed up from the Warriors and Drifters behind him. And so the battle began.

The first four horsemen rapidly descended on Denith, but he was ready for them. As soon as the first rider reached him, Denith swung his razor-sharp sword with all his might, sending the man tumbling to the ground and screaming in pain. The second stroke killed the next rider instantly.

By this time, the Warriors behind Denith had taken up the charge, and quickly dispatched the other two riders before pressing forward to engage Lancer's remaining forces who stood rooted to the spot, stunned at the battle that had so suddenly come upon them.

The Warriors and Drifters fought with a vigor and fervor that they'd never fought with before. They knew that this was the battle that would bring them a decisive victory over Lancer's forces. The sight of Denith at the head of his men had struck even further fear into the hearts of the Watchers, who had until now been convinced that this Warrior had finally been killed, and had felt much relief at that fact.

BATTLE OF THE FORCES

The battle raged long and hard, and there was no escape for Lancer's men. Those who did seek to flee into the forests for safety were quickly overtaken by Drifters who were much more familiar with the woods. When the battle finally ended, the pathway lay littered with the dead and dying bodies of Lancer's men. But Lancer himself had long fled the scene.

THE SEVEN KEYS — WARRIOR LORD

THE TRIAL OF TRIUMPH

“Denith, we have visitors,” Keren announced.

“Visitors? Who?”

At that moment, Kurt and Leonor walked into the room.

“Kurt, Leonor—what brings you here?”

“Leonor comes with news,” Kurt answered.

Denith motioned for both men to sit down, but Leonor remained standing.

With Kurt translating, Denith first introduced Leonor to Keren, explaining she was Amy’s daughter.

Leonor nodded, and then spoke what he had come to say.

“Amy is not well,” he began sadly.

The mention of Amy’s name brought an unexpected jolt of emotion to Denith’s heart, and his face registered his surprise. He quickly turned and looked at Keren with some concern.

Leonor stopped for a moment, following Denith’s gaze, and then turning back towards Denith, his eyes asking whether it was appropriate to continue in front of his lady’s daughter.

“Go on,” Denith said, bracing his heart for the news.

“She has been ill for some time, but did not think

it serious. Now it has taken a turn for the worse. It is not known...”

Kurt hesitated in translating Leonor’s words.

“Go on, go on,” Denith urged.

“She wants to see you ... both of you,” Kurt finished simply. “Leonor will accompany you aboard one of their ships that is already waiting.”

Keren looked at Denith in alarm. “What is wrong with Mother?”

“I’m not sure,” he answered, struggling to subdue his own emotions towards Amy. “Last time I saw her she mentioned something about not feeling well. But she looked strong and healthy. I do not know what could have afflicted her. She never told me.”

Keren’s eyes grew wider with worry, and Denith sought for words to allay her apparent fears.

“Perhaps she simply feels the need to be close to her own people. I am sure just the sight of you would make her feel much better. You must go to her, Keren. You must go and tell her that I cannot come right now. There is too much happening here at the moment for me to pull away. But you can go. It would make her so happy to see you.”

“Denith, I am with child, and you would send me alone to a strange place?”

“It is not so strange as you might imagine. And Kurt could go with you as well. He knows the place better than I do, and he could take care of you. You could take Barthol as well. I assure you, the Baron vessels make for much more comfortable travel than our Trader vessels do. You will hardly know you are at sea, and it is a voyage of only three days.”

While there were many duties and responsibilities that Denith now had to see to, especially in Celor’s absence, there was a greater reason stopping him from seeing Amy at this moment. He was unsure how he

would handle the emotions he felt within him when he saw her again. And Keren was very perceptive. She would be bound to notice and ask questions—and Denith did not feel ready to give any answers.

And so it was decided. Preparations were made for Keren and Kurt to make the voyage together, and Denith suddenly found himself all the more busy with affairs that needed taking care of. He tried not to think of Amy, or Keren. But he could not shake the feeling of uneasiness that had settled over him from the time Leonor had brought news of Amy.



“Denith, Denith.”

Denith roused, but did not waken. An apparition, hazy at first, began forming in front of him. He jolted upright, watching expectantly for whatever was going to fully appear.

“Faethé?” he questioned, but there was no response. Then suddenly he recognized the form.

“Amy!”

Somewhere in the depths of his consciousness—in that land of half-dreams, half-reality, Denith knew that this was simply an apparition, and not to be confused with reality. He relaxed, preparing himself for whatever scenes this dream was going to bring.

“My dear,” Amy said as she approached and embraced him. She gently caressed the nape of his neck. “At last I can see you again.”

As it can be in a dream, though Denith was fully aware of what was going on around him, he found himself unable to speak. But then again, he did not have to. It seemed Amy read every thought as it was going through his mind.

“You must learn not to close your heart to the love it could be feeling. We have been given emotions for a reason, and while you cannot rely on them, they

are also not meant to be ignored. Love is a powerful emotion, Denith. Let it help you discover what you have to give, what you have to share, how you can help, hold, comfort and encourage many others, as you will have to.”

Amy looked deeply into Denith’s eyes.

“Those are the things that will be remembered. Those are the things that will make a difference in people’s lives. Those are the things that will drive away the darkness, and make room for the light to grow brighter and brighter within you. Remember that, my dear, remember!”

As much as Denith wanted to, he could not speak, or utter any response.

“Goodbye, Denith,” Amy continued, as her form began to fade. “I will be looking forward to meeting you again. Until then, do not close yourself to the gifts that life has to offer, the joys that it can bring to you.”

“Amy!” Denith finally forced the words out of his mouth, only to discover that he had fully awakened, and that there was no trace of the vision or dream he had just woken up from. He sat up in his bed and looked around. His heart was pounding, and small beads of sweat had formed on his forehead.

He sat in the darkness for some time, trying to understand the meaning of the vision, and why it had come to him just now—but not understanding. Finally tiredness again engulfed him, and he fell back into a deep sleep. When he awoke the next morning, the dream and the questions that had come with it had been forgotten.



Expanding their network of informers among the Drifters, and inspecting the forts and border posts that were being erected throughout the Protected Territories, kept Denith fully occupied, so that he found

little time to think of Keren or Amy.

It was to his great surprise when, only two weeks after Keren had left, Denith returned home from a mission to find her inside the house, waiting for him.

"Keren!" he said with surprise, and then noticed her tear-stained face. "You've been crying. What happened?"

"Oh Denith," she said, as she flung herself sobbing into his arms. "Denith, it's Mother."

Denith stiffened. "Amy?"

Instantly his memory of the dream returned, and its questions with it. Denith somehow knew those questions were about to be answered. He felt the fear and apprehension of what those answers would be—but that did not make him any more prepared for them.

"She has passed on, Denith. She's gone."

"No," Denith whispered. The words cut into his heart deeper than any sword.

"Oh, Denith," Keren said, sobbing. She buried her face in his shoulder, and failed to see that Denith's face itself grew pale with an unspeakable grief.

Denith held Keren tight and closed his eyes. The pain of knowing he would never see Amy again, that he had not come when she had asked for him, racked his being. Tears streamed down his face.

"I ... I am sorry I could not be there," Denith finally managed to say.

"She asked about you," Keren answered between sobs. "But she seemed to understand why you could not come."

Denith was beside himself with grief, devastated. Even Celor's death had not brought such a great feeling of loss with it.

"Are you all right?" Keren asked, seeing the look of shock and pain on Denith's face. "I didn't know it would be so difficult for you."

“It ... it’s just everything together, Keren,” Denith answered, trying to explain. “The battles, the victories, the tests and triumphs, and now this. It’s all a bit overwhelming.”

“I’m sorry,” Keren answered, lowering her head. “I did not mean to cause you grief also.”

“No,” Denith answered, trying to comfort her. “Do not worry. All is well with her. I know that. She is in a better place. She would not want us to grieve.”

“It was beautiful, when it happened,” Keren said, her eyes taking on a faraway look. “She looked so peaceful, so calm. She looked as if ... as if she was going home. She spoke of you. ‘Tell Denith never to forget the beauty of what he has brought us,’ she said.”

The tears stung Denith’s eyes, and the softness of Keren’s voice and her words of comfort soothed his heart. He took Keren in his arms again, and embraced her.

This, he realized, clutching Keren, is the treasure you have left me with. Let me love her as I would have loved you.



The night passed restlessly for Denith. Before the sun had risen he rose to seek out Baden, who had taken to sleeping in a small Drifter tent at a quiet and remote place near the walls.

“Denith, what are you doing here this early?” Baden asked him, having been awakened by the sound of Denith’s horse approaching. “Shouldn’t you still be in bed with your lovely wife?”

“I have to leave!” was all Denith said.

“What? You only just got back.”

“It’s Amy,” he finally blurted out. “She’s ... gone.”

“Again?” Baden asked jovially.

“No, Baden, she’s dead,” Denith said.

Baden instantly repented of his lightheartedness

and fell silent. He knew the fondness with which Denith had come to regard Amy, even if the two men had never discussed it openly.

"I'm sorry," Baden finally said. "How is Keren?"

"She at least seems to have come to terms with it. But I..." Denith hesitated. "I feel as if I failed her in not being there with her. She asked for me, but I ignored her."

"So what do you want to do?" Baden finally asked.

"I just need to get away for a time—I don't know where."

"A time away is indeed a good remedy for such wounds," Baden mused, almost abstractly. "But what of Keren?"

"Kurt will take care of her ... I know he will."

"And will Kurt know where you have gone?"

"I have left a note for him, and Keren as well. It will only be for a few days. Will you come with me?"

"But of course! I wouldn't trust you out there by yourself."

Denith smiled. At least he could always count on Baden to keep his sense of humor. "Thank you, Baden."



Once again disguising himself as a Drifter, Denith managed to make his way with Baden out one of the smaller gates without being recognized.

"I believe I know a good place to take you," Baden said once they were outside the walls.

"Then I'll follow you," Denith answered.

The two men spurred their horses on, and were soon galloping eastwards, towards the sea. After two days Denith could smell the familiar presence of salt in the breeze, and by noon the third day their eyes alighted on a wide and deep blue horizon. They pulled

short atop some cliffs that fell steeply to the waterside below.

“What do you think?” Baden asked, looking at Denith expectantly.

Denith remained silent. It looked almost exactly like the Bluffs, and the cliffs he had known and wandered as a boy.

“It’s perfect,” Denith whispered.

Baden’s face beamed with satisfaction. He dismounted, and sprawled out on his back on the grass below him.

Denith rode a short distance further, before dismounting his horse, and tying it to a nearby branch. Then he moved to the edge of one of the cliffs, and sat there, silently staring out, inwardly trying to come to grips with the grief he felt at Amy’s passing. Tears began to flow, and roll hot down his cheeks.

Why, Amy? Why did you have to leave? Why now?

He earnestly sought for some sign from the Whisperers—a manifestation of their presence as they had given upon Celor’s death, and the understanding of it they had brought with them. But there was no such sign, and their voices seemed to have been silenced. Denith felt alone. Truly alone.

At length the tears stopped. *It is enough, Denith told himself. I have lost the one who would have been my best friend. Whether I understand it or not makes no difference. I must let go of this treasure, and move on, accept life as she would have wanted me to.*

I am sorry I was not there, Amy. And though I know not when the time shall come, I know that I shall see you again, and that I will find you in a happy place.

Having said his mental farewell, Denith slowly turned and walked back to where Baden was still lying on the ground. Denith joined him, and the two men

lay there beside each other for a great while, silently staring up at the shifting patterns of the clouds above them. Then Denith, being unable to ward off the feelings of tiredness that were beginning to overwhelm him, closed his eyes, and in a short time, drifted into a soft and relaxing sleep.



Denith sat up with a start. A strange noise had awoken him. He looked around. Baden lay peacefully on the ground a short distance away. A flickering campfire burnt peacefully between them.

Baden must have lit it while I was asleep, Denith realized sleepily.

He looked around, wondering what it was that could have awoken him. The sky was still dark, and the twinkle of a thousand stars smiled down at him. Only the calm lapping of the waves against the rocks below the cliff broke the silence of the night.

Denith felt wide awake. *Makes sense,* he thought to himself. *I must have been sleeping since this afternoon.*

Not knowing what else to do, he stood up to walk around. A quarter moon hung low above a forest behind him, and would soon vanish behind it. Then he heard the noise again. It was like a moaning whimper of a wounded animal. It came from the same forest he was staring at.

Without thinking, he stepped off towards the forest to see what he could do to help the small creature in need. As soon as he stepped into the undergrowth he heard the fast flutter of wings, then a high-pitched shriek, followed by total silence.

Again, he stepped in the direction the noise had come from, his hand ready on the hilt of his sword. He soon found himself in a small clearing, and by the faint glow of the moon shining through, discerned the form

of an eeghaw feasting on an unfortunate animal that had become its prey. The eeghaw was not his own.

Almost immediately, the eeghaw became aware of Denith's presence. With another shriek, it abandoned its catch and flew up into the darkness of the sky.

No hope for that creature, Denith thought to himself, before turning around to head back to the campfire.

He stopped short, sensing the shadowed form of a man standing in front of him, blocking the way he had come.

"Baden?" he called.

Only silence answered him.

"Who are you?" Denith asked nervously, his hand once again moving to the hilt of his sword.

Again silence answered him, only this time a chill came with it, and Denith suddenly realized that he had faced this figure before.

"I know who you are," Denith challenged. "You have no power over me."

"That is true," the figure's voice answered back.

"Then why are you here?" Denith asked.

"Simply to tell you something that you may not realize for yourself," the figure answered. "And that is that *they* have no power over you either."

"Who?" Denith asked.

"Those of the other world—who you have allowed to choose your destiny for you. You think they have given you much. They have given you nothing. There are many things they have not told you, and that they don't want you to hear."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you have your hopes and dreams of transforming the Commonlands into a more beautiful place, where these truths you have discovered will be known to all, and everybody will live happily ever after. Do you think that is really what is going to happen? Do you

really think something as simple as these colors can change a world? They may change some people, Denith. But most will go on being exactly as they are.”

“Then why are you so afraid of them? Why take them away in the first place?”

“Have they really told you so little?” the figure answered. “It was not I who took the colors away from anybody, just as it was not them who gave them to the Drifters, or to you.”

“But they gave me the keys,” Denith answered.

“And the keys gave you the colors,” the figure added.

“Well, yes.”

“And where did they get those keys?”

“I ... I never asked them.”

“And they never told you, because they did not want you to know. Oh, it is so easy for them to manipulate and bend one’s desires to conform to their own. They make it so beautiful, so attractive, and so helpful. But they do not tell you the real truth.”

“And what is that?”

“That the greater power that is behind all of this created both the light and the darkness, both the colors and the shadows. They are one and the same, two sides of the same coin, and to live with one or the other makes little more difference than it does to sleep on the left or the right side of your bed.”

“Then why all these battles? Why all this fighting?”

“Was it them battling, or was it you? Do you think they really fought with you? Or were they only using you, like Lancer used his own men, and the prince used his soldiers, only to retreat back to their own safety when the battle was over?”

“No, it’s not like that,” Denith protested, but he felt his inward resolve growing weaker, and his mind

beginning to question things he had until now accepted.

“They fought for their own ends. The more people they can bring to their side, the more minds they can manipulate to their own ends, and infect with this curse of their colors.”

“And is the curse of your shadow any better?” Denith challenged.

“That question is yours to answer,” the figure responded. “Are you really so much happier now than you were before you knew anything of this other world? Or has it only brought with it greater conflict, greater pain, greater confusion? And what of the Barons, or the Drifters? Are they really so much better than the common man? Are your Warriors any better men than the Watchers they have massacred in the name of this other world, and your so-called freedom?”

“Think about it, Denith. Do not allow these creatures of color to so easily color your mind. You think these keys are a gift that has been given you. No, Denith, they are a weight and a burden, and I suggest you seriously stop and think before you spread this burden on a people who have lived happily without it until now.”

The figure suddenly stopped speaking, and turned around. There was a noise behind him.

When Denith looked again the figure was gone, and the telltale flapping of an eeghaw’s wings sounded from a nearby branch before the creature lifted off and disappeared into the sky.

“Denith, I heard voices ... what are you doing here?” Baden was almost frantic as he approached Denith, a torch in his hand.

“Oh, nothing,” Denith replied calmly, as he stepped past Baden and made his way back to the campfire, which he noticed Baden had stoked with

more wood.

Baden stepped up to Denith, who had seated himself in front of the campfire, and was staring emptily into its flames.

“Denith, you can’t hide the truth from me. Something was going on in that forest.”

“Very well,” Denith said with a sigh. “If you must know, I was speaking with someone.” He continued staring blankly out into the darkness before him.

“You were speaking with the Evil One!” Baden blurted out perceptively.

“Yes, I was!” Denith countered angrily.

“How could you, Denith? You should have called for me.”

“He was no threat,” Denith said defensively. “He only wanted to talk.”

“That is his greatest threat!” Baden shot back. “Denith, how could you even listen to him?”

“Not now, Baden. Please, let me be.” Denith stood up again and turned to walk away.

“Denith!” Baden called, to no avail. He had already disappeared into the darkness.



Denith sat alone at the edge of the cliff once again, staring blankly out at the horizon in front of him as it grew gradually lighter with the glow of the sun that would soon be rising. His mind felt torn and confused, riddled with questions about the nature of everything that he had known and learned so far.

“He asks more questions than he can answer.”

Denith jumped to his feet, sword in hand, only to find himself face to face with Hoden.

“Hoden ... it’s you!”

“Yes, Denith, it’s me. It seems like this is often the kind of place where we run into each other.”

Denith looked into the old man’s eyes, which were

watching him kindly, and yet hid a sad and distant look.

Memories flooded Denith's mind of the first time they had met, and the many changes it had brought to his life—changes he had just been pondering and questioning in his mind.

“You have let him confuse you with his many words, Denith, when the truth is very simple. He tries to complicate things, to make them look so much more complex than they really are. He gets you to question, to wonder, and to stop accepting the simple reality of things as they are. He throws out questions, but never answers them. And if you question him, he responds with a new question. Asking, always asking, questioning, doubting, but never wanting or honestly seeking for true answers. That is the way of darkness.”

Denith turned and silently stared back out to sea. Then he sat back down. Hoden sat down next to Denith.

“It is true that darkness and light came together. You cannot really have one without the other. But that is not because they are equal. The darkness is there to help you recognize the light when you see it. The shadows exist so that color, when it is found, will be all the more appreciated. Just as there is sickness, and when the sickness has passed, you realize that being healthy is a true gift.

“But the darkness cannot accept this truth, and so it deceives itself with many cunning words into thinking it is equal, that the shadows and the colors are equal representations of the same world, when in reality, both are only pictures of the larger worlds behind them—one, a world of darkness and ignorance, the other, a world of openness and the knowledge of truth.

“And this is the world we wish for people to see and

come to know, and the truth that the Evil One would not have them discover, and which he has tried to keep men from yearning after. Do not entangle yourself again in the shadows you have escaped from, Denith, because if you return to them after having known the light, you may never recognize the greater truth and power of it again, as happened to Lancer.”

“Lancer?” Denith asked in amazement.

Hoden looked down, his eyes sorrowful.

“Lancer is my son,” Hoden confessed sadly. “The firstborn to Faethé and myself.”

“But that isn’t possible!” Denith exclaimed. “That would make Lancer ... my grandfather.”

“Not quite. Your grandfather, Dughall, was a sensible Woodsman. He married our second child, Larista—your grandmother. But even she, by the time she gave birth to her first child, your uncle Celor, had set her heart against the colors, and was living in a world without them.

“Our children were such a disappointment to us, Denith. Yes, Lancer knew of the colors once upon a time, longer ago than he will ever remember. But once he chose to follow the way of darkness, his mind began to be inhabited by it, until he became alienated from the very memory of the world of color he used to know.

“His sister Larista was different. She could see more than she wanted to admit, but she deliberately closed her eyes, forcing the colors and all that came with them from her mind and life like it was all part of some bad dream. It is what made her so strict on your uncle Celor when he was a child.

“We knew there was no hope of changing our children, and so we waited. In the meantime, I passed into this world. But Faethé kept waiting, and finally one day she confronted Celor, but he was not ready.

There was another destiny awaiting him, one that he would have to find on his own after he left his home, and the influence of his mother. It wasn't until you came along that Faéthé knew you were the one we had been waiting for, and the reason she had not yet passed into our world to be with me.

"There was a task for her to do, to teach and train you as a child, to open the channels of your mind to the realities of a world you would be called to represent to your people, to those whose eyes had become closed to it, and at the same time blinded to the darker powers that had robbed it from them. And thus she cared for you as a child, instilling the words, stories, and foundation that would leave your heart open to the calling of the keys when it came.

"That is how Faéthé and I managed to pass our gift on to another generation—first to your uncle Celor, who did what he could with the knowledge that he received, and then to you, Denith, when you were finally ready to receive the destiny that had been prepared for you."

"But if Lancer is really your son, how can he still be alive? He does not have the appearance of an old man, and he certainly isn't feeble," Denith asked.

"It is one of the mysteries of the Shadows. Those who are devoted to it do not age as normal men do, even as those who serve and come very close to our realm can live very long lives—such as Charine. The Shadows have kept Lancer robust and alive to fulfill the course and purpose for which they chose him. When they have no further use for him, he shall age and die his natural death all the more quickly. But he does not realize this, just as he does not realize that his actions, his destiny, his very end, are all being planned and orchestrated by the dark powers his choices led him to serve."

“As you are orchestrating my destiny?” Denith asked.

“Your destiny is your own to choose, Denith. We can prepare a path, and show you the way, but you must choose to walk in it—knowing and trusting those who have placed it before you. Lancer has not yet fully realized that he is in the service of the Evil One. But we have shown you the truth, Denith. We have revealed ourselves and our purpose to you, and we will continue to give you the guidance you shall need to see the path that fulfills this purpose.

“But I will not hide from you that the power to bring this purpose to pass lies in you alone. We can help you, but it is you who must make the decision. We will lead, but you must follow. If you do not—and that is a choice you always have the power to make—we shall have to begin all over again with another.

“The choice is yours, Denith. But consider that Lancer also made such a choice, and see where it has gotten him. He is a man lost in his own lack of purpose, not knowing who he serves or why. Perhaps our realm is mysterious, but it is not deceitful. We have given you the truth, which the Evil One has sought to confuse, just as he has confused many with his words of deceit. But your heart bears witness to the simplicity of the truth, Denith, and that is what you must follow.”

Denith remained silent for some time.

“And you need not worry about Amy,” Hoden finally said.

“She is with you?”

“Yes, and so is the friendship you shared together. Such things are kept as well.”

“But still, she is there and I am here. There will always be that gulf between us.”

“It is not as big a gulf as you think. Remember,

you have been to our world before, and gone back and forth as if there was no time between them. And that is because there is no time when it comes to the matters of our world, Denith.”

“I seem to remember you telling me that before,” Denith answered sheepishly.

“The only distance between your world and ours exists in the perception of those who cannot comprehend the reality of our world. But you have comprehended it, Denith. You have seen it for yourself, and experienced our beauties and gifts—and you still hold the keys to them. So long as you have them, we will be with you, and our world will be a part of yours. Remember that, and let it give you the courage to face the future that lies ahead of you.”

Hoden’s voice began to fade with the first glimmers of sunlight that streamed over the ocean’s horizon. He was gone. Denith stood to face the sun in all its fullness as it rose above the distant waters. The glowing ball pulsated as it shot rays of varied colors into the early morning haze, warming Denith’s countenance, and welcoming him to the start of a new day.

Denith walked back to where Baden was quietly loading things into his horse’s saddlebag.

Baden stopped as Denith approached. He could see that a change had come over the man.

“Is all well?” Baden asked.

“Yes,” Denith said, putting his hand on Baden’s shoulder. He turned around for another glimpse of the warm rising sun. “Yes, all is well, and I am now ready for my future.”

“And I believe,” Baden answered, “that your future is now ready for you!”

- 18 -

DEDICATION

Denith stood alone atop one of the high watch-towers on the eastern edge of the city, watching the sun rise over the rolling hills that faded into the distance. Far to his right loomed the dark carpet of green that marked the beginning of the Dark Woods to the south of the city. Even it did not seem as dark today as normal, with the sun casting a pleasant glow atop its sprawling, mystic cover.

He sighed deeply and contentedly. This day had been long in coming, but now it was finally here. After seven years of building, they could finally celebrate the completion of the walls, and the inauguration of their new city.

Edward, as usual, had planned the great ceremony to be filled with all the pomp and circumstance that such an event merited, and with the Baron prince and a full retinue of Baron soldiers and lords joining the attendance, that pageantry would not be hard to come by.

In a few hours, people would be thronging the great square outside the main gate. From where he stood, Denith could already see workmen erecting the podium the ceremony would be conducted from. His heart was filled with reverence and gratitude for

everything that had brought him to this point.

He suddenly became aware of a presence standing next to him.

“Faethé! I had a feeling you were about to pay me a visit.”

She laughed her wonderful melodic laugh.

“Am I in trouble?” Denith asked cautiously, “or is the city in danger of an attack?”

“No, Denith, this time I am not a bearer of bad news. I came with a small message about the ceremony.”

“The ceremony?” Denith asked, a little surprised.

“Yes, the ceremony. There’s something we want you to do, Denith, as an illustration of our presence and protection over this city.”

“Oh?” Denith looked curious, and listened intently as Faethé continued.

“There is a small wooden chest outside the main gate, to the side of the great square where your ceremony will be held. The workmen used it to lock tools and plans in at night. Now it is empty. When Prince Beldanah hands the key to the gate into your hands, you must take this key, and place it in this chest. Then, using the keys we have given you, you are to lock this chest, so that from this day forward, no man will be able to open that box, or even break the chains that hold it closed, unless he comes with the power of our keys. And so let this box stay, as a symbol of our protection over all that this city will come to stand for.”

“But the key will be given to the prince, by Edward,” Denith exclaimed.

“And the prince, in turn, will give it to you,” Faethé answered.

“Very well,” Denith finally conceded, “if the key is placed in my hands, I shall do as you have said.”

"It shall be so," Faethé answered.

"Was that all you came to tell me?" Denith asked, a little disappointed at the thought of his pleasant guide having to leave so soon.

Faethé looked at Denith for some time, saying nothing. Then slowly, she spoke again.

"You have faced down Lancer, and you have faced down the Evil One. But neither of them are yet defeated, and they shall not rest from their struggle to undo what we have begun here. They will stop at nothing to destroy the influence we have brought into your world through the keys, and they shall seek to find ways to take these keys to themselves. If they succeed, the gifts and powers these keys bring with them shall slowly become lost to you and your world once again. But as long as you hold them and keep them near you, then no matter what happens, the presence of our world will always be kept alive in your heart, and through that assurance, to your world."

"I promise I shall never let them out of my sight," Denith said without hesitation.

"Beware of the words of the Evil One," Faethé cautioned him in spite of his confident manner. "Lancer is a man of this world, just as any other man. But the unseen Shadows ... their powers are greater, and are not to be underestimated."

"But your powers are greater," Denith answered.

"As long as you rely on them. But if ever you start relying on yourself, this power will be lost. And that is exactly what the Evil One will seek to get you to do."

"Then he will fail!" Denith said emphatically.

"I hope so, for your sake, Denith," Faethé added, as she slowly began to fade. "I have brought you this far, Denith. Now my task is completed, and this must be goodbye. There are other helpers who shall be with you as you continue along the path that is set before

you. They shall always be with you, as I have been. Listen to them as you have listened to me.”

“I ... I won't see you again?” Denith asked.

Faethé's form grew fainter still, and her words faded to an echo in his heart.

Not in this world, Denith. But I will be waiting for you at the end of your journey, to welcome you into mine.

And then she was gone.



The courtyard was abuzz with activity, and all eyes focused on the small stage that was almost dwarfed by the great ornamental gates behind it, a perfect backdrop for the characters in front of it.

Denith stood to one side of the stage, dressed in all the finery of his Warrior and Baron uniform and colors. His arm rested atop his shield, which reached to the floor, and had been newly painted in the yellow and black colors of Lord Hamenor's insignia. His sword hung in its red and gold Baron scabbard on his left side, prominently visible.

Prince Beldanah stood to the other side of the dais, likewise dressed in the full regalia of his office. The white satin robes, offset with a thick brown jewel-encrusted belt and his sword in an ornamental gold-plated scabbard, only served to highlight his dark face and deep, brown eyes. A round, turban-like helmet wound with a white cloth that hung down the back hid most of his thick, dark locks. A deep red cape hanging down to his feet completed his attire.

In between them stood Edward, looking as puffy and round as ever, his face still slightly reddened from the climb up the few steps that led to the raised podium. His perfectly tailored yellow-brown garments looked plain beside the more impressive dress of the men on either side of him, but he took little note of that. Raising his hand, he quieted the stirring crowd.

Denith looked on admiringly as Keren, who stood near the front next to his parents and Kurt, knelt down to quiet her two sons, who were busily engaged in animated conversation amongst themselves, comparing their own small Baron Warrior outfits they had insisted on wearing to the ceremony.

Edward's loud voice boomed across the square. "People of the Protected Territories ... nay, people of the Commonlands, today is a day we have long been waiting for, when we can celebrate the completion of the walls that encompass our homes. Their building and the gifts this city was privileged to know from its beginning have brought us together as one—Drifters, Barons, and common folks alike, to stand free together."

The crowd erupted in applause. Edward raised his hands to quiet them again.

"We owe much to these two men," he continued, motioning to Denith on one side, and Prince Beldanah on the other. "It is their friendship and vision that has brought us all together today, and so today we honor them with our gratefulness for all they have done for us."

The crowd applauded again. Edward gave a short nod in the prince's direction. This time, Prince Beldanah held up his hands, and the crowd grew quiet again.

"It is a custom among my people," the prince said in a loud and deep voice, "that a city be named at its birth. Your friends here insisted that I be the one to choose a name. When I first came to these lands, I saw for the first time how dark they truly were. It was only then that I realized the true courage and bravery of those who sought to fight the dark forces that pressed them from every side, and to cling to the gifts of light that had been imparted to them.

“I am honored to have been a part of that fight, and to have come to know you as friends, and no longer as strangers. And so I have chosen to name this city for you, the kind people who shall dwell within it. May you make these very walls glow with the warmth of your friendship and the light of your goodness. And may this city always be known as the Place of Light, or as it is said in the Baron tongue, *Citar*.”

The crowd broke into cheering again, and Edward stepped forward, picking up a large key that sat on a pedestal in front of him. The crowd grew quiet again.

“As a token of our appreciation to your people, and as a symbol that you will always be welcome, I extend to you, Prince Beldanah, the key of our humble city. May it stand, as long as it stands, for the friendship that has been forged between our people.”

The prince gave a short bow, and accepted the key graciously. Then he held his hands up to quiet the cheering crowd again.

“It is with great pleasure that I accept this gift of your hospitality and friendship. However, I believe this key more appropriately belongs in the hands of another. Let it not be said that the Barons built you a city, but kept the key for themselves. No, people of the Commonlands, this is to be your city, and yours alone.”

Edward looked towards the prince, wondering what the man meant. Then he turned to Denith. But Denith remained standing silently, looking forward. Seeing that the prince’s comments were not causing Denith any undue concern, Edward kept his thoughts to himself, wondering what would happen next.

The prince turned, and walked towards Denith, and in a simple gesture, placed the key to *Citar* in his hands.

“It is you who have brought these people together, Denith. It is in your hands that this key belongs.”

Denith bowed and accepted the key without question.

As the crowd grew silent, and people watched his every move, Denith descended from the podium, and did exactly as Faethé had instructed him.

He approached the small wooden box built, as Faethé had said, into the outside of the wall. Without speaking, he opened the chest, placed the key inside, and closed it. Then he pulled out his keys, which seemed to catch the light of the sun from all directions, and glow brilliantly in the sight of the people. There were gasps from those who had never seen them before, and whispers from those who had.

Choosing the key most likely to fit, Denith slid it into a padlock that hung loosely on some chains. The lock opened. Denith strung the chains through the chest's latches and handle, linking them securely together before he slipped the padlock through them. Once again he turned the key to set the lock, and as he did, the entire chest glowed with an unearthly aura that lingered as Denith made his way back to the podium.

Edward stood there, his mouth wide open, at a loss for words.

Denith approached the front of the platform.

"I want to thank you all for your respect and honor of me. But it is not I, nor the prince, nor even the Barons or the Drifters that brought any of this to pass. We are all only tools in the hand of a greater power, the power of the other world. It is they who have accomplished all of this through us, and it is they who will keep that which they have built, and finish the work that they have begun.

"The key to our city now rests safely in their hands, and it shall be protected by the same power that has delivered us from those who sought to keep us in darkness. And may this power always remind us of the light we have been given, lest the shadows should

once again make us forget.”

The audience cheered, and Denith smiled. He walked up to Edward, who seemed frozen in stunned amazement at all he had just seen, and patted him on the back. “Let’s go, Edward. It’s time to join the party.”

And a grand party it was, as Barons, Drifters, Warriors and common folk mingled together with the sounds of music and dancing. Never before had there been such a colorful occasion. Drifters danced in wild abandon as the common folk gingerly tasted the great varieties of new and strange foods their Baron guests had brought with them for the occasion. Guards and Drifters jostled together in playful tournaments, and drink was had in plenty.

As evening fell, and the partying continued, Denith sat back contentedly under a canopy, watching the action with great amusement. Keren sat beside him, holding his hand. Prince Beldanah and Princess Suranis sat nearby, next to Elden and Miria. In the front of the tent, an earnest little wooden sword fight was being played out between young Barthol and his little brother Gabriel. Barthol quickly had his younger brother on the floor.

“Careful with your brother, Barthol,” Keren admonished.

“He’s going to be quite the Warrior when he grows up,” the prince said with a laugh at the earnestness in Barthol’s face. “He’s got all the right moves.”

Denith beamed with pride. He loved his sons.

“When I’m as big as you, you won’t win so easily,” little Gabriel announced to his brother loudly enough for all to hear.

“They certainly get their boldness from their father,” the princess commented.

“But their beauty is unmistakably their mother’s,” the prince answered with a wink in Keren’s direction.

DEDICATION

Keren blushed and Denith laughed.

At that point, Baden came walking up to the tent.

“Good evening my lord, your highness,” he said, bowing his head first to Denith and then Prince Bel-danah.

“Ah, Baden ... please join us,” Denith answered, motioning towards some empty sitting pillows strewn about in the canopy’s shade.

“I shall be delighted to, but first I have an introduction to make. I would like you all to meet my wife—”

“You got married?” Denith asked in shock before Baden could finish his sentence. “But when? How?”

“A marriage among Drifters is a matter altogether different from your concept of marriage,” Baden answered calmly. “Nevertheless, the vows we have made to one another bind us together just the same.”

“So who is this woman?” the prince asked.

The group suddenly became aware of a figure hidden just behind Baden, obscured in the shadows that the flickering tent lanterns were casting behind him. She now stepped forward, plainly visible to all.

“Gwyn?” Denith exclaimed, recognizing the woman who had once helped him, and also been rescued by him.

“A commoner and a Drifter married—now I have seen everything!” Elden said with a laugh.

“You’re pregnant.” Keren was the first to notice and mention this fact as she moved to make room for Gwyn beside her.

“Yes, I am ... three months along,” Gwyn answered, gratefully taking the seat Keren offered.

“Well well, Baden ... you *have* been busy, I see,” Denith joked, taking a glass and filling it for Gwyn, and then another for Baden.

“A toast ... to Baden and Gwyn’s firstborn son or daughter, whichever it shall be!” Denith called.

“A toast to our Warrior Lord and his Warrior sons!”

Baden answered.

“And a toast to Citar, and to our future,” the prince added.

“To our future!” they all answered.

EPILOGUE

And so was the beginning of the great alliance between Denith, the Warrior Lord, and Beldanah, the Baron prince and ruler of Hassak, and later the great king of the Baron lands. The alliance brought with it a time of peace and prosperity for the people of the Protected Territories.

Some time after Amy's passing, Denith gave Lord Hamenor's estate into the care of Kurt, who from that time on lived there. He found himself a wife from among the maidens of Hassak, and became one of the nobles of that great city.

Gwyn gave birth to a son, Kalman, and raised him with Baden in the Drifter fashion. Kalman saw many adventures in his own life before he settled in the Lowlands beyond the Gray Ridges, which were renamed the Golden Ridges in Denith's time.

Not long after the founding of Citar, Denith's forces marched on the city called Danar, only to find that Lancer had fled, and that the city had been deserted. Instructed by the Whisperers to claim this city for their ends, Denith made it his new capital, and renamed the city "Charina"—after the Drifter who had shown him the path of his destiny in the tunnels. Thus this city of the Warrior Lord became a haven for Drifters and commoners alike, from which the new and greater battle against the dark spell that still overshadowed much

of the Commonlands began. And by virtue of the keys, and the whispers and tales of the other world that were spread abroad from this city into all the regions of the Commonlands, colors began to return, and the shadows recede.

But the remnants of the dark forces behind these shadows remained, lurking in corners, seeking for ways to undermine Denith's power, and to reclaim their influence over those they had lost to the liberty of the other world. And so the Evil One worked together with Lancer, using his desire for revenge and to reclaim his own city to plot against Denith, and above all, to get at the mystical keys he always carried with him.

But Lancer was not nearly as skilled in following the wisdom of the Evil One as Denith was in heeding the instruction of the other world, and Lancer only succeeded in doing more damage than good to his cause. Thus, left to his own increasingly overconfident plans, and without the power that had aided and protected him before, Lancer finally met his death at Denith's hands, and the Evil One moved on to a new and more devious plan of his own.

It is said that history repeats itself, and so it would in one of Denith's sons, who would give ear to the Evil One, and turn from the ways of light to embrace the rule of a Shadowed realm, taking upon himself the name of Bazal, the name of the Prince of Shadows.

But the darkness cannot and never will triumph over light, and it is the forces of truth and goodness that are destined to reign supreme for all eternity. And so the other son would live to stand up against his elder brother, and to pass on the gift that had been given to Denith into the hands of those who, in the end, would triumph over the forces of darkness once again. But that is another story.

The End



Sir Denith - The Warrior Lord

ADDENDA: LEGEND OF SHADOWS

From the Books of the Drifters, and the Tales of the Whisperers

Introduction

In an attempt to bring understanding to the people of the Commonlands, many writings went forth from the Drifters to explain the truths and nature of the forces of darkness that had overrun their lands and plunged them into the colorless world they inhabited.

It was only when the common man grew in his understanding of the truths and realities that had been beyond his grasp before, that the sight of the colors would begin to return to him. Even so, though the influences of the emissaries of Shadow were eventually driven far back into the Wastelands by Denith, there were some for whom color never returned. And in the days when the powers of Shadow returned, and these writings disappeared, the colors were lost to the common man once again.

But some writings were preserved, and parts of them are recounted here for the benefit of the reader.

Creatures of Shadow

Just as there exist many beings of light who inhabit realms that are seen and unseen, so there are creatures of shadow, some of whom are seen, others of whom are unseen.

Some have encountered Toilers, vile creatures who live off their own blood, and the blood of those they capture. They are the most visible, and their stench the most discernible, of all the creatures of shadow. And yet for all their vileness, they are largely dumb creatures with little capability of control over themselves. Their imaginations are largely given over to darker thoughts and influences that control them.

And yet it is those same dark imaginations that make these creatures sharp in the ways of darkness, and tools in the hands of the unseen ones that rule over them from the Shadowed Realm.

It is these unseen ones who can manifest themselves in many ways. From the time their presence entered the Commonlands and sought to rule over the children of man, they have shown themselves in many forms. They entered the Toilers to become creatures of terror, or into men whose minds were similarly weak to use them as creatures of guile.

So the Shadowed Ones first entered the world of the children of man, and chief among them was the Evil One, whose dark sayings began to be spread, until slowly their influence and presence took from man his perception of color. And so the knowledge and sight of the other world was lost to the common man, and he was left in a world ruled by the creatures of shadow, and the ways of their netherworld.

As man accepted the influences of the Shadowed Ones, his eyes could no longer perceive that those who ruled over him were being controlled by these creatures of shadow; their colorless faces revealing

the world they now belonged to. The common man continued his blind existence, not aware that his world and his life had been stolen from the magical realm of the other world, the world that from the beginning had given man life and color and a world filled with beauty.

The Dark Forces

The Shadowed Ones grew in their influence, strength, and presence, and commanded more and more of the children of man. Many continued living their simple lives as they once had, only now in shadow. The imaginations of others drew them deeper into the ways of shadow, and these were set to become Watchers over the simple, to protect them from those who would seek to turn the heart of man back to the things he had lost.

These dark forces, led by shadows they could not see and powers they could not perceive, served the purpose of the Evil One well, who sought to win the people of the Commonlands to himself. In time, many Watchers came together and chose leaders among themselves, and so they established their hold over the lands and regions of the common man.

The Enchanted Woods

It was then that the dark forces first fell into battle against the people of the Enchanted Woods, who would not submit to their rule or their dictated ways. The magic of the woods, and the presence of the other world, protected the people of the Woods for many years, but in time they were driven out, becoming Drifters throughout the Commonlands. Their place of enchantment was turned into a place of darkness, so that it became a favored and hallowed place for the Toilers and their deeds and creatures of darkness.

The Drifters nevertheless kept their heritage and independence in all the places they traveled to, and refused to submit to the ways and rule of shadow that the common man had embraced. And so they remained hunted and maligned by those who served the shadows, and by those who did not know they served the shadows.

Thus the Commonlands became lands of shadow, where the Shadowed Ones lived and walked among the children of man freely—even as the children of the other world once walked freely among the people of the Enchanted Woods. As the teachings of the children of the other world had once enlightened the people of the Woods, so now the teachings of the Shadowed Ones and the rule of their Watchers engendered a spell of shadow and ignorance over the Commonlands, until the other world was forgotten, and its colors were seen and known no more.

A World Lost

In the blindness that beset the children of men when the Age of Shadow was born, the presence of the beings and creatures of light who watched over them was forgotten, for the colors of the realm of light could no longer be seen. The tales of their existence became first legend, and then myth. Each new generation would forget more, and believe less.

Only the children of the Drifters remembered the world that had been, the truth that was, the light that had been driven from their world by those whose hearts were darkened. Some drew closer to this light, that in its presence they might learn to preserve it from generation to generation. Others drew closer to each other, that they might ward off the attacks of those who despised them.

But those who drew closest to the realm of light

LEGEND OF SHADOWS

could still hear its Whispers drifting across the veil that kept it a world apart. And those whose eyes had grown the most dim to the world around them saw the other world all the more clearly.

And to them were given the words, were told the tales, were revealed the secrets of things to come—of the time when a great light will return to the people, and the power of darkness will be shaken; when the heralds of battle will call men to one side or the other; when the armies of children clad in garments of light will rise up against those who had chosen to keep darkness within their hearts; when the beings of light will come to their aid, and drive away the creatures of shadow; when the Whisperers shall step forth from the veil that had hid them, and walk again amongst the children of men whose hearts continued to believe; when those whose hearts cling foolishly to shadow will be banished to the dark fate they have chosen for themselves. In the power of that light, a new Age shall be conceived, and through the travail of battle that will follow, the world shall be prepared for it, and in the victory that is promised, the Age of the Whisperers shall be born, and the light and its colors shall break as dawn over the land, and the other world shall be known once again.

THE COMMONLANDS

