

Kings, Queens, Heroes, & Fools

(The Wardstone Trilogy Book Two)

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Enjoy, M.R. Mathias

** Due to my lack of formatting skills I could not get the map to show up in the eBook versions.

The **Map of the Mainland Kingdoms** can be found here: <http://www.mrmathias.com/>

Chapter One

Lord Alvin Gregory opened his eyes sometime in early winter. They'd been closed since summer began. The unfamiliar room was dark, but warm and earthy, tinged with the smell of fire smoke and roasted lamb. He tried to rise, but his body would not allow it. With the pain came the memory of the wounds he'd taken. *From what?* He shouldn't be alive, he knew, but he could tell by the intensity of the pain he was in, that he was. He lay there for a long while before the hazy memory of a woman, elegant and beautiful, carried him back into sleep.

The next time he opened his eyes he found a woman sitting next to him. She wasn't the woman he had been dreaming of, but she was no less beautiful. It seemed that his waking had startled her, but a warm smile crept across her face soon enough and she went back to cleansing his skin with the damp cloth in her hand.

She had long, straight jet black hair, and dark motherly eyes. The edges of which were just starting to show the lines of age. She was no noblewoman, her clothes were made from doeskin and plainly cut. He wasn't back in his Westland stronghold at Lakebottom, he knew. He couldn't sort through the fog in his brain to say where exactly he was though. It was a safe place, he sensed, but it was a long way from home.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

He tried to reply to the question, but his throat was thick with mucus and would not work for him.

"It's all right, Lion Lord," she said. "I'll fetch some broth and my mate."

Lord Gregory suffered the pain of turning his head so that he could watch her go and felt the chill of the icy-cold air that blew in when she opened and closed the door behind her.

Lion Lord, she had called him. It stirred memories from the mix of his mind, but nothing complete enough to comprehend. He closed his eyes again and drifted.

"He can remember nothing," the woman said sometime later.

Lord Gregory opened his eyes to find her and two men standing in the room.

"Ah, he's waking again," the older of the two men said. He was seventy years old if he was a day.

His long hair was streaked with silver and gray and the skin on his clean-shaven face was sun-darkened and wrinkled. The old man shrugged off a thickly furred cloak that had been made from several different animal skins. Grayish brown, black, and snow-white long-haired goat skins had been hem-hawed together. It looked warm though. Lord Gregory grew curious when the old man winced his way down to take a seat at the edge of the bed.

"Lord Gregory," the old man said. "Lion of the West. Lion Lord. Do these names mean anything to you?"

"I know who I am," Lord Gregory croaked. His own voice sounded unfamiliar to his ears. It was weak and hoarse and it reminded him of his injuries.

"Good, good," the old man said with a pat on Lord Gregory's arm. "Do you know where you are?"

Lord Gregory racked his cloudy brain and found the knowledge, but the name of the place escaped him. Then he wondered if it even had a name. He managed to get out two words: "Clan village," but even though he knew that was correct, he knew it was incomplete.

“Yes, yes, this is the village of the Skyler Clan. I am Halden Skyler, the Eldest, and this is my second son Harrap and his mate Karna. They have kept you while you were resting. Their son, my grandson, Hyden was amongst your group when the dark creature attacked. Do you remember?”

Some of it came back to him. A fleeting feeling of hope bloomed. “Mikahl?” he croaked.

“Aye,” Harrap joined the conversation. He was standing at the foot of the bed. “And an elf.” The word ‘elf’ was spoken with more than a little contempt.

“A tattooed Seawardsman was with you as well,” the old man added from beside him. “You killed a Seawardsman at the festival. Do you remember that?”

Summer’s Day, a great fight with another brawler; gamblers, wagering, thousands of people cheering them on, blood and knuckles and pain—these were the images that came to his mind.

“I lost, I think.” Lord Gregory tried to grin.

“Aye,” the old man looked to his son at the foot of the bed. His grin was full of satisfaction. “This lion will roar again. He just needs a little more time to lick his wounds.”

“He’s not heard of the Dragon Queen and the fall of Westland yet. And...”

A raised hand from the Eldest cut Harrap short. Harrap shook his head in frustration.

“Lord Gregory’s mind’s not ready for all that yet, son. He’s been unconscious for more than a season. Filling his head with too much at once might hinder his recovery.” The Eldest turned to his son’s mate. “You’ve done well, Karna. Could you ask Tylen to come for a while each day to help our Westlander get his body used to moving around again.”

She nodded that she would and hurried out the door. The old man’s gaze settled back on Lord Gregory. Their eyes met, and the old man’s look was serious, yet reassuring. “It will be no small task to get you walking again. We will see if you truly have the heart of a lion beating in that chest of yours.”

“That his heart still beats at all, after being dropped from the sky by that evil beast, shows that he has a lion’s heart,” Harrap said.

It didn't escape Lord Gregory's notice that Harrap had spoken of him, but not to him. Maybe his eyes had been closed, or maybe he'd been lying there so long that he didn't seem like a person anymore to Harrap. Before he could think much more about it he slipped back into a deep and heavy slumber.

The young man named Tylen came later that day. He and Lord Gregory spoke for a while of the legendary brawl from a few years earlier, when Lord Gregory beat a fighter called the Valleyan Stallion. He won his place on the Summer's Day Spire that year. The great needle-like projection of polished black stone rose up out of the sacred Leif Greyn Valley and the names of each year's winners were carved into its base. No one knew who built the Spire or why, but for as long as any man could remember, on the first day of summer each year, men from all across the realm gathered there to trade and compete in the spirit of fellowship and peace. The winners of events such as archery, brawling, hammer throw and various foot and horse races won a bit of immortality and heavy prize-purses of gold and silver, but it wasn't the honor of having his name engraved into the Spire twice that drove the Lion Lord to battle again last year. He'd been there for far more important reasons.

King Balton, the king of Westland, had been poisoned just before the festival. From his death bed he had ordered Lord Gregory to attend. The Lion Lord had done so, and was poisoned himself, beaten half to death, and left to watch helplessly while most of his men were killed by the Blacksword soldiers of Highwander. The whole festival had turned into a battlefield. It was all too much to think about.

Tylen eventually took the covers off of the Lion Lord's legs and manually worked his ankles and knee joints as his grandfather had instructed him to do. It was agonizing for the Westlander but, with clenched teeth and many curses, they got through it. When the young man was done he fetched the Lion Lord a strong drink of some horrible tasting liquid and helped him get it down.

That night, Lord Gregory dreamed of the regal lady again. When he woke, her identity and the vision of her most beautiful face were fresh in his mind's eye. She was his wife, the Lady Trella. She was his best friend, his lover, and he found that he missed her dearly.

Later in the day, just before Tylen started his exercises, Lord Gregory asked for the Eldest. He was ready to hear what the old man was keeping from him. Somehow he knew it involved his wife. In his dream she had been fleeing something and he couldn't come to her aid. As he waited for Halden Skyler, he prayed to the gods that his wife was safe. He swore to get his legs working again so that he might find a way home to her.

"There's much to tell," the old man said, as he took a padded stool and sat on it near the hearth. "Are you sure you're ready to hear it all?"

"Sooner or later I'll hear it, sir," Lord Gregory said. "I'd prefer to hear all of it now."

"Well then, as you know, us clansman are not kingdom men. We only ventured down from the mountains a few times a year. Two of my sons, Harrap and Condlin, made one such journey in the fall. They went to the city of High Crossing to purchase animals and other provisions like they do every year before winter sets in. Only this year the town was nearly empty."

This grabbed Lord Gregory's attention.

"Harrap and Condlin continued south to the city of Castlemont. I guess I should say where the city of Castlemont used to be." The old man leaned forward on his stool, took up a poker and began prodding the fire back to life.

"Used to be?" Lord Gregory asked.

"What few folk they came across told them that the city was sacked by your new king and then was destroyed by his wizard. The ones that didn't hide well enough were rounded up and herded to that slaver city by the sea."

"O'Dakahn," Lord Gregory said. "But...but that's impossible."

"Oh there's much more to tell," the Eldest said. "While your Westland king was herding the people of Wildermont to the south, and his army was making passage through the Wilder Mountains to attack the Red City, a dragon rider led an army out of the swamps and took Westland for herself."

“But—”

The Eldest cut Lord Gregory’s protest off with a wave of his hand and a healthy harrumph. “Walking lizards from the marshes, the zard, Harrap called them. Huge man-like beasts that aren’t true giants, but wild half-breeds from beyond the Giant Mountains hold Westland under the Dragon Queen’s rule. They destroyed the bridge at Castlemont. That alone amazes me. I’ve seen that bridge with my own eyes and it would take powerful forces to tear it down. I wouldn’t believe these things had my own two sons not told me of them. They are good fathers, and good men. They have no reason to lie.”

Lord Gregory had crossed the magnificent bridge that led from Wildermont over the Leif Greyn River into Westland at least half a hundred times in his day. A spectacle of archways wide enough for five, maybe six, wagons to cross abreast, it was the only land passage from the eastern kingdoms into Westland. If this Dragon Queen really existed, then she wasn’t planning on giving Westland up anytime soon. The fact that she had destroyed the only land access into Westland showed that she meant to isolate and defend the territory. He could only hope that his lady wife was alive and well. Surely his friend Lord Ellrich, or another of his peers, had seen to her safety.

“What of your kinsman Hyden, and my countryman Mikahl?” Lord Gregory asked. Inside him the desire to get his legs working again so that he could go see if these things were true, was growing from a spark into a fire.

Mikahl was the true king of Westland, though the boy didn’t know it yet. *I may have told him*, Lord Gregory said to himself, but he wasn’t sure. Mikahl had been raised a bastard, but King Balton brought him up well. Mikahl was Lord Gregory’s squire in his adolescent years, and the king’s squire up until King Balton was murdered. Mikahl was smart, well trained, and capable. Lord Gregory hoped he was still alive, and still had possession of his father’s sword, Ironspike.

“Borg, the Southern Guardian, a true and noble giant, came out of the deep mountains in the early fall,” the eldest said. The reverence he held for the giant was clear. “He brought with him three horses

and a tale as wild as the news of the Dragon Queen. Hyden, Mikahl, and the elf, met with King Aldar. What transpired at the meeting, I do not know.” Halden stirred the fire again and adjusted his old body on the stool. “The Seawardsman who was with them was killed in the Giant Mountains by the same beast that got you. Borg spoke of Mikahl’s bravery in the battle, and for Borg to make such compliments is no light matter. King Aldar sent them through the Evermore Forest to the kingdom of Highwander. Borg was very vague about why, but my grandson Hyden and his hawkling, and that... that *elf* went with him. They rode on the backs of King Aldar’s great wolves no less. Can you imagine crossing through the Evermore Forest on the back of a great wolf?”

Lord Gregory couldn’t even imagine Mikahl fighting the hellcat, much less anything else. He knew that King Balton had sent Mikahl to the Giant King. It was the only place he knew that Prince Glendar and his wizard Pael might not hunt them down. It was why Lord Gregory had been with them in the mountains in the first place. He’d sworn to help Mikahl get to the Giant King. He was relieved to know that he would not live on as an oath-breaker; almost as much as he was relieved to know that Mikahl was probably alive. He wondered why King Aldar had sent them to Highwander. The Witch Queen’s Blacksword warriors were the ones who started the bloodshed at the Summer’s Day Festival. At least that’s the way Lord Gregory remembered it.

He also remembered thinking that he was dead after sending his page Wyndall to take a message to Lady Trella. If Wyndall made it, Lady Trella would have been warned of the coming trouble. Hopefully big Lord Ellrich or Wyndall or someone else had helped her to survive. In a rush of angry passion, Lord Gregory tried to rise up from the bed only to end up howling as his soft, un-worked muscles gave fiery protest.

At once, the old clansman was at the door yelling for young Tylene. The boy came and went, then returned with another cup of the horrible concoction they had been feeding him. The Eldest helped him drink it down and waited patiently until Lord Gregory slipped back into his deep dreaming slumber.

Lord Gregory dreamt a memory of the big half-breed beasts he'd fought in Coldfrost. He, King Balton, and Lord Brach had led the men bravely against the huge brutal creatures. Then King Balton used the power of his sword, Ironspike, to create a magical boundary that the creatures couldn't pass. Borg had spoken for King Aldar there in that frigid bloody place. The true giants wanted no part of the breed beasts, and in fact were pleased with the way King Balton had imprisoned them on the glacial island.

In his dream, the true giant, Borg, fought alongside him, young Glendar, and King Balton against the creatures. They battled to free the Lady Trella from a prison of ice where huge hairy half-men were trying to tear apart her body.

Lord Gregory woke in a cold sweat. His legs ached from the movements Tylen had put them through, but he wanted more of it. From that day forward his whole existence was about getting his legs back under him. It took half a month for him to be able to sit up on his own. He had Karna and Tylen place his food across the room. He crawled, slithered, crumpled and cried, but he didn't give up, even though he went hungry many a mealtime. In the evenings, he worked his legs while lying in the bed, bringing his knees up as close to his chin as he could, one after the other, over and over again. He used a rock the size of his fist for a weight to exercise his arms, but gradually worked up to a head-sized chunk of granite. His arms regained muscle much faster than his legs, but he didn't get discouraged.

He talked to Harrap and Condlin about their journey into the ruined cities of Wildermont for many hours. He questioned them in great detail and learned that the half-breed giants had been released from Coldfrost and had helped tear down the great bridge between Westland and Wildermont before taking over rule of the Westland trade city called Locar. They were building great wooden watchtowers all along the Westland bank of the Leif Greyn River when the two clansmen had been in Castlemont. Some said King Jarrek had fled his kingdom. Others said that he had died by the hand of the wizard Pael.

As hard as he tried, Lord Gregory couldn't learn much more than that from the two men. They weren't kingdom men. They'd been born and raised and lived here in the mountains their whole life.

Kingdom men seldom dared to venture here, and the things a kingdom man might notice about a place were lost to them.

Harrap helped his nephew Tylen support Lord Gregory the first few times he tried to stand and walk. It was hard and painful and even comical at times, but finally, near midwinter, Lord Gregory took some steps on his own.

“This lion might not yet be able to roar,” he told them. “But at least I can still growl.”

He began using a cane that the Elder had carved for him out of a witch-wood bough. The handle was the head of a snarling lion and the base a wide lion’s paw. It was crude work, but heartfelt. Lord Gregory cherished it dearly.

By the time spring was upon them, Lord Gregory was hobbling along fairly well. When he left his room the first time, he found that he had been living underground all winter. The clan folk all lived in stone rooms built right into the sloping walls of their little valley. Narrow passages that reminded Lord Gregory of mine tunnels led from the open valley into the homes. Giants and dwarves, Halden told him, had supposedly built the burrows long centuries ago.

The clansmen didn’t own or ride horses, but on several occasions Lord Gregory rode on the dead Seawardsman’s mount. It wasn’t long after that he was feeling well enough to leave the Skyler Clan and their hospitality behind him. The desire to find his wife was gnawing at him like a starving dog at a bone.

He would have rather taken Mikahl’s proud and well trained horse, Windfoot, but he left the steed because Borg had promised Mikahl that it would be there when he came for it.

He waited until it was warm enough to get out of the mountains without freezing, and then, after a long respectful goodbye, he left the Skyler Clan behind. He pointed the horse south toward Wildermont, and with all the hope in the world, he set off to find his wife.

Chapter Two

Mikahl reared back with his blade as he slipped to the side of the sword the dark haired man before him had just thrust out. To the onlookers, Mikahl looked like a young lion with his intense expression and his thick golden mane flying about. The man he was fighting, Brady Culvert, growled in frustration through gnashed teeth because he had to spin to get clear of Mikahl's gleaming, arcing swing. He managed it, but barely. He lost his balance in the process and almost fell. Mikahl rode the momentum of his slash all the way around, but this time, instead of resuming his guard, he feigned a chest-high slice. As soon as the other man committed to his unbalanced defensive guard, Mikahl deftly lowered his blade to thigh level, and struck with force.

Mikahl's dulled steel thumped wickedly into Brady Culvert's leather thigh pad. The small group of swordsmen gathered in the training yard grimaced with sympathy then called out praises and jests alike. Brady couldn't hear them over his own cursing. Mikahl had horse-knotted his leg and it hurt like hell. Brady wasn't angry though. He had just won a small fortune in wagers by lasting over five minutes sparring against High King Mikahl. It was a record. No one in all of Highwander had managed to make it even three minutes against the treacherous young king of the realm.

"If he'd been using Ironspike, Brady, you'd be legless," King Jarrek, the displaced king of Wildermont, commented as a squire began unbuckling Brady's leather armor from the back. Another squire took the dulled sword from the combatant's hand.

“If he had Ironspike in his hands, I would have been fighting with him, not against him, Highness.” Brady smiled back at King Jarrek. After settling their debts, the men broke up and went back to their practice drills. The victor smiled at his congratulations, then went over to a small table where an old retired warrior was keeping time with minute glasses.

King Mikahl hadn't been wearing armor at all—only a pair of calfskin britches, and a green silk shirt trimmed in gold. Those were the colors of his dead father's Westland banner, and after several long minutes of dodging and deflecting Brady Culvert's blade, he hadn't even darkened them with sweat. His hair had gone wild though, and he made a futile attempt to smooth it back into some sense of order before making his announcement.

“Seven full minutes and almost half a glass more,” King Mikahl called out with a nod of respect. “The cream of the crop, without a doubt.”

Brady Culvert was twenty-two years old, three years older than High King Mikahl. Brady had been one of King Jarrek's feared and revered Redwolf guards and had worn his crimson enameled plate mail proudly. Their kingdom had been decimated last summer by the Westland wizard Pael. Brady, acting on orders from his King, rode all the way across the continent warning the other kingdoms of the approaching doom. He'd been in the Red City of Dreen warning the Valleyans when that battle started. He escaped the evil wizard's hordes only to be captured later by a group of Queen Rachel's Seaward soldiers. Somehow he'd won free of them and made it all the way to Xwarda, where Pael and his undead army were already attacking.

Most of the people of Wildermont, including Brady's family, had been sold into slavery, and all winter long, King Jarrek had been here in Xwarda training a group of handpicked men to go into Dakahn to free them. High King Mikahl, being a great swordsman, trained with them rigorously. In fact, he trained easily twice as hard as any man in the group. He had a temper, and in order to keep it under control, he intentionally exhausted himself at least once a day.

“...not good enough to stay alive if we faced each other in actual combat,” Brady was saying in response to Mikahl’s comment.

“Aye,” the High King grinned proudly, but without cockiness. “In actual combat, Sir Culvert, you’d have never had the chance to draw your sword.”

For the most part formalities and titles were forbidden on the Royal Training Yard. Unlike the yards where Queen Willa’s Blacksword soldiers trained, where sergeants and captains put regiments of men through long brutal repetitions, often accompanied by much yelling and screaming, here, men were just men. Crowns and thrones and holdings meant nothing. It was one of the few places a man might jest with his king without fear of reproach. The use of the word ‘Sir’ by King Mikahl when speaking to Brady displayed volumes of respect and Brady Culvert beamed for it. So much so that he’d missed the humor in the High King’s ridiculous boast. King Jarrek didn’t miss the jab though, and he laughed heartily.

“That one will do,” Mikahl said after Brady had gone. “I want him to go with Hyden Hawk, if you’d spare him. My friend needs a sword he can trust on this wild expedition he is planning.”

“I thought you’d keep him for yourself Mik,” King Jarrek said a little disappointedly.

“I would if there were someone as capable with the blade going along with Hyden,” replied Mikahl. “Why is it that you refuse to take him with your group? He’s your countryman, and you’ve known him his whole life, or so he says.”

“It’s true. I was drinking with his father when he was being born, but his father was killed right before his eyes, by Westlanders, and his mother, sisters, and cousins may be the very slaves we come across in O’Dakahn. Just like another great swordsman I know, his emotions are too highly strung. Besides that, if one of the slaves recognizes him, then it could jeopardize the others. The men I hand-picked are all from Highwander. They have no emotional involvement in what we’re going to do. I think it’s better that way.”

It pained Mikahl deeply to hear of the horrible deeds that his Westland countrymen had done under the leadership of his stepbrother King Glendar and Pael. Mikahl sometimes wondered how Jarrek kept from hating him for being a true Westlander.

“It makes good sense then, to send him with Hyden Hawk, but what if one of the slaves recognizes you?” Mikahl asked.

“I had no beard when I sat my throne at Castlemont, and no one in all the lands, save for a few here in Xwarda, have ever seen me dressed as anything less than a king. It will be easy for me to go unnoticed, I assure you.”

“Not if you keep speaking like a king. Commoners don’t use words like you do. Maybe you should spend some time out in the markets, or at the Squalor, where they speak with less pomp and formality.” Mikahl laughed at the idea of it. King Jarrek was naturally as regal as a man could be.

“I may just do that,” said Jarrek as they started toward the bath-house. His expression showed that he was seriously contemplating Mikahl’s suggestion and it made Mikahl laugh even harder. When the mirth died away, Mikahl changed the subject.

“Can you believe that Queen Willa actually wants me to propose to this Princess Rosa?” The High King’s voice was incredulous. “I don’t even know her.”

“It might be necessary to secure Queen Rachel’s full support,” explained Jarrek. “The Princess is as pretty a girl as there ever was. Have you seen her?”

“No, but it’s not fair!” He felt like a little boy whose mother was calling him to come inside early instead of letting him stay out in the cobbles to play with his friends. “Her mother tried to attack Xwarda after sacking two Highwander cities. I don’t understand how Queen Willa could even think of us making such an alliance.”

It was Jarrek’s turn to laugh. After a moment he grew serious and stopped Mikahl to look into his eyes. “Seaward has fighting men, Mikahl. The few thousand men Queen Rachel sent to help King

Broderick attack here was a token offer at best. You have to remember that Glendar, or Pael, or whoever was behind the attack at Summer's Day, set all of this into motion. They flew Willa's Blacksword banner when they did it. Rachel had to do something, and thankfully she did as little as possible." He put his arm around Mikahl's shoulder in a fatherly manner. "Remember, it's a proposal, not a marriage. Later, after Queen Rachel has bowed to you publicly, then you can politely change your mind, but I doubt you'll do that. You'll not find a more beautiful and polite girl in all the realm."

"If and when I marry, I want it to be for love," Mikahl said naively. "Anything less just doesn't seem to be, what's the word? Honorable?"

"Being a good king isn't a very honorable business sometimes," said King Jarrek. "Every single time we do something good for somebody, someone else is upset about it. That is why honorable men don't usually want to be king."

"Aye," Mikahl agreed with a huff of frustration. "I should've gone a few more rounds out in the yards," he mumbled to himself as King Jarrek was pulled away by a question from one of his men.

Queen Willa was having a welcome feast for Princess Rosa later in the day. It hadn't even started yet, but already Mikahl was getting aggravated by the mess. The bath was hot and relaxing and went far toward easing his tension. It was peaceful in these particular bathhouses, which were for the use of those training in the Royal Weapons Yard. If Mikahl tried to bathe anywhere else he'd be swamped with bowing servants, over eager attendants, and all the other amenities of his position that made his blood boil. What he'd give to be able to eat anonymously with the squires and pages this night. The only formalities he'd find there were belching contests, dice, and the laces on a willing servant girl's girdle.

A sharp repetitive thumping sound caught his attention and he turned in the wooden tub to see what it was. A wide wingspan of dark brown feathers swirled the steam and the tiny, yet widening yellow ring of a hawkling's focusing eye found him. The bird gave a weak apologetic caw then proceeded to flap its way out of the room, dragging Mikahl's robe with it.

“Talon, no!” Mikahl screamed as he looked around and saw that there was nothing at all to cover himself with. “Blasted Hyden!” he swore. As angry as he was becoming, he couldn’t hold back the smile that stretched across his face. He and Hyden took great pride in the pranks they pulled on each other, and this was a good one. Princess Rosa was here at the castle, and by the time the feast gathered this evening, the gossipers and rumor mongers would have a lot to talk about. Mikahl wasn’t about to be meek about it. He would strut across the practice yard naked if he had to. His fierce pride wouldn’t allow any less.

“You just wait Hyden. I’ll get—” Mikahl was yelling as he burst out of the door that opened into the corner of the training yard. His voice died quickly away. His heart leapt into his throat when he saw the girl who was waiting there with Hyden. She was suddenly wide-eyed and having to stifle her giggles. Talon leapt from Hyden’s wrist and flew to perch on a piece of training equipment a fair distance away and began preening himself innocently.

The well-bloomed young girl with Hyden was beautiful beyond reason, with sparkling blue eyes, full pouty lips, and long wavy brown hair that flowed down over her shoulders. Her day dress was colored the very same shade of green as the Westland banner, and it hugged her curvaceous figure well. Her skin was golden, but mottled roses had suddenly appeared on her cheeks.

“Oh, sorry, Mik,” Hyden shrugged with an ear-to-ear grin on his face. His long black hair was pulled into a tight ponytail, and gave his face a hawkish look that eerily resembled Talon’s. “They told me you were taking a hot bath, not a cold one.”

Princess Rosa’s mouth had formed a perfect ‘O’. She whirled and whacked Hyden across the chest. Hyden could barely contain himself. He was about to explode with laughter.

“Yew seed that he was feeding some earphanded beer cubs!” she shrieked in a heavily accented voice as she stalked off. A pair of equally flustered and giggling attendants, and a slightly older woman

who was still openly eyeing Mikahl's naked body, appeared from the background to receive the girl and usher her off.

Hyden lost all control of his mirth and was laughing so hard that he actually fell to a knee and held his stomach. As the training yard door slammed shut behind the Princess of Seaward and her entourage, applause erupted from some of the braver men; there were whistles and jeers as well.

Chapter Three

Hyden Skyler spent the winter up in Dahg Mahn's tower learning to read and write. It was Hyden's tower now, even though everyone still referred to it as Dahg Mahn's. The great wizard had disappeared ages ago, but had left a trial, a series of tests that one must pass to win entry into his sacred Xwardian abode. Hundreds of magi had tried to enter, but only Hyden Hawk Skyler had done so.

Targon, the old High Wizard of Xwarda, had died with the elf Vaegon in a mighty battle against a Choska demon on the outer wall, as Pael's undead hordes swarmed into the city. Queen Willa had named two of his underlings to take his place. The new High Wizards assigned apprentices to help Hyden in his endeavors. Hyden's desire to overcome his ignorance drove him, and now he was reading well, if a little haltingly at times. His writing skills were still lacking, however. He could scratch and scribble enough to get by, but nothing more. His favorite apprentice, a skinny blond-headed orphan boy of fourteen summers named Phenilous, had given him the most help. He and Phen had become fast friends. Hyden was nearing twenty summers himself, but was still a boy at heart. He had a natural gift for magic and he could communicate with animals through his familial link with his hawkling, Talon. Phen's grammatical skills were superb, but his magical skills were lacking in the sense that they were stiff and studied, and came not from the heart, but from repetition and memory. Hyden Hawk's magic was pure—not learned, but felt. Over the winter, the two of them garnered a great deal from each other and had serious fun in the process.

Hyden was planning a grand quest. Since it was Phen who had done the bulk of research into the great blue dragon, Cobalt, and the treasure he had stolen from the pirate Barnacle Bones, Phen was trying to get Hyden, and the two High Wizards to let him go on the adventure. Hyden didn't mind at all. In fact he liked the idea of Phen going, but there would be danger, and the boy was only an apprentice. Hyden wouldn't dare disrespect Queen Willa's wizards by assuming anything. Only if they agreed, would he add Phen to his growing roster of campaigners.

"What did they say?" Hyden asked the boy as he was getting dressed for the evening's feast. Phen was a lowly apprentice and hadn't been invited to the event, but it didn't bother him. He didn't really want to have to use manners and act serious all evening long.

Phen smirked in approval as he entered the room. Hyden had sensed him there before he had seen him. It was a simple awareness spell they had been working on, and Hyden had used it perfectly.

"Master Amill seems to think I could learn a lot on such an excursion," Phen said. "Master Sholt, on the other hand, thinks that it will be too dangerous, and that I'll just be underfoot."

"When I was your age, my father had me harvesting hawkling eggs on cliffs higher than this tower," Hyden said, a little miffed at the reasoning. "I'll try and talk some sense into them this evening, Phen. Master Sholt is coming to the feast, is he not?"

"I believe so." Phen seemed pleased that Hyden was going to speak for him. He had been worried that Hyden had only been pacifying him with his talk of taking him along on the quest for Barnacle Bones's stolen booty. "We don't need treasure, though, Hyden. Queen Willa's got all the gold in Highwander already."

Hyden laughed. "You can do better than that, Phen."

"Why won't you tell me what it is that we're really after?" the boy asked with an ear to ear grin.

"I'll tell you only this..." Hyden turned from the reflecting glass and looked seriously at the boy. Phen stifled a laugh. Hyden's robe was bunched all wrong on one side.

“What is it?” Hyden turned back to the reflecting glass.

“Here,” Phen came over and straightened the fancy silver trimmed white robe. “Now what were you going to tell me?”

Hyden loved drawing stuff out with the boy. Phen’s impatience was entertaining, but he was in a hurry, so he told him what he wanted to know—at least part of it. “When the dragon, Claret, and I finished sealing the demon back into the Nethers, she told me...”

“I know, I know this part,” said Phen as if the balance of the world’s fate hung in what came next. “She told you about Cobalt the blue drake, and the pirate ship, but what is it we are really after? What’s in that booty that you want so badly, Hyden?”

Hyden laughed aloud at that. Phen was as sharp as a whip’s crack. It was one of the reasons he liked the boy so much. “Claret told me that among the treasures the dragon stole was a silver skull with eyes of jade, but if you tell a soul that that’s what we’re after, I’ll skin you and hang you from a banner pole.”

“The Silver Skull of Zorellin, but...”

“But nothing! You keep your mouth shut about it or I’ll have Talon pluck your eyes out.”

Just then Talon flew from his perch near the open window and landed on Phen’s outstretched arm. The hawkling was as tall as Phen’s arm was long, and he had taken a liking to the boy.

“Traitor,” Hyden said to his *familiar*. “I guess I have no choice but to convince your masters to let you come with me now that I’ve spilled the stew.”

“Spilled the stew?” Phen giggled. “You really are a bumpkin, Hyden. King Mikahl was right. I can’t believe you grew up in a place where people don’t ride horses and live inside dirt hills.”

“In the Giant Mountains, even in the spring and fall, you’d be glad to be inside a hill. And besides, the walls are made of stone, not dirt.” Hyden frowned into the mirror, not liking what he saw at all. “Blast this! It just doesn’t suit me.” He pulled the fancy wizard’s robe over his head, and then began

stripping off the awful itchy woolen leggings that went with it. “Grab my kid-skin pants from the closet—the new black ones—and my old horsehide boots for me, would you Phen?”

“Sure.” Phen went into the other room and found the items. As he returned with them he asked, “Is it true, what they say you did to the High King and the Seaward Princess this afternoon?”

“I suppose that depends on what they say I did,” Hyden chuckled from behind the changing screen. “But if they say I lied to the pretty girl with promises of bear cubs, but showed her the High King’s sword instead, then yes, it’s true.”

Phen laughed deeply at that. “They’ll have you hanged for insolence or treason,” the boy managed between giggles.

“Nah, nah! High King Mikahl was my friend back when he was just Mik the Squire.” Hyden stepped from behind the blind in a pressed white shirt with ballooned sleeves that was tucked neatly into his leather pants. Unlike what the current fashion trends dictated, he wore the legs of his snug fitting pants over his boots instead of inside them. “Besides,” he continued. “I’m not from the kingdoms of men. I’m a human from the kingdom of giants. I am a free man here, and if I did have a king it would have to be King Aldar.”

“The cloak,” Phen offered his fashion advice. “Wear the black one with the silver flames along its edges.”

“That was Dahg Mahn’s cloak,” said Hyden. The idea of wearing it stopped him completely. For a long moment he just stood there contemplating. He rarely messed with the long missing wizard’s personal things. It just didn’t seem right. Yet to wear that cloak to this feast seemed to be the perfect thing to do. “All right then,” he nodded.

Phen was already up and bringing him the ancient garment. Hyden put the cloak over his shoulders, pinned it with a silver broach shaped like a diving hawk, then checked himself in the glass again.

He had mussed up his long black hair when he'd pulled the robes off. He started to brush it, but changed his mind and instead tied it back behind his head with a silver wire. He gave the mirror another look and decided that there was only one thing missing. He reached into his shirt and pulled forth the silver medallion that he always wore around his neck. The brilliant tear-shaped jewel mounted in it sparkled at his collar. Finally, Hyden decided, he was ready.

Talon cawed out his approval of the look.

Phen nodded as well. "Not so bad, for a bumpkin, I mean."

"Keep an eye on that boy, Talon," Hyden said to his hawkling with a grin. "He's as sharp as a iron orb."

As soon as the door closed behind Hyden, Phen sat Talon back on his stand and started rummaging through the piles of books at the study table. He would know everything he could about the Silver Skull of Zorellin by the end of the night. Little did he know, that was exactly what Hyden Hawk intended.

Later, at the gathering, Hyden gawked openly at the size of the arms on Princess Rosa's two guardsmen. They were huge. Each bicep was as big as Hyden's head. Both men wore spiked and studded boiled leather armor vests that weren't just for show. Each of them carried long, well used swords at their hips too. Studded gauntlets and knee-high hard leather boots finished the uniform, save for their long blue cloaks with the orange setting sun of Seaward emblazoned on the back. As were most of the men of Seaward, these two were baldheaded, and covered with tattoos—one giant tattoo actually.

One of the guards had what looked like a bird's beak that started between his eyes and bent backwards over his head. Hyden had seen the same style on a lot of Seawardsmen. Feathers started where his hairline should have been, and strange yellow eyes were inked in over his ears. The other had a simpler design of lightning streaks jagging back from his temples and forehead. The man reminded Hyden of Loudin the hunter. Loudin's tattoos had been of tiger stripes, and he had been as fierce as any wildcat there ever was.

The Princess was beautiful. Her dress was a rosy color, with crimson and sea-blue trim. It set off her eyes and the jewels on her dainty wire crown. The dress was less shapely than the one she'd worn earlier in the day, but it revealed more of her ample cleavage. A thumb-size sapphire had been cleverly hung around her neck. It rested perfectly at the top of the deep line her breasts made. At her side was an older woman. Hyden thought he heard someone say she was an aunt.

Queen Willa looked regal and beautiful in a powdery blue gown. Her little blue-skinned pixie friend Starkle fluttered around her head like a butterfly, giving her an unearthly, surreal appearance. To further the look, at either side of her was a dwarf. Dugak was on her right, and his wife Andra was on the queen's left. They were dressed in a darker shade of blue that was trimmed in lavender. Though her expression didn't show it, Hyden knew that Queen Willa would have rather been wearing her studded leather girdle over her chain mail. And Dugak would surely have rather been drinking in the cellars, for if you wanted to find him for anything, most of the time that was where you would go. Queen Willa smiled brightly at Hyden when she saw him. He smiled back and made a cringing funny face. She was forced to feign a cough to hide her laugh.

King Jarrek wore the deep black shades of mourning, trimmed in blood red. He was making a statement for the Princess to carry home to her mother. "My kingdom was destroyed," the look said. "My people are now slaves. Will you just sit there and do nothing?" Jarrek's expression was stern behind his dark bangs and beard, and the fierce determination in his eyes added a perfect exclamation point to his attire.

Then came the High King. Hyden had to shake his head in wonder as the court announcer called out his lengthy title. "I give you High King Mikahl Collum, the Uniter come again, the King of Kings, the wielder of Ironspike, and Defender of the Realm..." and so on for a full two minutes. Mikahl looked the part too. Layers of emerald and forest green, all trimmed in gold, were draped over him, and a fur scarf made from what might have actually been a lion's mane gave him the appearance of a young, golden

crowned lion's cub. The emerald-eyed lion's head medallion that King Aldar had hand carved out of dragon bone hung proudly around his neck. He looked the part of a mighty king, in all his splendor, but the look on his face was pinched. Mikahl despised this sort of pomp and ceremony.

Hyden knew without a doubt that with only a few words he could create a scene here for the ages to remember, but he held his tongue for the sake of Queen Willa and King Jarrek. To begin rebuilding in earnest, they needed Seaward's aid badly. Hyden was sure that was the only reason his friend Mikahl was suffering through this farce as well.

When King Mikahl's eyes landed on Princess Rosa, it was hard to say which one of them blushed a brighter shade of crimson. After a moment, both sets of eyes found Hyden. All Hyden could do was shrug and grin. High Wizard Sholt saved him from their glares by handing him a goblet of Valleyan honey wine and engaging him in conversation.

"The only two things Valleyans can do well are raise horses and make wine," the middle-aged man said. He was wearing the high collared, black-trimmed, white robes of his station. The master wizard kept his beard in a neat goatee, but his wild graying hair always seemed to be in disarray. "In fact, it's the only two things they do at all," he continued. "It amazes me that King Broderick is pleading for exoneration for his great mistake, but is too afraid to ask to be forgiven in person."

"Would you want to face King Mikahl and that sword of his?" Hyden asked. He hated politics, but liked Master Sholt. "Or what about Willa the Witch? Would you like to have to face her after sacking two of her cities?"

"Nay, sir, I would not, on either count," agreed Sholt with a forced chuckle.

"You will allow Phenilous to continue tutoring me while I'm on expedition, I hope," suggested Hyden. His words hadn't been framed as a question, more like a subtle order.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that," Sholt started. "I wasn't sure if he was truly needed on such a dangerous venture. I thought that it might have just been kindness on your part that was

indulging his fancy. He tends to be a little highly strung, if you haven't noticed. Confined on a ship, on a long sea voyage, he will become a nuisance, I assure you."

"No," Hyden looked the master wizard directly in the eye as his father had taught him to do. "It is more than indulgence, Master Sholt, I assure you. And no one will be more antsy on that ship than I. I trust Phen, and he helps me with Talon. He is fluent in several languages, including Salazarkian, for which I may need him as a translator when we reach the islands. But most importantly, he is my friend, and he really wants to go."

"I see." Sholt swirled his nearly empty goblet a few times then downed the last of the wine. "What do you plan to do with the items you find on this expedition? I suppose that is the pertinent question. As scholars and educators in the arcane, we would want to study anything of importance. And I'm sure you know that we don't want any dangerous items ending up in the wrong places."

Hyden was certain the high wizard was fishing for information just like Phen had been doing earlier, only with a little more tact. Phen couldn't have told them yet, and wouldn't have told them about the Silver Skull. "I assure you that anything of interest to you, Master Sholt, and your colleague, Master Amill, will be handed over once I've returned," Hyden said directly into the man's eyes. "My interest is only in the adventure of finding the old pirate ship." *And using the Skull of Zorellin to go into the Nethers and get that blasted ring away from the thing that my brother has become. Once I've accomplished that you can have the Silver Skull too, for all I care.*

"Any scrolls, or texts would find their way to me or Master Amill before any other eyes delved into them, I pray," the high wizard said seriously. "Neither you nor Phenilous are skilled enough in the arcane to do more than cause harm with something you don't understand. When it comes to spells, potions, and artifacts, extreme caution and careful study is always the best route to take."

"Of course, Master," Hyden said from behind a forced, but convincing smile.

“Then I will inform Phenilous of his good fortune later this evening.” Master Sholt’s smile wasn’t forced at all. The prospect of acquiring new spells and artifacts excited him and set his mind to wandering.

The “tink! tink! tink!” of silver rapping on crystal grabbed everyone’s attention. The feast, it seemed, was about to begin. Oddly, Queen Willa’s place at the head of the table had been given to High King Mikahl. Queen Willa sat at the other end of the table with the round and balding, but extremely capable head of her Blacksword soldiers, General Spyra, on her right and King Jarrek on her immediate left.

Hyden was seated at High King Mikahl’s right hand, next to a large fleshy man who he thought might have been the mayor of Xwarda. Across from him, and to the King’s left, sat Princess Rosa. The aunt, who sat beside the Princess and almost directly across from Hyden, was staring at him with a dark, angry look in her eyes. The white of her knuckles as they squeezed around the handle of her meat knife wasn’t lost on him. Nor was Princess Rosa’s subtle amusement at the discomfort that her aunt was causing him.

He gave her a mock apologetic shrug and sighed. It was going to be a long meal, followed by an even longer, and less interesting series of negotiations masked as polite conversation. Hopefully Phenilous had taken the bait and was researching the Silver Skull of Zorellin. If he was, Hyden mused, at least something was getting done this night.

Chapter four

“...thes weel interest yew, Kang Jareek,” Princess Rosa was saying in her heavily accented, girlish voice.

The dinner dishes had just been removed and everyone was anticipating the desserts that were yet to come. Hyden was just glad that there were no more knives left at the table. The daggers in the eyes of Princess Rosa’s Aunt were as sharp as razor blades.

“A men neemed Dreeg, and hes company, are claiming up the iron mines around yer ruined Castlemont, and all threw the rest of Wildermont as weell,” the Princess continued. “It seems that he’s taking your people back to their homeland as slaves to do the werk—the digging and the smething, I think mother called it.” She touched a finger to her pouty lips and squeezed her huge dark eyes shut in concentration. “No, smeelting not smething, was whet she said,” she finished with a smile.

The room fell silent for a few long heartbeats. The subject was a tender one for both King Jarrek and High King Mikahl. Her information was welcome, though, and the fact that her mother had obviously told her to tactfully relay the news showed that Queen Rachel might be serious about helping King Jarrek’s cause.

“Dew yew reelly think that the zard-men are lizards?” the Princess asked High King Mikahl, in an attempt to change the subject.

He started to answer, but Hyden Hawk cut him off. “They are, m’lady.” He gave Mikahl a wink and then focused his full attention on entertaining the Princess. “They were a prominent race once.

According to the writings of one Urfell Nevlen, the Westlanders attempted to kill them off a few hundred years ago. Up until recently, it was believed that they had succeeded. They ride big four- legged lizards called gekas, and they train long beaked swamp dactyls to fight and spy for them.”

The Princess’s expression showed the distaste she held for such slimy scaled creatures.

“Between the zard-men and the breed beasts, taking back Westland will surely be some bloody business,” King Mikahl said, more to himself than to anybody else.

“No less so than freeing my people from that slaver, Ra’Gren,” added King Jarrek with a nod.

“Now, now, sirs!” Queen Willa interjected herself forcefully into the conversation. “I will not have such talk at my table. The Princess was merely musing on the existence of those creatures. All of this blood talk can wait until later. I assure you that there will be a time and place for it, but that time and place is not here, nor is it now.”

Like two scolded boys, the kings mumbled apologies to Queen Willa with chastised looks on their faces. The sight was humorous to some of the ladies at the table, but the subject matter of the previous conversation kept them from doing more than eyeing the two men.

“I understand that you’re leaving on your treasure hunt soon,” someone said to Hyden.

“Aye,” Hyden started to respond, but then remembered his manners. “Um, I mean yes, sir, we are.” It had been the Lord Mayor of Xwarda who had broached the subject.

“Pirates’ treasure is it?” the pudgy, half-inebriated man asked. “It seems to me that, with the people of Wildermont enslaved, and Westland overrun with skeeks and beasts, the timing of this adventure is... well ...well it’s just odd.”

Hyden looked at him coolly. There was a gravy spill on the man’s collar where his second chin mushroomed up out of the straining garment he wore. Hyden pointed at the stain conspiratorially as he responded.

“The amount of wealth that was supposedly on that ship is more than enough to buy back every single one of King Jarrek’s people,” said Hyden. It was a lie, but it sounded good. “Not that I would recommend buying them back. The High King and King Jarrek need the coin though; Highwander as well. Soldiers, carpenters, and lumbermen all have to feed what is left of their families while we rebuild.”

Queen Willa rescued Hyden from having to dig himself further into the conversation. “Lord Mayor, do not forget that Hyden Hawk is not a kingdom born man,” she scolded. Her narrowed brows and severe tone cowed the man, but she went on anyway. “He has already bested Dahg Mahn’s tower, saved Xwarda from the dragon’s wrath, and helped High King Mikahl destroy that foul wizard Pael. I think that if he wanted to build a ladder up to the moon it would be none of our concern.”

Silence again.

“Yeer Highness,” the Princess gamely tried again to gain the High King’s attention. “Deed you reelly fight the daemon-wizard from the back of a magical horse weth wings of fire?”

Hearing it from the mouth of the dreamy-eyed girl made it sound absurd, but it was true. Mikahl did fight the demon-wizard and his dark minions from the back of the bright horse. Humble by nature, Mikahl couldn’t find words. What was worse, the table had gone quiet in expectation of some boasting tale. He fingered his dragon bone medallion, trying to avoid the Princess’s gaze because he didn’t want to flush with embarrassment in front of the whole table. Knowing that she’d seen him naked as a jay this afternoon was too much at the moment. Luckily he was saved from having to respond to her awkward question by the arrival of a train of servants bringing in the desserts.

All along the front face of Queen Willa’s Xwardian Palace, starting above the second floor’s row of arched windows, had once been a row of forty-foot tall stained glass depictions. All the glass was gone now. High King Mikahl, King Jarrek, Queen Willa, and Hyden Hawk stood in one of the open balcony-like spaces that remained, looking out across the moonlit rubble Pael’s wrath had caused. The horror of the

site was displaced by fragments of the stained glass that had been blasted out from the castle wall, leaving the destroyed city looking as if it had been frosted in gems.

In the foreground, below them, the fountain in the middle of Whitten Loch danced and played. The ripples reflected the light of the torches that ran along the top of the castle's inner wall. The air was still chilled and Mikahl had placed his lion-skin cloak over Queen Willa's shoulders, but it was King Jarrek who stood closest to her.

"When are you leaving?" Mikahl asked Hyden.

"Two days, if nothing diverts me," Hyden answered.

"Brady Culvert is a strong sword and a good man, Sir Hyden Hawk," King Jarrek said. "His father died beside me at Castlemont and was my dear friend."

"Aye, and I hope we have no need of swords," Hyden nodded. "The island we're headed to will most likely be deserted. On the maps I've seen, it doesn't appear to be big enough to sustain much life, but I'm honored to have him along, just in case."

"Salazar is a tricky place to lay-over," King Jarrek pointed out. "Brady's presence will dissuade the alley thieves if you display him properly. It's the Dakaneese pirates you've got to watch out for."

"Captain Trant is a master seaman, and the *Seawander* has a most capable crew," Queen Willa said. She had donated the use of her royal ship as a token of thanks to Hyden Hawk for the deeds he had done to save her kingdom.

"I can't believe that I used to think that you were a witch," High King Mikahl laughed lightly. "In Westland, they said that you once turned a man into a pig, and fed your Blacksword army the flesh of your enemies."

"And I did nothing to make them think any different," she boasted. "Fear of Willa the Witch Queen has kept many a man from crossing me. I learned that from my grandmother. Rumor and gossip, and sinister legends can sometimes be a weapon far greater than steel."

“I’m not so sure that she isn’t really a witch,” King Jarrek said with a grin. “She’s been match-making and meddling so much as of late that it wouldn’t surprise me to see her pouring love potions into the Princess and the High King’s cups.”

“It was Hyden Hawk doing the meddling and match-making, from what I hear,” Queen Willa defended with a devilish look at Mikahl.

“I was just trying to show Princess Rosa the High King’s sword—I mean his swordsmanship,” said Hyden.

Mikahl’s glaring eyes spoke volumes about the quality of the revenge he wanted to exact on his friend.

“Nevertheless,” Willa went on, hiding her blush in the mane of the lion’s fur. “I do think she’s taken a liking to you Mikahl. She is smart, very pretty, and it’s obvious that she has caught your eye as well.”

“We’re riding in the park tomorrow,” Mikahl said. “If I could get some time with her, without all of you meddling and eavesdropping, I might be able to have a conversation with her. Until I’ve done that much, she is just another pretty girl to me.”

“I believe you’re right, Queen Willa,” said Hyden with a nod. “He has fallen for her.”

The clang of Mikahl’s steel on the practice yard the next morning was louder and sharper than usual. Hyden came down with the elven longbow Vaegon had given him, and could tell immediately that Mikahl was hammering out his frustrations on some unlucky opponent. Since the day their friend Loudin of the Reyhall had died, Mikahl had risen every morning and put himself through rigorous drills with his sword. The feel of the longbow in Hyden’s hand, and the ringing intensity from Mikahl’s blade brought back a memory of the four of them on their trek through the Giant Mountains. This in turn spurred an even earlier memory of Hyden and Vaegon competing in the archery tournament at the Summer’s Day Festival.

Either he or Vaegon would have won. The winner's name would have been carved on the Spire at Summer's Day with all the other champions of the realm, to be seen ever after. That seemed like a lifetime ago to Hyden, but it had been less than a year. It was a shame that they never had the chance to finish the contest.

This morning he was unintentionally giving a demonstration on packing the wizard's eye full of arrows. He could get four of five in the center, but hadn't found a way to squeeze the fifth one in yet. But it wasn't for lack of trying. It wasn't his aim, it was the size of the wizard's eye. The center of the target was just too small to take five arrow tips completely inside its circumference.

"What you need is smaller shafts, Sir Hyden Hawk," Brady Culvert said from behind him.

Hyden turned and smiled at the strapping young man. Brady was tall and bulky, but hardly any of it was soft. His unruly dark curls left him with a boyish look. "No more of that 'Sir' crud. Not if you're going with me, Brady," Hyden said matter of factly. "We travel, we fight, and we work together as equals on our quest."

"What should I call you then?"

"Hyden, or Hyden Hawk is what my friends call me, and any friend of King Jarrek's is a friend of mine."

"Hyden Hawk it is then," said Brady with a nod. "My father used to buy hawking eggs from your people at Summer's Day. He said they were the best for sending important messages, such as troop orders and other royal documents."

"Don't let Talon hear you say that," Hyden joked as he began unstringing his bow. "I use to climb the nesting cliffs in the spring to fetch them down." He thought of his younger brother Gerard then, and the ring Gerard had found among the nests up there. Sorrow threatened to take hold of him.

The loud clashing of Mikahl's sword filled the silence. Hyden forced Gerard and his terrible fate out of his mind. "You'll not need your plate armor; chain mail might even be inappropriate. Good leather

with rings should do. I have a feeling that we might have to do a bit of sneaking about, maybe some climbing as well, and a lot of walking.” Hyden paused to look over at a commotion that had broken out. Apparently Mikahl had dislodged an opponent’s sword and it had flown into a bystander.

“I pity his sparring partners today,” Brady said with a grimace of understanding. “He seems exceedingly aggressive for some reason.”

“He’s riding with the Princess this afternoon. All of this royal hoopla is keeping him from being himself.” The concern in Hyden’s voice betrayed how deep his friendship with Mikahl had become. “He wants to go with us more than you could imagine.”

“He’s the High King. All he has to do, is what he wants to do.” Brady scrunched his face up in confusion. “Besides all of that, who’d rather go sailing after pirate treasure with a bunch of louts than ride with Princess Rosa?”

Brady pulled his chin in and gnashed his teeth together in a regretful cringe when he realized he had just called Sir Hyden Hawk Skyler a lout. But to his surprise Hyden was grinning at him.

“You’ll do just fine, Brady,” Hyden spoke his thoughts aloud. “And it takes a lout to know one.”

Phen was waiting in the tower study when Hyden came down the next morning. “I can go!” The boy yelped excitedly. At his feet lay a big burlap sack full of his personal belongings and his extra robe.

“When do we leave? What should I bring? What texts are we taking? Master Sholt said that I have to keep tutoring you, so I know we should at least bring three or four books. How about *Tales of the Sea*? How long do you think we will be gone?” All of Phen’s questions were asked with one breath. Hyden chuckled as the boy inhaled deeply. He was about to begin again when Hyden stopped him with a question of his own.

“What did you learn about the Silver Skull?”

Phen looked at him with a perplexed expression for a moment. "How do you know that I know anything about the skull?" Phen asked.

"I am a great wizard," Hyden said sarcastically. "How else?"

"I'm starting to see what Master Amill meant when he said that you were a natural," said Phen with a shake of his head. "Without even casting a spell you got me to scour the books for you."

"You're just extra curious, Phen."

"I am, but you made Princess Rosa fall in love with the High King yesterday afternoon when you tricked the two of them. At least that's what the gossipers about the castle are saying."

"I just gave her a little more to think about is all. Not much more, I assure you. Besides, I had to get him back for that Yule gift he gave me."

"He said it wasn't him," Phen said.

"Just... He and I are even for the moment, and that's that. Now tell me about the skull."

"The Silver Skull of Zorellin is the artifact's proper name," Phen started. "I only found one listing about it in the Great Tome of artifacts. Darin wrote that the skull could be used to speak with the dead, the undead, and some of the more intelligent demons. But," Phen strode over to the table and pointed at the exposed page of the topmost text lying there, "In Dahg Mahn's untitled journal, the one that speaks about the Seal and other things relating to demon kind, it is said that the Silver Skull of Zorellin can be used to transport items, and people, to and from the Nethers."

"Does it say how?"

"Wait, Hyden, I'm not done," Phen's voice was sharper than he intended it to be, but he didn't stutter or stop his lecture. "In a book called *Zorellin*, that I got from the master's library last night while all of you were at the feast, I found a bit... Hold on." Phen went to his bag, rummaged through it a moment then came up beaming. In his hand was an ancient text. He held it up as if it were a great prize, which in this case, it was.

“In here,” Phen tapped the cover of the book. “It tells how the wizard Zorellin made the skull, and how he used it to enslave the demon of Krass, who he eventually used it to kill King Baffawn the Bloodthirsty for the good of all mankind.”

“Very good, Phen,” Hyden said. “Now the masters have loaned us the very book that gives away what it is we are really after.”

“No, I sort of borrowed it,” Phen smiled. “You know, just until we get back. I left the *Index of Known Forest Animals* in its place. They’ll never know.”

“That was my favorite,” Hyden said.

“Aye,” Phen said, emulating Hyden’s response to almost everything. “But I also have in my sack *The Index of Known Marine Creatures*. I figured that, since we’re going on a ship, you’d want us to have it handy.”

“See, Phen, that’s exactly why you’re going with us.” Hyden put his arm across the growing boy’s shoulders in a brotherly fashion. “Have your masters freed you of all your other duties yet?”

“I’m yours to command, Sir Hyden Hawk,” Phen stepped away and bowed with a flourish and a grin. Only the excitement he had felt when the late Master Targon and Queen Willa had plucked him from the orphanage in Xwarda City and made him an apprentice could compare to the level of exhilaration he was feeling now.

“Good,” Hyden said. “I want you to use some of that energy to go find Brady Culvert at the East Gate Barracks, and also Dugak’s nephew—I can’t ever seem to remember his name. It’s...It’s—”

“Oarly,” Phen remembered.

“Yes, Oarly. I want you to tell the two of them to meet us at the Golden Griffin tonight at dark fall.” Hyden was starting to get excited as well. “Tell them that the meeting is mandatory, but the food and drinks are on me.”

“Aye,” Phen called as he tore out of the tower room to find them.

Chapter five

Lord Gregory sat atop his mount cursing his fortune. Before him, where he would have crossed the shallows to the western bank of the Leif Greyn River, was a stretch of raging rapids that churned and thrashed with the full force of the spring thaw behind it. He was left with two choices now. He could either backtrack up into the mountains and go west, crossing the hundreds of streams, trickles and creeks that combined to make the powerful flow before him, or he could go south into Wildermont and hope that Harrap and Condlin Skyler had been exaggerating the amount of death and destruction they had found there. Even as that thought formed in his mind he dismissed it. He knew that Harrap and Condlin had most likely told him exactly what they had seen and heard. He also knew that, if the bridge that crossed over into Westland was really destroyed, his decision here and now would determine how long it would take him to finally make it back home. *If I even have a home left*, he thought to himself. Had he been younger or even healthier, he would have already been working his way back up into the mountains. Maybe it was good that he was half crippled and weary of backtracking. If Westland really had been taken over, he knew he would find no welcome there, but still he had to go look for his wife. Finding her was all that he lived for.

He took a deep breath and spurred his horse southward along the eastern bank of the churning flow. He knew that there were a few smaller towns and a dozen villages south of Castlemont along the river—Low Crossing, Seareach, and others. The Leif Greyn River split at Seareach. Maybe he could find a

boat there and take the Westland flow to Settsted stronghold. There he could at least learn of his friend and peer, Lord Ellrich's fate.

Lord Ellrich's stronghold held the main barracks for the river guard. If the zard had come up from the marsh, Settsted would have fallen first. Maybe he should try to find a boat to Southport instead. No king or queen or invader of any sort would destroy the trade center of the kingdom they were taking over. Southport was Westland's biggest port. Shipping trade with all of the east, the Isle of Salazar and the other southern islands took place there. It was also a place where Lord Gregory could probably blend in with the populace.

A boat from Seareach to Southport then, he decided. He had enough gold in his saddlebags to buy his own ship. A chunk of raw gold ore the size of a man's head was left in one of Mikahl's packs, along with a fat sack of Westland coin. He'd taken the coins and with a dull axe, had broken a fist sized chunk off of the other. What he'd left behind was easily twice as much as he'd taken. Mikahl and Hyden would understand, he knew, so he didn't feel guilty for helping himself.

A day later, he saw the tip of the Summer's Day Spire jutting up over the ridge ahead of him. That afternoon, when he topped the ridge, he saw the whole flooded bulk of the Leif Greyn Valley. The Spire looked to be rising up out of a great lake.

"It's cleansing itself," he said aloud, and with some amazement. All of the dead bodies and burning wagons and deserted pavilions that he had seen as Vaegon the elf and Hyden Skyler helped him away from his routed camp were under water now. Hopefully the carnage was being washed down the river into O'Dakahn or the marshes.

It took the rest of that day, and two more, to get to the city of High Crossing. Normally it would have only taken a day, but he had been forced to skirt the flooded valley. At least the High Crossing bridge was still intact. It didn't cross the Leif Greyn River, though. It spanned the Everflow River as it came out of the Evermore Forest to join with the Leif Greyn.

No toll-taker stepped out of the little house on the other side of the bridge when he crossed it. That alone confirmed most everything that Halden Skyler's sons had told him. He didn't have to look upon the nearly deserted rows of buildings that lined the streets beyond the bridge. He didn't have to see and smell the bones and thawing remains of the corpses that had been haphazardly put into piles and burned before winter set in.

He felt eyes upon him as he rode through the empty town. Suddenly a sharp squeal filled the air and a thin filthy boy came chasing a healthy looking piglet into the road. The boy couldn't have been ten years old, and he froze in place when he saw Lord Gregory coming. Tears of terror welled up in the boy's eyes as he darted back into the evening shadows, his piglet forgotten. From somewhere in that direction came a woman's hushed, but scolding voice. Lord Gregory, saddened by the sight, but uplifted to know that there were some survivors about, spurred his mount onward.

As he left the town of High Crossing behind him, the sun was starting to set. At an abandoned farm set a short distance from the road he holed up in a barn for the night. There was no telling what sort of pilferers and bandits were about. He didn't want to spend the night out in the open. He thought about sleeping in one of the abandoned inns he had seen, but he would have had to leave his horse outside. What people remained here were desperate and would probably have the poor animal gutted and cooked in the blink of an eye.

As he lay in the barn struggling to find sleep, his heart grew heavier. Throughout the day the signs of war had become apparent, making him wonder just how bad off his homeland might be. Was Lady Trella even alive? He had to find out.

Westland couldn't be as desolate as High Crossing, could it? It could, he decided, but he knew that it wasn't. Instead of being empty and void of life, it was now full of skeeks and barbaric breed giants. The strand of hope he held for his Lady Trella was growing thinner, but he refused to let it go.

He could picture her in his mind as she had been when he'd left her at the stronghold in Lake Bottom: the yellow dress with the sky blue ribbons, the sparkling of her sapphire eyes as she kissed him goodbye.

King Balton had called on him. It was supposed to be a relatively short journey, a trip around Lion Lake to Lakeside Castle, then two weeks at the Summer's Day competition, but when Lord Gregory arrived, King Balton was on his deathbed. He'd been poisoned and knew exactly who his murderer was. Secret orders were given, then at the festival all the hells broke loose.

Lord Gregory had wanted to stay with his king, root out those responsible, and deliver them to the noose, or better yet, to the headsman's axe, but King Balton had told him no.

"Go to Summer's Day," he'd said. "Take good men, men that you trust. Mikahl will need you. You know who he truly is. He'll have my sword, and he'll be scared. You'll find him in the Giant Mountains looking for the Southern Guardian, but go to the competitions first and participate as if nothing is amiss. It's imperative that the cause of my death remain between us. If they know that you know I've been poisoned, they will try to kill you too, and Mikahl needs your help far more than the rope needs necks."

Lord Gregory had passed Mikahl in the hallway outside the King's chambers after that conversation. The young man looked troubled, as if he already knew some of what was happening. Lord Gregory remembered looking into Mikahl's eyes then and seeing King Balton in them. He understood now that Balton had known that his son, Prince Glendar, would bring the kingdom down. There was no way Glendar could ever have Ironspike. Mikahl was the intended heir to Westland. Mikahl's heart was true, and humble, and fierce. Mikahl would have to pick up all the pieces now. Lord Gregory only hoped that the boy was still alive. Why the Giant King had sent him off to Highwander where the Witch Queen ruled, he couldn't understand. He could remember clearly her Blacksword warriors cutting down his men while he lay helpless. If he couldn't find Lady Trella, Highwander was his next destination.

In the morning, while rummaging through the barn, he found a crossbow and a handful of dull, but usable steel-tipped bolts for it. Before he had taken his injuries, he had been quite handy with the sword, but now his body felt a hundred years old. He could wield his blade if he had to, and he still wore it at his hip, but the crossbow would make even a well armored bandit wary of him.

He saw no bandits that day. He did see a herder with seven goats out in a soggy green field, and a man on the wall of a keep that sat a good distance off the road. He saw a few folk who looked to be planting corn or maybe wheat behind a mule-drawn plow too. When he passed they huddled together and stared at him as if he had a golden horn sticking out of the top of his head. When he finally came into the outskirts of what used to be the city of Castlemont he saw nothing but destruction.

Half a hundred proud towers had once reached toward the heavens from the base of the city. Now there was nothing but ruin, a stubbed tower here, the taller stump of one over there, and a few other broken structures jutted up from the rubble like broken teeth. Lord Gregory figured that winter had preserved some of the meat of the dead, for hundreds of thousands of carrion birds swarmed over the piles of brick and stone and fractured wooden beams looking for another meal. It was the idea of what had happened here, more than the smell of rot in the air that made his stomach turn. He couldn't understand how Pael and King Glendar could have orchestrated such total destruction.

He had no doubt now that Valleya had fallen as well. Dreen had naught but a clay brick wall around it. If that's where the Westland army had gone, then they had taken it.

Why would they sack Wildermont and not try to hold it, though? Glendar probably had no idea that Westland would fall behind him, so he hadn't been concerned with guarding his rear. But still, any good military tactician would want to hold the source of more than half the realm's supply of iron ore. It just didn't make any sense not to.

Thoughts of King Glendar, and more specifically of his beloved Westland, began to consume Lord Gregory. He spurred his horse southward, stealing glances across the river between the crumbled buildings on his right. In places he could see the wide, powerful flow and his homeland across its span.

A wooden tower rose up from the Westland bank where the destroyed crossing bridge still stuck out like some fancy half-finished dock. Men were pulling lines in from it as if it were just that. Other men were on the tower, and there were people moving about beneath it as well. Behind them, the city of Locar seemed to be carrying about life as if nothing had changed. Dull gray smears of smoke still lifted toward the sky, and the occasional clang of tack and the faint smell of cooking meat carried in the air. It all looked pretty normal and hopeful, but only for a moment. Lord Gregory then saw a giant breed beast being pulled in a huge wagon carriage by a dozen men. Climbing to the top of a pile and squinting with his hand visored at his brow, Lord Gregory watched as the driver, a man, lashed at the pullers with a whip until they quickened their pace and disappeared beyond some buildings. Fluttering up on the wooden tower, and from several other places across the river in Westland, was an unfamiliar banner: three yellow lightning bolts crossing in the middle on a field of black. Lord Gregory reckoned it looked like a wicked golden snowflake.

Enslaved Westlanders, breed giants loose in Westland, and under the banner of some self-proclaimed Dragon Queen. Lord Gregory shook his head in dismay. King Balton would roll over in his tomb if he knew of this—if he even had a tomb. Lord Gregory, however, was filled with a newfound hope that Lady Trella might have actually survived the Dragon Queen’s invasion. He had to get home and find out if she was all right, but there was no way to cross here. He needed to go south to where the river widened and split, then he had to find a boat to get across.

When he topped the hill that led down into the town of Low Crossing he saw a dozen men loading a flat barge with crates. Suddenly he was feeling uneasy. The pings and clanks of a few smiths’ hammers could be heard, but Lord Gregory didn’t dare stray from the road. On the southern side of a small bridge

that crossed a tributary just before it met the main flow, he hurried past four well tended horses tied to the post of a fully operational tavern. As he was about to leave the town behind him, a pair of horsemen came out from behind the last riverfront building and blocked the road. By the insignia on their breastplates he knew they were Dakaneese sell-swords. He had run into them before on the docks of Southport and Portsmouth in Westland, but this wasn't Westland. Here he was nobody; his lordship meant nothing. He found, as he brought his crossbow to bear on one of the men, that he was more than just a little afraid.

The man he was aiming at spat a thick brown wad of slime from his mouth. "Let him pass," he said gruffly. "He's no absconded slave."

"But Dreg said to stop anyone that looks suspicious," the other man argued. The conviction in his voice fled when the crossbow moved from the first man to him.

"Look there, Lem, at his hilt. That sword's worth more than all of your sisters in a bundle. This man ain't suspicious, Lem, he's armed," the first man said. Then to Lord Gregory, he said, "What're you doing passing through here?"

Lord Gregory's heart was hammering in his chest. He could barely breathe, but knowing that these men were only second-rate sell-swords he said the first thing that came to his mind and hoped for the best. "Is Dreg paying you enough to mind my business?" He asked the question in a way that suggested not only that he knew who Dreg was, but that he was in the man's favor. He hoped that the extreme quality of his nervousness didn't show through his façade of annoyed confidence.

A moment of silence ensued, then the man spat another wad of brown slime from his mouth. He grinned with rotten teeth as he backed his horse away from his companions. "See, Lem," he said as he motioned for Lord Gregory to pass between them. "He's not suspicious."

"Nay, he's not," the other man said, his eyes never straying from the crossbow that was still trained on his gut.

As soon as Lord Gregory was out of their sight, he spurred his horse and rode at a mad gallop for a good long while. He thought that this man Dreg might send somebody snooping after him and wanted to put as much distance between him and Low Crossing as he could. He doubted that the two men guarding the road would even say anything about his passing, but he couldn't be sure. If they did, the fact that they'd noticed the value of his sword meant that men would surely come looking for him sooner or later.

Just before dark he spotted a wagon train approaching from the south. There were three horse-drawn wagons surrounded by at least twenty mounted men. Probably just more sell-swords guarding a cargo, he thought. Not knowing what else to do, he left the road for the hills that rose up off to the east. He hated to leave the road. He was so close to Seareach he could smell the marshes already. Even so, he needed to come up with a story, or a plan, or both. He needed to know what the sell-swords were about, who had hired them, and what the political climate was between the Dragon Queen, the Dakaneese, and those Westlanders who had survived, but he didn't want to get robbed, captured or killed doing it.

Seareach was the last place he could find a boat to take him swiftly across the river to Settsted. It was less than half a day south. If he had to go farther south than that to find transport, he would have to travel all the way to O'Dakahn and catch a sea ship. That could take weeks.

He found a low place in the hills and dared to light a small fire that night, for it was still chilly, even this far south. The beginnings of a plan began to form in his mind and he fell asleep turning the ideas over and over again.

He woke to the sound of voices—voices far too close to him. He reached slowly—as if he were just shifting his sleeping position—to where he'd lain the crossbow before he'd fallen asleep. It wasn't there. Panic shot through him, but he didn't overreact. He saw that the sun had barely reddened in the sky

when he cracked open his eyelids. He felt a heavy booted man step close to his head, and could see three others. Two of them had longbows drawn and trained on him.

“Come on man, wake up,” a voice said. “We’ll just have a word or two with you.”

The accent was Dakaneese. The way the man spoke told Gregory that he was no lackey; this was somebody who had authority.

“Who are you?” Lord Gregory asked as he sat up. He was glad he had used his saddlebags for a pillow. Had these men found all of his gold he would already be dead. The thought of the wealth in his packs gave him an idea that added well with the story he had come up with last night.

“You don’t recognize old Dreg?” the man’s tone was full of irony. “My men said that you told them you knew me.”

“You need to hire better men,” Gregory calmly replied. Though he showed no fear outside, inside he felt as if his heart might fail him. “How did you track me at night? My fire was too small to be seen from the road.”

“With sorcery of course,” Dreg said with a nod toward the silhouette of a robed and hooded figure who was sitting on a horse near the other men. “What were you doing up north?”

Gregory sighed. *Here it goes*, he thought, *all or nothing*. “I escaped the Dragon Queen’s breed beasts through the Reyhall Forest and wintered in a cavern up in the foothills.”

“You’re high-born, don’t deny it,” accused Dreg. “Is there a reward for you?”

“Reward?” Lord Gregory chuckled nervously. “If there is, it’s not a big one, I assure you.”

“The quality of your steel says otherwise,” Dreg’s tone had become curious. “Where did you come by such a piece?”

“I pulled it off of a body at Summer’s Day,” Lord Gregory lied. In truth his father had given the sword to him, as his father had done before that. It had been in his family since it had been forged nearly three hundred years ago. He didn’t want to lose it, but it wasn’t worth his life.

“I’m a man of inspiration, and I have a weakness for survivors,” Dreg said coolly. “Inspire me to leave you to your fate and I may do so, though I doubt it.”

Dreg would probably let him live if he gave him the sword and some coin, but Lord Gregory had a better idea. “Get me on a boat to Settsted or Southport over in Westland,” he said. “If you do, I’ll make you rich—rich beyond imagining.”

“Granddad’s coin chest? Mam’s jewelry box?” Dreg smirked. “You’ll pay me when we get there? I said inspire me. I’ve heard this drivel hundreds of times. Just last week a man offered me an entire herd of goats to spare his young daughter from my men’s lust. I agreed, and being a man of my word my men never touched the girl. I did though, and after I killed her, we feasted.”

“Still eatin’ them fargin goats,” a man chuckled. Another laughed with him from the darkness.

Lord Gregory reached behind him and pulled his saddle bag to his lap. He heard the laughter suddenly stop as the men around him resituated the aim of their bows. He didn’t stop what he was doing, though, because he knew that Dreg wouldn’t let them shoot him just yet.

“Slowly, man,” Dreg cautioned. “Itchy fingers all around you now.”

“You’d be wiser to let me show you what I’ve got in private,” Lord Gregory said with enough confidence that he saw Dreg considering it.

“And be pricked by some poison dart, or caught up in some ludicrous charm spell. I think not.” Dreg trotted his horse up a little closer. “I could just kill you, fool, and take what you’ve got. Now out with it.”

“Kill me if you like,” Lord Gregory replied boldly. Most, if not all of his confidence had returned. “But if you do, you’ll never know where this came from.” He pulled the fist sized chunk of raw gold ore out of his pack and held it to where it caught the breaking light of dawn. All around him the gasps of Dreg’s men could be clearly heard. Dreg himself let out an audible “Ooh” and his eyes grew as big as coins.

“It appears that I owe you an apology, sir,” Dreg finally said, with some sincerity in his voice. “I have indeed been inspired. Now what was it you said you needed? A boat to Southport? Is there anything else?”

Chapter Six

Shaella, the Dragon Queen of Westland, daughter of the recently deceased demon-wizard Pael, carefully tipped the vial she held until a single drop of glistening crimson fell from it. The blood landed with a ‘plop’ in the clear water basin cradled in her lap. She stirred the concoction with a finger, sucked the liquid, then sat perfectly still until the swirling calmed.

On the surface of the stuff in her bowl she saw her reflection first. Her dark eyes contrasted with the angry pinkish-red burn scar that started at her temple and ran back over her ear, leaving one side of her head hairless. The rest of her thick, black mane could be laid over the ugliness so that it didn’t show,

but she chose to let the ruined flesh be seen. A dragon had made that scar, the dragon that she tricked and enslaved, and then used to take over the biggest kingdom in the realm. Another scar, from a knife fight that had happened long ago in a Dakaneese tavern, ran down her cheek like a permanent teardrop. The scars were nothing to be ashamed of. Though they marred her beauty, they reminded those who came before her of her violent past, and her vast capabilities. The scars made it easier for her to be taken seriously, and she displayed them like badges of honor.

The people of her new kingdom, the struggling humans, the slithery zard-men, and the huge hairy breed beasts, all thought that the dragon was still hers to command. They didn't know that she had lost her controlling collar, and thus the ability to command the great red wyrm. She didn't discourage the notion that she could call it forth on a whim, though, and her appearance kept questions from being asked.

She mumbled a few words in a musical hum and the face in the water's surface shimmered into that of another woman. This woman's features were rounder: slightly chubby cheeks, framed by blonde curly ringlets, pale blue eyes speckled with green and gold, and a smile that spoke of true innocence. She looked stunning for the hundred and twenty year old marsh witch that she really was. Shaella remembered the woman's ample bosom and wide curving hips from the visions they regularly shared together. All of Queen Willa's Xwardian court had been, and was still, completely fooled by the powerful illusion that had changed the old witch's appearance. In fact General Spyra, the aging head of the entire Highwander Blacksword army, was in love with her.

"What does our General have to say today, Mandary?" Shaella asked.

"Mastress, the hawk-man departed the palace here at Xwarda yesterday on his quest for the pirate treasure," the plump woman said in a girlish voice.

"Did you place the *finding stone*?" Shaella asked.

“Yes Mistress. A boy—an apprentice—travels with them. The stone is hidden among his things. Queen Willa has an odd interest in the youth’s safety. So I doubt he’ll be abandoned or thrown overboard. And none of those seamen will dare to rummage through his duffels.”

“Good, good, Mandary. What else?”

“King Jarrek is still rigorously preparing his men to try and free his people from King Ra’Gren’s slave pens. The General told me that they will all be leaving soon.”

“And the High King?” Shaella interrupted. “When will he attack?”

“There has still been no talk of attacking Westland, my Mistress,” the witch woman said. “I have wheedled the General’s mind well. If it is to happen, as you fear it will, then General Spyra knows nothing about it.”

“What is it that he is waiting for?” Shaella asked aloud, but rhetorically. Before her spy could answer, she asked another question.

“What does the young king do? He has the power of Ironspike at his hip. Is he daft?”

“He is far from daft. Apparently he is trying to unite all of the Eastern Kingdoms.” The woman in the reflection looked away quickly. The alarm that came across her face faded as she continued. “As you know, Queen Willa and King Jarrek have bowed to him. Now King Broderick of Valleya is supposed to join them, and as soon as High King Mikahl weds Princess Rosa, her mother, Queen Rachel, and all of Seaward will no doubt do the same.” The plump woman looked away again; this time the alarm stayed in her expression. In a quick whisper she went on: “He seems content to leave you be while they rebuild what your father destroyed.” The last was spoken almost inaudibly, and before Shaella could respond, the woman’s face backed away from the reflection and a pair of plump hands came reaching in to disturb the surface of the liquid in Shaella’s bowl. As the vision shimmered away with the ripples, Shaella could still hear her spy’s girlish voice talking to the intruder.

“Oh, Marial dear, you startled me. You really shouldn’t enter unannounc...” Then the spell was completely broken.

My father, thought Shaella, *the mighty wizard Pael*. He had spent Shaella’s whole lifetime molding Prince Glendar into his puppet. To him, she had been nothing but an afterthought, or so it had seemed until he more or less handed her Westland on a silver platter. All of his bribing and scheming had been so that they might take over the realm together. It was a shame all that planning had gone over the sill when part of the demon Shokin had found its way into him. Pael’s thirst for power had caused him to rush into Highwander seeking the magic stored in the Wardstone bedrock of the place. Had he been patient and content with his original plan, he might not have been killed.

Shaella learned from her father’s mistakes, though. She’d learned that lust and greed and power could spoil a near perfect plan. She was just glad that she had followed through with her end of things. Love had nearly led her conquest into ruin, but now that her hold on Westland was secure, she had the time, and the means, to communicate with her beloved Gerard. It was time that she might not have had if she’d done things differently. It was only a temporary inconvenience that Gerard was sealed in the Nethers with all of demon kind. At least she kept telling herself that. Together they would find a way to breach the magical bonds that held him in that dark place. It was that hope that drove her, the very reason that she spent nearly every waking hour in Pael’s tower scouring his books in search of another way in and out of the Nethers.

There was another way. She knew this for certain. Long before Pavreal had created the Seal that he used to banish the demons back to their home, there had been a way. How else could there have been demons loose for him to banish? They had to have gotten out somehow.

The demon Shokin had breached the Nethers in those ancient days when he was just a man. He had wrought so much pain, destruction, and death in the world that the Abbadon, the Dark Lord himself, had turned him into a demon as his reward. Shokin had then terrorized demon kind until he rose above

them all. Somehow he escaped the Nethers and brought his dark hordes with him. The great hero Pavreal eventually sent Shokin back to the Nethers through the Seal he carved into the Dragon's Tooth Spire with the sword Ironspike. That Seal was destroyed by Hyden Hawk Skyler and the dragon, but there was another way. There had to be.

Pael had recently used Pavreal's Seal to call Shokin back into the world, but something had gone wrong. Shokin was torn in half when Pael's sacrifice wouldn't die. Shaella's lover, Gerard, had been that sacrifice. He crawled down into the Nethers with half of Shokin's essence clinging to existence inside his mind. The other half of the demon filled Pael with the very power that eventually brought about his demise. Gerard's older brother, had somehow forced the demon out of Pael and back into the Seal, thus condemning his sibling to the horror of the darkness forever. Or had he? Now both halves of Shokin had rejoined in Gerard. Gerard held them apart, and kept them from taking over his mind with the fiery will that burned deep inside him. When he had been at death's door, alone and in the Nethers, he had eaten the yolk of one of the dragon's eggs he had stolen. It changed him completely. More dragon-beast than man now, and with the two powerful halves of Shokin bickering in his brain constantly, he fought every day to stay alive, trapped in the demon-filled darkness.

Gerard was still weak, but he was growing stronger and was starting to tap Shokin's power and knowledge. He had gleaned from the demon that Shokin had once used the Silver Skull of Zorellin to breach the Nethers. Shaella found an entry in a diary from her father's library about the artifact. A raving mad man who'd been abandoned on an island by the brutal pirate Barnacle Bones had spouted on and on about a silver skull that conjured forth a demon wind that would carry the pirate anywhere he wanted to go. After leaving the man, Barnacle Bones was never seen or heard from again. He never made port with his treasure. Shaella had searched and searched for a clue to its location, but she found nothing. The fact that Gerard's brother, Hyden Hawk, was going on a mysterious quest for pirate treasure could mean only one thing, though. He too was after the Silver Skull.

Already, Flick was manning a party and a ship to track down Hyden's group and take the skull. With the *finding stone* hidden on Hyden Hawk's ship it would be impossible for them to get away. With a few words and a sparrow's heart she, or Flick, could cast a spell that would reveal the exact location of the *finding stone*.

Flick was a capable wizard. Once one of her father's apprentices, he was loyal to Shaella's cause and always eager to please her. The two breed giants he had chosen to accompany him on his mission, Drolz and Varch were both fierce fighters. The zard called Slake was a most competent captain. He had pirated several barges full of weapons and supplies that had been instrumental in Shaella's taking of Westland. He was highly feared and regarded among his kind. The mixed crew of his sleek ship, *Slither*, were loyal and tested. As soon as Hyden Hawk found the skull, they would help Flick take it from him.

With those thoughts on her mind she rang a bell to summon her zardess attendant, Fslandra. A moment later the door to her chamber crept open and the young lizard-girl stepped in and bowed with a hiss.

"How may I serves yous?" she asked.

"Find Cole, and have him meet me by the turn of a glass in the old gathering hall, the one with the map table in it." As she gave the order she rose to her feet, went to a closet and began searching for a particular garment. "And Fslandra," she called out as the lizard-girl's tail flitted out the door. "Have Lady Able fetch me up a hot bath immediately."

"Yes Mistress," came the fading reply.

It entertained Shaella deeply to watch the Lady Able carrying bucket after bucket of hot water up all those stairs. It thrilled her even more when she made the high born woman wash her naked body. It wasn't the sexuality of it. It was the disgust and contempt that radiated off the woman as she lathered the rags with scented soap, and the way Lady Able had to clinch her bottom lip in her teeth to remind

herself not to scrub too hard; the way her entire upper body glowed red with a mixture of embarrassment, anger and shame as she towed Shaella dry.

Before Shaella took Westland, Lady Able had been waited on hand and foot in the luxury of her husband's stronghold. She'd been the ruler of her roost, so to speak, and had never kept less than three personal attendants. In her day she had humiliated, overworked, and disrespected at least half a hundred young servant girls. She'd made the mistake of demanding that she be treated like a high born lady in front of Queen Shaella's entire court.

"I will treat you exactly how you treated all those ladies that served you," Shaella said. Then she added, "Now go fetch me a tray of fruit from the kitchens and be sure not to meet the master chef's eyes."

As a queen, Shaella was merciless, cleverly ruthless in her punishments, and more than a little dark in her deeds, but no one could say that she was unjust. She showed no favoritism to the zard-men, the breed giants, or the humans. High born, or low, covered in scales and hatched from an egg, or birthed from a mother's womb meant nothing to her. A person was judged and rewarded or punished by their actions alone. The common folk had seemingly accepted her after she'd flown on her dragon's back over Portsmouth and Crossington and driven the savage breed giants out of the streets and back into line. Little did those people know that she had sent the breed to terrorize them in the first place. When she began knocking the Westland nobles, who hadn't escaped, off of their pedestals, some of the commoners began to really like her.

During King Glendar's short and brutal stint as the king of Westland, he had rounded up nearly every able bodied man and boy and marched them off to their eventual deaths. Before he'd done that, he had decorated the bailey yards of Lakeside Castle with the piked heads of hundreds of men— Westland men. Suspected conspirators, men so loyal to his father that they tried to oppose his succession to the throne, even the common gossipers who whispered the wrong thing in the wrong ear,

ended up with their heads displayed on pikes. The good people of Westland had been scared to death, and rightly so.

None of the people knew that Pael was Shaella's father. Had they, they might not have been so accepting of her rule. The belief that it was Queen Willa's Blacksword army, the Valleyans, and King Glendar's evil that had taken away their husbands and sons was now prevalent. This played perfectly into Shaella's hands because she had forbidden all trade with the Eastern Kingdoms, save for Dakahn. With all borders closed, the people were starting to feel safe again, especially since Queen Shaella was now publicly punishing the zard, and the breed, when they attacked any of the humans.

As she made her way to the map-room to meet Cole, Shaella passed a group of young merchant-men in an open corridor. They all bowed graciously to her.

"You're looking radiant today, my queen," one of them said as she moved past.

When the men were long behind them, Shaella spoke. "Fslandra, do you think I look radiant?"

The lizard-girl knew that Queen Shaella was mocking the young man, and she made a gurgling sound that passed for zardian laughter.

Cole was waiting for her in the map room with a silver goblet in his hand. Cole was Flick's brother, and both of them emulated Pael just a little too much. Shaella's father had been their mentor and teacher, and they both kept their heads free of hair and their skin as ghostly white as Pael had. Cole was the eldest. He was taller and thinner than Flick, but not by much on either count. From a distance they could easily pass as twins. They had been instrumental in the taking of Westland, and in her heart Shaella considered them as her dearest friends.

Cole started to bow to her but she waved it off. "We're not in public, Cole. You know better."

"Just showing my queen her proper respect," he replied evenly.

"That's enough, Cole." She motioned for Fslandra to go. The lizard-girl shut the door behind her, leaving Shaella and Cole to themselves.

The room was paneled in deeply varnished oak. Along one wall there were wine-rack shelves holding hundreds of rolled maps. The opposite wall was glazed and a grand view of Lion Lake spread out before them. Expertly etched into the surface of the great oval table that filled the room was a map of the continent and its kingdoms. Shaella deftly plucked the goblet from Cole's hand and sipped from it. She made a sour face then circled the map-table, studying it as she went.

"I hope I didn't disturb your day," she said, "but the idea that struck me was too marvelous to contain."

"I've been dealing with reports about your Lord of Locar. It seems that Bzorch is bringing in Wildermont slaves to help build his watchtowers along the river." Cole heaved a sigh of exasperation. "I've gone over seventeen different grievances concerning your pet breed giant's conduct. Truthfully, I'm glad to be away from the mess."

"Seventeen is too many to ignore. I'll set out for Locar myself with a troop of zard on the morrow and settle the matter. I don't want slaves in Westland. Bzorch can pay his laborers like everyone else."

"You are the nicest evil sorceress queen I've ever met," Cole jested. He was glad that the words Dragon Queen hadn't slipped out of his mouth. Since she'd lost her dragon, Shaella hated the term. "Now what is this idea you can't keep to yourself?"

"I'm driving myself crazy waiting on the High King to attack us. He has to try to get his father's kingdom back or no one will really follow him. What good is a king who cannot hold his own kingdom? The problem is that every day he waits, he gathers more allies." Shaella hopped up, sat on the map-table and tapped Seaward City. "I want to provoke him, force him to come at us, before he gains too much."

"How do you want to do that?" Cole asked, his curiosity piqued.

"He's going to marry Princess Rosa soon," Shaella grinned. "I say we find out if High King Mikahl has enough honor to come rescue a damsel in distress. I'd like you to go to Seaward and invite Princess Rosa

here for a visit.” She gave Cole a sinister wink and chuckled deviously. “Well, maybe *invite* wasn’t quite the word I was looking for.”

Chapter seven

Had to be that fargin dwarf, thought Hyden, as he darted to the bushes for the fifth or maybe the sixth time that afternoon. *Phenilous wouldn't dare betray me.* Brady Culvert was a possible suspect as well, but not a likely one. The Wildermont guardsman's sense of duty was second to none. Hyden knew that someone had betrayed him though. Someone had conspired with High King Mikahl to get the squat weed into his cup or his canteen. *Maybe it was the wagon driver, or one of his two helpers; or was it someone else in the escort?*

"It's like traveling with a wee little girl," commented Oarly the dwarf from the top of his mule. His legs weren't long enough to get around and over the back of a horse, so rather than teeter to and fro like a child's toy, he chose a narrow-backed mule that his stumpy body could manage. On top of the hairy little man's head was a pointy-topped, wide-brimmed hat that had long ago flopped over in the middle.

"I have to admire King Mikahl's mode of revenge. It's... It's..." Brady started to say "effective," but the moaning grunt that Hyden Hawk made from the bushes on the roadside caused him to finish with the word "brutal," instead.

"I swear by the goddess that if I find out which one of you helped him," Hyden called out breathlessly, "I will... I'll... Ooh! Ah! Oooh! Blast you!" The wet sloppy sound that followed caused them all to make sour faces and urge the horses a bit further away.

They were somewhere between Jenkanta and the High Port – Old Port split. They had crossed the Doon River the day before and camped at an often used cave called the Midway. They were on their

way to Old Port to catch their ship and should have been beyond the split by now, but Hyden Hawk's condition forced them to stop every few miles so that he could relieve himself.

At first Hyden thought that he had eaten something that disagreed with him, but then he remembered Mikahl's comment as they had said their goodbyes. "Take plenty of soil cloth," the High King had joked with a stupid grin on his face. Hyden thought that he'd meant to take extra soil cloth for the sea voyage. He understood the jest all too well now. This was Mikahl's revenge for Hyden displaying him naked before the Princess, and it was, as Brady put it, "brutal."

"Should we let the wagons run ahead?" the commander of their customary twenty man escort of Blacksword soldiers suggested to Brady from a discreet distance. "Captain Trant will want to load the gear and make ready. He likes to keep his schedules."

"Aye," Hyden called from the roadside. "All of you go on. I'll catch up to you."

"Escort the wagons on to port, Sergeant," Brady said. "I'll escort Hyden Hawk."

"I'm staying with Hyden too," Phen said. His loyalty to Hyden, as well as his worry, showed plainly on his face.

The sergeant spurred his horse away and spoke to the wagon master. The procession began forming back up and eventually started away.

Oarly made no move to join them. As soon as the procession had moved on, he urged his mule toward the clump of shrubs where Hyden was now standing to lace up his leather britches.

"It was I who got ye," Oarly confessed with a mixture of pride and shame. "By the order of the High King, mind ye." He began rummaging through his pack and brought his stumpy arm out with a grin. "Here, eat it." He offered Hyden a thumb sized dried vegetable that still had the stem attached to it. It was glossy black, like a polished stone. "It might burn a bit going in and out, but it'll plug you up, if you know what I mean."

Hyden studied the dwarf's eyes, which were on a level with his own since Oarly was still seated on his mule. It was hard to read the dwarf's expression because his big silly looking hat shadowed most of his face. Hyden saw no malice or mischief in the squat man's gaze though, so he took the offering and bit off a big piece. The heat of the pepper crept up on him as he was walking back to his horse. By the time he got there his entire head was glowing red and on fire. Sweat poured down his brow and his mouth felt blistered.

"Ahh!" Hyden yelled. "Wah-er! Wah-er!" He walked, almost sprinting, over to Brady who was unshouldering his canteen. "Whaaat-er!"

"It'll only make it worse," Oarly said with a grin, but it was too late.

"AAHHHHH," Hyden yelled as he guzzled water like a mad man. When it didn't cool his mouth his eyes grew panicked and desperate. He made a pleading gesture with his hands. "AAHHH! AAHHH!" His eyes were squinted and watering. Water from Brady's canteen was running down his chin and his head looked as if it might explode.

By that time, even Brady and Phen were laughing.

A few moments later, after he'd cooled off and mastered himself, Hyden Hawk summoned what dignity he had left and climbed back up into his saddle. Without a word, but with plenty of angry looks, he spurred his mount down the road.

"What did High King Mikahl give you to do that?" Brady asked with genuine curiosity in his voice.

"For slipping him the squat weed he gave me this." Oarly reached his stumpy arm over his shoulder to his back and patted the handle of the wicked looking double-edged axe that was strapped there.

"That cinder pepper I just gave him, though," Oarly chuckled, "now that was me own gag."

"He'll get you back, you know," Phen boasted in Hyden's defense. "He'll get you back good!"

"No lad," the dwarf said with a confident smile on his hairy face. "After that cinder pepper works its way out of him, he'll know better than to jest with the likes of me. Mark my words."

From Phen's shoulder, Talon the hawkling cawed out his sharp disagreement with the dwarf.

Oarly hadn't lied. True to his word, the effects of the squat weed quickly dissipated. Nevertheless, Hyden kept them trotting a few hundred yards behind the wagons and the escort just in case.

The land around them was green, but rocky. There were very few trees, but many clumps of shrubs and bushes dotted the landscape. They passed several herders whose large flocks of sheep and goats looked fat and healthy. After they took the Old Port branch of the 'Y' in the road, they began to see lively farms, and other humble dwellings out along the hills. It appeared that this part of the world hadn't been touched by Pael's madness.

As they drew closer to the ocean, Hyden grew excited. He'd never seen the sea. Berda the giantess had told him and the clan folk many a tale about it. The last few nights, at the fire, Hyden and Phen had taken turns reading from a book about tides and the moon's other effects on the ocean. This only made Hyden want to see the splendor of the sea that much more. Before he could see or hear the water, though, he could taste the salt in the air. As soon as he did, he sent Talon ahead to explore. With his eyes clenched shut, he watched as the world passed below through the hawkling's razor keen vision.

The road wound its way down among the sloping hills into a long stretched conglomeration of gray topped roofs and crowded, narrow cobbled streets. It extended southward farther than Talon could see at his present height. Hyden sent the hawkling rising in an upward circle, using the warmer air reflected off the rooftops until it was all well below him. Hyden saw through Talon's eyes that they were starting out onto a finger-like peninsula that extended a good distance into the gray-blue ocean. The road went the length of the finger, with smaller dirt and cobbled lanes cutting across it toward the white rolling shores. Ships, boats, skiffs and trawlers lined the myriad docks that extended from the western side of the formation. To the east, the finger was open and a fat dark gray line separated sea from shore. As Talon swooped lower Hyden saw that it was a crude wall made of granite blocks. Rolling white-capped waves crashed into it, sending up huge explosions of foam and spray. Gray and white gulls were

everywhere calling and shrieking and diving on schools of baitfish. They scattered when Talon soared past.

Hyden urged Talon across the finger to the other side. The billowy sails of several gliding ships glowed amber, illuminated by the rays of the setting sun. All along the shadowy docks people swarmed like ants loading and unloading boxes, crates and net-loads of fish. Some of the ships looked like trees—their masts stood proud but empty like limbs that had shed their leaves for winter's coming. Farther up the docks the buildings started. There the lanes were full of carts and wagons. Swarms of people scrambled among others who were gathered in crowds to buy and sell fresh sea-fare. From above, it all it looked like chaos. Hyden couldn't wait to get there.

When he called Talon back to him and opened his eyes, he was pleased to find that the group was already a good way out along the peninsula. The bay off to his right sparkled as it reflected the light of the setting sun back at them. The gray tidal wall that ran the length of the other side of the peninsula was almost invisible beyond the buildings to his left. Torches were being lit and lanterns hung along the roads. As the sun left this part of the world behind, wells of wavering light transformed shadowy corners into welcoming points of commerce and congregation. It reminded Hyden of the crowded Ways at the Summer's Day Festival, especially the calls of the hawkers as they tried to draw attention to their particular wares.

More than a few people stopped to gawk at Oarly the dwarf as the group passed. Only a score of dwarves remained in the realm and all of them lived in or very near Queen Willa's Xwardian palace. To see one out on the docks was rare. Some of the older tavern songs said that thousands upon thousands of them lived somewhere far below the earth's surface, but when Queen Willa had blown the magical horn that was supposed to summon them to Xwarda's aid, none had come.

Oarly made silly faces at the younger spectators, which put smiles on the faces of everyone else. Before long, rumors that the hawk-man wizard who'd saved Xwarda from the dragon was in Old Port

caused the crowds to grow. Luckily, Captain Trant, the captain of the *Royal Seawander* had anticipated as much and paid some men from the docks to block off the mass of people as Hyden's group gained the entrance to the yard of the Royal Seastone Inn.

"Wow!" said Phen as men came out of the shadows and took their horses away. "You're a regular hero, Hyden Hawk."

"Hardly," Hyden replied with a blush. He was starving and thirsty, but afraid to consume anything. He didn't know whether to be repulsed or enticed by the warm savory smells that wafted out of the inn's open doorway.

"Well met, sirs," a big barrel-chested man with a thick, but well-trimmed ginger beard said to them. He had a cob pipe clenched between his teeth and wore a spiffy gray and green captain's uniform.

"You must be Captain Trant," Hyden said with the slightest of nods. Mikahl had instructed him on rank and etiquette over the winter. Mikahl had explained that Hyden's role as a key defender of the realm in the battle against Pael gave him a status that was beyond rank, yet still of a knightly nature. He was more often than not addressed as Sir Hyden Hawk. Since he was not a kingdom born man and his rightful allegiance was not to any of the realm's human kingdoms, the slight nodding bow wouldn't offend anyone. Still, Hyden felt uneasy whenever someone of note was around. If it were up to him, Queen Willa would be just Willa and High King Mikahl would just be Mik, like he used to be, and all the titles could fly out the window. Yet here, the ship's captain was calling all of them 'sirs'.

"Hyden of the Skyler clan, I presume," Trant said as he reached out and shook Hyden's offered hand.

Hyden was shocked to speechlessness by the fact that the man knew how his clansmen would have addressed him. He was saved from the awkward moment when Oarly approached.

"Ah, Master Oarly," Trant reached down to shake the dwarf's hand.

Master Oarly? Hyden thought. *Master of what?* Already schemes of revenge began plotting themselves out in Hyden's mind. *It's going to be a sweet kind of revenge,* Hyden promised himself. His thoughts were interrupted when he saw Brady starting to go help the other military men of the escort with the unloading. "No, Master Culvert," Hyden stopped him. "Your sword can't protect the three of us if you're off with them."

"Master?" He rejoined Hyden. The boyish grin on his face showed that he was glad to be included. "I'm no master."

"You are now the Master of Defense for our exploratory party, Brady." Hyden informed him. "And any man who can go seven minutes against Mikahl's blade is a master swordsman in my book."

"Phenilous, my lad, you've grown some since I last saw you at the palace," Captain Trant was saying as he ruffled the hair on Phen's head.

"Aye," Phen replied. "You came up for the Harvest Ball last year. I didn't realize that it was going to be you steering the boat." Then to Hyden with excitement growing in his eyes he said, "The Captain has a blue monkey that dances on a leash. It can do flips even." Then back to Captain Trant with his eyes darting all around the Captain's feet, "Where is he? You still have him don't you?"

"*She's* alive and well and on the ship." He motioned them into the common room of the Royal Seastone Inn with a sweep of his arm. "We'll be sailing out with the tide on the morrow. Enjoy this night's feast, for it's all hard biscuits and salted meats for a long while after."

The torch-lit room was decorated with sail canvas, rope nets, tiller wheels, seashells, and all other sorts of sailing paraphernalia. There were also a few sets of toothy fish jaws mounted on the walls. One was a wide open maw that was big enough for Hyden and Phen to crawl through at the same time. The air was warmer along the coast, so no fire was burning in the hearth. In a corner of the half filled room was a small stage where a harpist prepared his notes and began tuning his instrument with sharp plunking twangs.

“It’s a marsh thresher,” Captain Trant told Phen who was still gaping up at the big set of fish jaws on the wall. “A small one at that.”

Phen grinned at the others with mock terror in his wide open eyes. The serrated teeth in those jaws were as large as his hands. “How big do they get?” Phen asked the Captain.

“Big enough to bite the bottom out of a ship, I’d guess,” the Captain winked at him.

“We’re not going where them threshers live are we?” Oarly asked with genuine alarm in his voice. “It’s bad enough I’ve got to leave the land. Sailing amongst monsters such as that is for birds and fools.”

“Flying is for the birds, Oarly.” Phen said. “We’re sailing, and we’re only going to skirt the southern tip of the marshlands on our way to Salazar Island.”

“Just so,” the Captain agreed with a surprised nod of respect.

“How long will it take us to reach Salazar?” Brady asked, doing his best not to let his eyes linger on the thresher jaws as he passed them.

“More than two weeks, less than three,” the Captain said over his shoulder as he led them through the room. “It’s getting to be true spring now, and might be a storm or two blows at us along the way.” He stopped them when they reached a long empty table not far from the harpist’s stage. “We’ll lay over at Kahna to fill the water barrels in about a week. You might get some time ashore there if the weather looks questionable.” The Captain looked sharply at Hyden, who was peering back at the entry door.

The door swung open and two finely clad men came in laughing. From behind them, Talon swooped through the opening and glided smoothly across the room to alight on Hyden’s wrist. A woman gasped with fright, and a few men could be heard whispering above the sudden silence that followed. Talon sidestepped his way up Hyden’s arm to the shoulder where he settled in and began preening himself.

They took seats at the table and a pretty lady dressed as a pirate, complete with an eye patch, and mummer’s sword brought out a tall flagon of wine. Hyden stopped her at half full on his and Phen’s goblets and ordered sweet milk for the two of them to come with their courses.

The singer started into a ballad just as hot bread and clam stew came to the tables. The man sang of a sailor who was out chasing treasure, and had left his beautiful lover back at port. There came a time when the sailor had to choose between the treasure and returning to his love. Of course he tried to have them both, and his lover ended up drowning in her own tears.

The wagon master and the commander of the Blacksword escort joined them, along with a senior member of Captain Trant's crew, who was introduced as Deck Master Biggs. They brought the news that the ship had been loaded. During all this, Oarly put away goblet after goblet of wine but showed no signs of even starting to be intoxicated. He did laugh rather robustly at some things that weren't that funny, but his speech never slurred and his wit stayed sharp.

They learned that they had suites in the inn for the night, courtesy of Queen Willa herself. Captain Trant told them this after a main course of nut crusted sea ray on a bed of rice that was smothered in mushroom sauce. Hyden was thankful to find this out, for his stomach was starting to roil. Phen was to share a room with him, but the boy wanted to stay and listen to the bard. Brady assured Hyden that Phen would be well supervised, so Hyden let Talon out to hunt, then went upstairs to their rooms to find the privy.

The singer was in the middle of a ditty about a fisherman who filled his boat full of fish and won the love of another captain's daughter when Hyden's horrid pain-filled scream cut through the whole place like a fog horn.

"That'd be that bite of cinder pepper coming out," Oarly bellowed into the hushed awe that filled the common room. The dwarf didn't care that he was the only one laughing. In fact, it made him laugh all the harder.

Chapter eight

High King Mikahl, King Jarrek, and General Spyra rode three abreast across the wagon-bridge. Not far behind them came their squires. The Pixie River was running fat and swift through the wreckage that was once the town of Tarn. The river flowed out of the Evermore Forest southward and created the border between the kingdoms of Highwander and Seaward. The wagon bridge was wooden and strong, but not strong enough for two hundred Blacksword soldiers and three hundred archers to just come barreling across. There were a few footbridges as well. The three commanders, Mikahl, Jarrek and Spyra, found an old maple full of spring leaves and sat in the saddle under it conversing as the slow process of crossing the men into Seaward began.

“How far is it to Tip?” Mikahl asked the General. Tip was where they would cross out of Seaward into the kingdom of Valleya.

“A week at this pace.”

Barely half a hundred people were left in Tarn. They stopped rebuilding and planting to watch the procession cross the river. A crier had come through earlier to make sure that the way was clear and that the good folk wouldn't be terrified. They'd been through enough already. King Broderick and Queen Rachel's combined army had first attacked Highwander here. The fight had been bloody, and ultimately had only served to add more corpses to Pael's undead army. Not much was left. Tarn had once been able to boast almost a thousand people, but no more. Those who hadn't died in the first attack were ridden over when the undead came. The ones who survived were either lucky, or fled the mayhem for

the forest. The Highwander city of Plat looked about the same when the procession had passed through the day before yesterday.

“We’re back-tracking the demon-wizard’s path of destruction,” said King Jarrek. “It looks like war tore through here, but something’s missing and I just can’t put a finger on it.”

“The bodies are missing. No grave stones even,” Mikahl said somberly. “Pael raised the dead and marched them to Xwarda to fight us.”

“Seeing this is a powerful reminder of what the people have been put through,” Jarrek mused aloud. “If King Broderick had a lick of sense he would have come to Xwarda so that you wouldn’t show up at his door with all of this fresh on your mind.”

“He’s afraid that Queen Willa will lock him away in her dungeon, I think,” said General Spyra.

“He is a coward. He fled his own castle at Dreen and left his people to face Pael,” Jarrek reminded them. “He ordered the small folk inside the red wall and then fled south to Strond. I think that’s where Brady said he went.”

“Brady is your man, the one who braved the enemy lines to warn them?” asked the General.

“Yes. Targon magicked me and a few others out of Wildermont, but barely,” Jarrek said. “I felt it only right to warn the people of Dreen of what was coming. I ordered Brady to ride to them. He stayed and fought with the Valleyans until the dawn broke and the dead started rising. He knew that I was headed to Xwarda with Targon so he rode ahead of Pael to warn everybody. He ran smack into King Broderick and Queen Rachel’s army at Plat. He was captured, but then escaped. He showed up in Xwarda at the palace gates in the middle of Pael’s attack, bewildered and half starved.”

“The boy’s got heart,” Spyra said.

“Aye,” agreed Mikahl. “Who managed to capture him?”

“Blackword soldiers, I think,” answered Jarrek. “They thought he was one of King Broderick or Queen Rachel’s spies, I’m sure. I think that was why he was so confused. He was trying to warn them all

that the dead were about to attack them, but no one would listen to him. His father was killed when Pael brought down the towers at Castlemont. He and I were fighting just a few hundred yards away.” Jarrek paused a moment picturing it all in his head. “I don’t think I want to talk about it anymore, if you’ll excuse me.” Before Mikahl or the General could respond he spurred his horse away.

“I don’t envy that one,” General Spyra said, after King Jarrek was gone. “There’s a long, hard road ahead of him. And you’ve got your work cut out for you as well. What will you do after King Broderick licks your boots?”

“Queen Willa would have me ride down to Seaward City to swoon over Princess Rosa, but I’m not sure if I will. I have a mind to go to O’Dakahn and see what this King Ra’Gren is all about. Maybe if I meet with him we can spare some future bloodshed.”

“Ra’Gren is about nothing but gold and power.” General Spyra actually spat his distaste for the man into the dirt. “The whole kingdom of Dakahn is run by greedy, pitiless overlords, and their king is the worst slaver of them all. You’ll have to either take Dakahn by force, or get really sneaky, unless you want to buy the freedom of the Wildermont people back. One thing about Dakahn is everything there has a price.”

“I guess I haven’t decided my course of action after we deal with King Broderick and Dreen.” Mikahl tried his best not to sound disturbed by the General’s lack of optimism. “I know you have a new wife back in Xwarda. I won’t keep you away from her any longer than I must.”

General Spyra beamed at her mention. He was proud of his pretty young wife, Lady Mandary. She was half his age and pretty as a picture. Her true affection was far more than an old, balding man of his girth could have hoped for, but yet he had it. She said that he was her hero. He had fought bravely in the battle against Pael, and Queen Willa had rewarded him publicly, but being his plump little wife’s hero was his favorite thing these days, that and trying to make a little baby general or two to carry on his name.

Thunder rumbled in the distant southern sky. A dark gray line of clouds had presented itself and appeared to be moving swiftly toward them. It was common enough this time of year for the sea to blow its wrath this far inland, but since they'd come all this way without bad weather they'd hoped to avoid it altogether.

"It'll catch us as soon as we get moving again," Spyra observed. He pointed to the empty dwellings around them. "We may as well spend the night here and let it pass over. If we don't, the men will just be wet and slower on the morrow."

"That's fine with me, General," Mikahl said. "I'm in no hurry to get my boots licked. You're the only one with a reason to hurry home." Mikahl laughed ironically. "By the gods, General, between you, Jarrek, and me, you're the only one with a home left."

Mikahl rode over to King Jarrek, leaving the General to call out the orders to make camp among the empty houses and shops in the little town. As he approached, Jarrek forced a smile, letting Mikahl know that his company was welcome. The two of them were silent for a while after they dismounted. It was after their assigned squires took their horses, and they were alone again, that Jarrek finally spoke.

"I'm thinking of riding on with my group," he said seriously. "We were going to split up when we get to Tip anyway. This..." he paused and indicated the Highwander soldiers who were starting to set up camp. "It's slowing us down. I have thousands of people under the whip, yet we're moving as slow as snails."

"I think that maybe you should then," Mikahl told him. "Your men are not needed here. Take them and ride like the wind. I've got five hundred of Queen Willa's soldiers and General Spyra to watch my back."

"Yes," King Jarrek grinned broadly at the High King. The smile wasn't forced this time. "We just might do that, but we'll at least ride this weather out with you before we go."

The rain came hard, and the long dreary night was filled with wicked lightning flashes and booming thunder. It reminded Mikahl of what his final battle with Pael had looked and sounded like. He tossed and turned, thinking about what he would do after he was finished in Dreen. He could ride south and help King Jarrek free the slaves, or he could ride west to the Leif Greyn River and see if he could spy out anything about his homeland, and the dragon-less Dragon Queen who'd taken it over. He didn't make a decision, and eventually he fell asleep, but not for long.

King Jarrek woke him. Outside his pavilion tent, Mikahl saw that the rain had stopped. It was still dark and cloudy, though, and Jarrek looked to be ready to ride.

"If you want something useful to do, Mik," Jarrek started in a whisper. It had been awhile since anybody had called Mikahl 'Mik,' but it didn't offend him. In fact, the use of the nickname gathered his full attention. Kind Balton and Lord Gregory had always called him Mik. Loudin of the Reyhall had as well. All those men he had loved and trusted. He felt he was safe in putting King Jarrek among them in his heart.

"When you're done with that craven king," Jarrek continued, "ditch the general, but keep thirty swords and thirty bows. Take them and backtrack Pael's path through the Wilder Mountains. You'll come out of them just north of Castlemont proper. Ride down on Dreg the slaver who Princess Rosa told us about and free those folks he's working in the mines. It'll give you a chance to get a look at Locar and the breed giant lord who is supposedly ruling there."

"Aye," Mikahl nodded, and clasped his friend's hand. "I may do just that. You be careful in O'Dakahn. That's a command."

"If I fail, Mik..." King Jarrek's voice trailed off, but his eyes met Mikahl's and the desperation in them was plain to see. The man cared deeply for his people. Mikahl nodded that he understood what hadn't been said, that if the unthinkable happened, he would find a way to finish what Jarrek was about to start. Then the Red Wolf, King of Wildermont, whirled and stalked off into the night.

General Spyra was full of questions the next day, but Mikahl just told him the facts. Yes, King Jarrek and his men rode south to O'Dakahn. No, he hadn't decided what he was going to do after Dreen. "Most likely, General," Mikahl said. "I'll send you and most of the escort back to Xwarda. I'll stay on a bit in Dreen, I think, and test King Broderick's loyalty, as well as his patience. If it comes to anything with Dakahn, I'll have what's left of the Valleyan host at my command."

His words hadn't really been intended as a jab, but they came off as one. It wasn't until five days later, when they rode into Tip under the midday sun, that the General bothered to speak to him on a personal level again.

"Since we've made exceptional time, Your Highness," the General's expression was pinched—he clearly did not want to be asking anything of Mikahl —"I ask that we let the men recuperate the rest of the day. The captains have asked me to see if they might hunt the tip of the forest so that we can all feast on fresh game this night instead of rations."

"A hunt?" Mikahl's grin was wide and genuine. "That's an excellent idea, sir. The best idea I've heard since I can remember."

Tip was located on both banks of the Southron River where it flowed out of the Evermore Forest. The forest reached southward along the banks and the town had been built at the forest's most southern finger-like point, thus earning itself the name Tip.

Like the Pixie River, the Southron River created a natural border. West of the Southron River was Valleya, and between the Southron and Pixie Rivers lay Seaward. The town sat on both sides of the bridge, but the Valleyans had swarmed in after Pael's horde had come through and taken most of the Seaward side over.

Since the Valleyans had taken over the town, it had started to be rebuilt before winter came. While Dreen, Valleya's capital city, had been destroyed by Pael's rampage, the rest of the kingdom of Valleya had been left untouched. There was no shortage of men and resources. New building had increased the

place to a size bordering on city status. Nevertheless, the thick run of the Evermore Forest that clung to the river north of the city was still rumored to be a hunter's dreamland. Apparently the vast and sudden increase in populace hadn't scared away any of the game—at least that's what the locals were saying. They also warned that some dark beast had taken up residence in the woods and that a few men had gone missing because of it.

Mikahl borrowed a longbow and a quiver of arrows from one of the archers, then set out on the Valleyan side of the river with a group of Highwander archer captains. General Spyra stayed in town and kept everything moving along in an orderly fashion. The Seaward side of the forest was hunted by the remaining archery captains, one of whom boasted the official rank of Queen's Ranger. Needless to say the ranger's experience paid off. The group hunting the Seaward side of the river returned an hour before dusk with two does and a stag draped proudly across the backs of their horses.

Open cook fires dotted the night, and the smell of fresh cooked meat filled the air. The men were all in good spirits, save for General Spyra. The sun was going down and the High King was nowhere to be seen. The General was sworn to protect High King Mikahl, but couldn't do so if he didn't know where he was. One of the Valleyan horse ranchers, obviously a wealthy man by the size of his entourage, approached the General as full dark was setting in. The man had a concerned look on his face as he spoke.

"There's a devil boar loose out there, General," the man said, indicating the Valleyan side of the river where the High King and his group had gone off to hunt. "It's as big as a wagon and evil. It's killed a half dozen men since the snows melted. It's been out there all winter. Them men of yours might have gotten into a pickle with it."

Spyra paled. He knew exactly what was out there in the forest. The demon-boar, and a few of the wyverns Pael had summoned into the battle of Xwarda, had escaped the might of Mikahl's sword. The wyverns had flown away, but the demon-boar had fled into the Evermore Forest near Xwarda. It had

taken wounds from his men in the battle, and they'd assumed it found a place in the forest to die. The Queen's Rangers searched after the snows melted. It was no wonder they found no sign of the beast. It had come west.

The General took a few deep breaths, gathered his cool, and began yelling out orders in the darkness. It took a few minutes longer than it should have, due to the relaxed state of his men, but the General's Blacksword cavalry formed up as ordered, each with a torch blazing in hand.

"Where to, sir?" a sergeant at the front of the group asked. His horse was prancing and whinnying.

Just then, an explosion of sapphire light erupted from the middle of the forest to the north. It was followed by a sizzling crackling sound. The light shifted from blue to lavender then to a deep angry crimson. In the shocked silence that followed, the sound of faraway voices shouting, and a harrowing scream carried to Spyra and his men. Then the distant red illumination sputtered and failed, leaving the forest bathed in silent, silvery moonlight.

"To the High King!" the General yelled at the top of his lungs as he heedlessly spurred his horse toward the ruckus in the woods. There was no doubt what the source of the colorful light had been; all of the Blacksword soldiers had seen Mikahl's infamous sword Ironspike lighting up the night while he was fighting the demon-wizard Pael. The question was, why had the light suddenly sputtered and disappeared, and whose voice had that been screaming out in such horrible agony?

Chapter Nine

They were given the Royal Compartments on the *Seawander*. There were two sleeping rooms, each five paces long and three wide. They had side by side cushioned bunks shelving out from the walls. A net faced storage ledge ran high on the wall, and a small writing table filled the space at the foot of the beds. There was a brass oil lantern dangling from a short chain overhead, and as it swayed, the stark shadows it threw exaggerated the movements of the ship tenfold.

The two rooms were joined in the middle by a third, which was paneled with polished mahogany and had a round window that the crew kept clean enough to actually see through. The viewing portal, as it was called, was situated at the end of a booth table that could easily seat six men. There was a cushioned divan and an enclosed privy at the other end of the room. All three cabins were carpeted in plush sea-blue shag and trimmed with elegant brass works. As far as quarters on a ship went, this was the lap of luxury, but since none of the four companions had ever been to sea before, they thought it was cramped at best.

Oarly went straight to a bunk in the room he and Brady were to share and wasted no time getting rolled up in a woolen blanket. The dwarf asked that his meals be brought to him and that he not be disturbed. He then pulled the covers up over his head and lay stock still. All this he did to the amusement of the others a full hour before the ship was scheduled to depart the docks.

The other three only stayed below long enough to drop off their things. They were too excited to miss watching the land fade away as they took to the ocean. While they stood at the rail, Hyden had Brady and Phen go over the checklist of supplies for the tenth time. Rope, blankets, grappling hooks,

lanterns, oil, arrows by the score. There were also shovels, axes, picks and other digging tools, not to mention the tents, field rations, foul weather gear and other necessities like soil cloth and healing herbs. They had thought of everything, or so they hoped. It was a good thing, too, because by the time they had finished discussing the supplies Captain Trant was bellowing, "All hands aboard!" The ship was departing Old Port for the open sea.

At dinner the night before the Captain had told them a little about the *Seawander*. At just over two hundred feet long she was no ordinary ship. Built to carry Queen Willa and other nobility, instead of a cargo, it was sleek and ballasted for optimal speed. She boasted three masts that reached high into the sky and the Captain promised that they could fly enough canvas to outrun any Dakaneese pirate ship they came across. What's more, the transom was lined with Wardstone, just like a river-tug, and the water-mage on board could make the ship go as fast as a double-decked rower, and that was against the wind. As proof of this, the ship lurched away from the dock without a single sail set and carved a sharp wake as it picked up speed and made its way through the harbor.

Men in fishing boats waved their hats and cheered the *Seawander* as she passed. A moment later, as she slid through the shadow of a monstrous ship, the crew of the galley called down to them in languages that neither Hyden nor Phen could name. Members of the *Seawander's* crew called back up to them in clipped but joyous shouts. The hulking cargo vessel towered over them in the water so much so that Hyden and Phen both had to crane their necks to take it all in.

Talon swooped and terrorized the flocks of noisy white gulls that were following along behind them. He rolled and spun and showed off his aerial prowess to the smaller sea birds as if he were their superior. The gulls seemed more impressed with the bits of food that were being stirred up in the ship's wake, but still kept a wary eye on him.

Deck Master Biggs called out orders, his voice booming through his thick seaman's beard. The first mate repeated them, and like monkeys, men took to the rigging and unfurled the yellowed canvas of a

dozen or more sails. Soon the *Seawander* began picking up speed. As she left the protected area of the port she began rising and falling with the swells. Each time she came down a great splash of spray and foam shot out from under her and blew back across the deck. Phen gripped the rail tightly with one hand and thrust his other fist up into the air urging the ship on. Brady found the bowsprit figurehead, a mermaid of polished ironwood, and leaned out ahead of the ship with her, letting the wind blow his long brown hair back behind him.

“Look!” Phen exclaimed.

Hyden searched the sea where Phen was pointing but didn’t see a thing. Then all of a sudden a delfin fish, as big as a man, sleek and green leapt out of the water alongside of them; another one shot out of the sea, then another. Soon a dozen of the smiling, snouted fish were arcing through the air racing and dancing with the ship as they went.

Talon swooped down amongst them, and through his *familiar* link Hyden could hear their joyous laughter and mirth. They were like a group of children playing in the summer sun.

Phen streaked across the deck toward the bow to tell Brady about the delfin. Deck Master Biggs caught him up about half way, flipped him around then half dangled him over the side rail. With a threatening, yet playful, look on his face, the Deck Master snarled, “There be no running on me deck, boy! No more warnings!”

When Deck Master Biggs pulled him back onto the ship and let him go, Phen’s eyes were the size of chicken eggs, but his terrified grin was even wider than before.

The delfin followed them for some while, and before they knew it, land was no longer in sight. The Captain said something to the Deck Master who looked behind them through his long glass then pointed. Biggs said something to the first mate, who came over to where Brady, Hyden and Phen were now leaning on the rail enjoying the delfin show and Talon’s antics.

“Keep a watchin’ as you are,” the man said with a discolored, gap-toothed grin.

Hyden let his eyes trail behind them to where the Deck Master was pointing his looking glass. For a moment he saw a surging swell on the water behind, then it was gone. It came again, only closer this time. There was a single sharp spiked fin as big as a man's leg breaking the water at the peak of the swell. Then it was gone again, back into the rolling sea. Then all of a sudden a fish the size of the *Seawander* herself leapt clear of the surface beside them. Its toothy mouth snapped shut on a pair of delfin as the terrified screeches of the rest of the pod caused Hyden to cringe and Talon to veer sharply away.

"Wow! It's a sabersnout, Hyden," Phin exclaimed loudly.

"Just so, lad!" Captain Trant boomed from somewhere. "Don't fall over the rail now."

Talon was so startled by the monstrous fish that he came swooping down out of the air onto the deck and landed badly among a roped down stack of water barrels.

The delfin were long gone when the sabersnout leapt through the air a second time. Its glossed black, dinner plate sized eye looked directly at Hyden Hawk. The satisfaction it felt after having just eaten a fresh meal was no less than the joy the delfin had been feeling when they were at play. If it could have, it would have eaten Hyden as it had the two unlucky delfin. *Thus is nature*, Hyden told himself as the big fish splashed gracefully into the rolling ocean and disappeared.

The Captain's table was in the galley, and that evening they were invited to eat with the officers of the ship. The fare was quite a bit better than the promised sea biscuits and salted meat. It was actually fresh venison and honey pork with hard bread and seaweed casserole. The table was treated to hilarious entertainment courtesy of Babel, the Captain's little blue-haired mango monkey. The monkey was the size of a newborn child and, as the first mate played a ditty on the flute, it whirled, tumbled, and spun across the table as gracefully as the ballerinas that sometimes danced in Queen Willa's auditorium.

They tried to get Oarly out of bed to attend the dinner, but not even the lure of wine or stout ale would get the dwarf to leave his cabin.

After dinner, back in the Royal Compartment, Brady listened while Phen and Hyden took turns reading out of the *Index of Sea Creatures*. They spent a little time reading about delfin and the sabersnout, but curious as they were, they read on. They read about the cloud fish that squirted inky poisonous fluids into the water to stun its prey. They read about the ever hungry marsh threshers and the rare flying sea turtles whose bright turquoise shells were worth a small fortune in gold. They read into the evening until eventually all three of them were plagued with yawns. Finally, long after the moon had presented itself, they all fell asleep to the smooth rocking motion of the ship as it carved its way westward through the ocean.

Phen found himself at the ship's rail before the sun was even up. He was heaving his supper to the fishes. Brady was right beside him. Oarly was sick as well, but had locked himself in the privy down in the Royal Compartments. Sick or not, the dwarf was determined to stay below deck the entire journey.

"It's not right," Phen whined. "I wasn't sick yesterday."

"Neither was I," Brady said glumly, just before lurching another load of bile out into the sea.

"I don't know where it's all coming from," rasped Brady when he was done. "I know I haven't eaten that much."

"Aye," Phen agreed then started to heave.

"Here," the first mate said, stepping out of the darkness. "Drink ye a few swigs of this, lads, and your guts'll settle."

Brady took the offered flask and was about to sip from it when the man cut in again sharply.

"Ah! Ah! Ah! Wipe you fargin mouth first," the man all but shouted. "Do ya think I wanna taste your innards?" Even in the darkness, the gaps in his teeth were visible.

"Sorry," Brady mumbled. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve then took a long pull from the flask. The burn of the liquor was harsh, especially in his throat. When it got down into his belly, though, the roiling there dispersed into a warm fuzzy pool. Phen took two quick swallows and nearly choked.

The next day, save for the crew, Hyden had the deck to himself. Oarly, Phen, and Brady were all below. Phen and Brady were sleeping soundly. Oarly was still locked in the privy, but snoring loudly between his less frequent rounds of dry heaving.

After conferring with Deck Master Biggs, Hyden scaled up the main mast's maze of rope ladders, yardarms, and rigging, up to the crow's nest at its top. From there he could see the horizon in all directions. There was no land in sight. It was a little unsettling, but not so much as when he looked down to see that the little ship below him wasn't actually below him at all. It was off to the right at the moment, riding up the face of a swell. Ever so slowly it passed under him and he felt the crow's nest swaying quickly out to the right of the ship as it eased down the other side of the wave. Not since he first started climbing the secret hawkling nesting cliffs to harvest their eggs with his clansmen had he felt such a tingling rush of vertigo.

No, that wasn't true. When he'd ridden on the dragon's back, he'd felt the same thrill, but that ride had been mostly at night. The feeling of desperation he felt during that flight had overshadowed everything. This was different. He decided he would have better odds calling the outcome of a coin flip than he would of landing on the deck if he fell. He knew he wouldn't fall, though. He had been climbing all his life.

For a long while he spread his arms out like they were wings and focused his sight out ahead of their course. Only puffy white clouds, blue sky, and the slow rolling turquoise sea were in his field of vision. He imagined first that he was once again on the back of the dragon, but then that wasn't enough. He imagined that he was the dragon, that he was gliding effortlessly over the sea, his big hind claws skimming the tops of the waves, and his wide leathery wings pushing volumes of cool salty air. In his mind he flicked his long sinuous tale this way and that to keep his balance true, then arced a swift banking turn one way, then the other.

Talon swooped in and landed at the basket's edge. The bird had to keep his wings out to maintain his balance there but he did it gracefully.

Hyden smiled at his *familiar* as the dragon vision slipped away from him. He touched the dragon tear medallion that always hung under his shirt. *If you ever have a need of me, just call me through the tear, and I will come*, Claret had said to him. She'd also said: *Remember who your true friends are. They come few and far between*. He wondered if her remaining egg had hatched yet. It galled him that Shaella had tricked his brother into stealing the other two. Gerard had paid the price for his thievery—or was still paying it. Hyden shook off the thought and tried to get his mind back on pleasant things, but it wasn't to be.

He didn't quite understand what Shaella meant that night, in the middle of nowhere, just before he threw her off the dragon's back. "You wouldn't know what's left of him," she said. "He's barely even human now."

Claret had confirmed that Shaella's words were true. The Westland wizard Pael had run a dagger through Gerard's heart, but Gerard hadn't died. The magic ring he'd found had kept him alive, but barely. Apparently he had crawled down into the darkness of the Nethers to escape Pael, or maybe to chase the power that the old crone had once foretold he would find down there.

Shaella said that he was barely human now, and Claret said that Gerard shouldn't have survived, but he had, because of the ring—the ring that Hyden was supposed to be wearing.

The goddess of Hyden's clan had told him that he must someday get the ring back from Gerard, that it was supposed to have been his. Until it was on Hyden's finger, the balance of things would remain badly off kilter.

Hyden hoped beyond hope that the Silver Skull of Zorellin might actually allow him to retrieve it, or at least allow him to go into the Nethers after it. He hoped that Gerard was still human enough to remember who he was.

Hopefully the bond they shared as brothers would be enough to allow Hyden to take back the ring peacefully and set the world aright.

Talon shrieked, bringing Hyden back into the reality of the moment. To the south, the sky was turning gray. Hyden took the looking tube from its holder in the basket and looked out at a dark place on the horizon. He decided that he could probably see better through Talon's keen vision. With his own eyes still open, he sought out Talon's sight. Now he could see a mass of churning black clouds as if they were right in front of him. Bright jagged lightning streaked up from the sea and fat drops of rain pelted the angry waves. The swells had grown huge and the wind was blowing in gusty spurts. It wasn't easy remaining calm as he climbed back down the mainmast to find Captain Trant.

"A bad storm you say?" Captain Trant scanned the sky to the south and sniffed the air. "Maybe so, maybe so. Biggs! Go get me the long glass!" the Captain ordered as he strode up onto the forecastle. A brass tube as long as a man's arm was brought up and the Captain peered through it to the south. He was silent for a long time, then he turned to look at Hyden curiously. "You saw that from the nest, did you?"

Hyden nodded. Talon flapped at his shoulder as the wind gusted and threatened to topple the bird. Captain Trant's eyes stopped on Talon for a moment.

"I'd suggest that you 'n' yer bird both get below afore long, and take this." The Captain deftly snatched the second mate's flask out of his shirt pocket as he moved by. "Your men will need it. That's not just a rain storm blowing at us, Sir Hyden Hawk, that's something a few tads nastier than hell!"

Chapter ten

High King Mikahl saw the demon-boar just in the nick of time.

Earlier in the evening they had taken two nice does, and we're now trying for a third. Four of the archers had ridden north making a wide berth around the river. They were riding back toward Mikahl and the other three men. They were coming slowly, trying to flush a buck, or maybe even a wild sow, out into the open. Mikahl didn't find much sport in hunting this way, but when there was an army of men to feed, and the sun was setting, there was no better way to drum up a meal. The High King was positioned closest to the band of thick underbrush that ran along the river's bank. He was reminiscing about the last time he'd been on a true hunt.

His fond memory was interrupted by two dull red embers a good foot apart, glowing in the deepest shadows of the forest ahead of him. He squinted, blinked a few times. Then, just as he realized that the embers were actually eyes, the beast charged.

Mikahl loosed the arrow he had nocked, then flung the bow at the enormous beast and drew his sword. Whether from the sudden appearance of Ironspike's magical blue glow, or from fear of the huge charging demon-boar that it illuminated, Mikahl's horse reared and whinnied loudly. In Mikahl's head, the eldritch symphony of Ironspike's power blasted full force, into a glorious and triumphant harmony. Mikahl turned the horse with a yank on the reins and was ready to slash when one of the fool archer captains tried to be a hero and charged his horse right between Mikahl and the demon-boar. The boar's tusks were razor-sharp and at least the size of a young girl's forearm. The archery captain's poor mount

didn't have a chance. The boar dug his head down and gored up through the animal. Then it reared back and sent horse and rider twisting into the trees.

Mikahl was awed by the size and strength of the creature. It was as tall as a man at the shoulder and was as big as a horse-drawn wagon, but low to the ground and covered in bristling hide.

The archery captain's sharp scream was abruptly cut off as his head slammed into a trunk. The disemboweled horse crashed down not too far from him with a thumping whoosh.

Ironspike's glow went from blue to lavender, then to cherry-red, as Mikahl's anger grew. When the boar came charging at him again, he sent three wicked pulsing blasts into the beast's neck and shoulder. He tried to spur his mount out of the way, but the terrified horse balked. The last thing Mikahl sensed before his horse made a desperate twisting leap was the horrible stench of burnt hair from where his blasts had scorched the beast. Ironspike was knocked from his hand and he was smacked gracelessly out of the saddle by a low hanging limb. In the now completely darkened forest, he landed hard on his back.

For a few heartbeats he thought he might have been knocked out, but the deep grunting of the angry beast and the thrum of an arrow being loosed from nearby came to his ringing ears and told him that he was still in the realm of consciousness. As soon as he had his breath back, he scooted himself back against a tree trunk. He strained to see, but it was too dark. Men were shouting, and nearby he heard his horse crashing through the trees. *Blasted animal*, he thought, *Windfoot wouldn't have frozen up like that*. He found that he missed his horse quite badly.

Since he didn't know where his weapon, or the boar had gone, Mikahl figured that he was all right to wait where he was. Then someone fired up a torch. The red eyes of the demon-boar were coming in at him again, this time with a vengeance. He felt around him on the ground hoping to find Ironspike, but had to give it up. He barely had time to roll out of the way.

The demon-boar hit the tree Mikahl had been leaning against so hard that it shook the ground. It didn't advance after that, it just stood there. Mikahl could smell the acrid stench of the creature's

wounds as it staggered in place right next to him. It was all he could do to hold in the contents of his bladder. Even in the torch-lit darkness the boar's size wasn't lost on him. He brushed against its side as he tried to get away. Its coarse bristles felt more like pine needles than hair.

Someone called for him but he couldn't find his voice to answer. He had a dagger in his boot, but he knew better than to waste the effort. A dagger probably wouldn't even get through the thick hide of something that big. The only course of action was to get away while the thing was still stunned. If he hadn't lost the sword, things would be different. As he stumbled blindly away with his hands up to guard his face from branches and thorny brambles, he couldn't help but feel naked. Without Ironspike he was vulnerable. He knew he wasn't defenseless without the sword. He was better than everyone on the practice yard. He had grown used to the feeling of invincibility that the magical blade gave him, though. He had grown used to its power. He decided that, if he lived through this, he would try to be more careful. He knew if he died, the power of Ironspike would die with him. Without Ironspike, who would unite the realm into a place of peace? Like it or not, he was the last of Pavreal's bloodline, and the sword would only recognize him as its wielder. For the first time, he actually understood why Queen Willa was trying so hard to get him wed.

"King Mikahl!" an exasperated voice shouted for the umpteenth time, as long wild shadows went flying about the area. Mikahl heard the call and responded.

"Here," he rasped back. The Captain found him quickly then.

"Where is it? Where is the beast?" the man asked in a frightful panic. As an afterthought he added a quick, "Your Majesty."

The demon-boar grunted beside them and made a low gurgling noise. The slow but solid sounds of trees being pushed aside, of fragile limbs suddenly being shaken loose, and the thump of heavy retreating footfalls followed.

“It’s getting away,” the Captain said. “Should I give chase?” His words sounded far braver than his voice.

“We’ll track it together in the daylight,” Mikahl replied.

The archery captain’s sigh of relief was louder than he intended it to be. Mikahl thought that he could see the man flushing with shame, but didn’t hold it against him; didn’t hold it against him in the least.

A short while later, General Spyra’s guardsmen came storming through the forest like a chaotic parade of giant fire bugs. Ironspike lay not three paces from where Mikahl sat, which saved him some embarrassment on the long ride back to Tip. Captain Finley died from the head injury he sustained when the boar threw him into the tree, and two other men had been wounded when they gave chase by torchlight. Mikahl learned all this by the campfire while munching on the hot greasy haunch of one of the does they’d killed. He raised a toast to the fallen man and then proceeded to down several cups of stout ale before promising the good people of Tip that the demon-boar would be rooted out before the host moved on to Dreen.

General Spyra didn’t like the idea of staying any longer than necessary, but didn’t voice his opinion. Instead, at first light, while Mikahl lay sleeping off the intoxication of the night before, the General organized a party to go kill the beast and get it over with. He sent two hundred men far to the north and had them form a tightly spaced line from the river all the way out to the tree line. They moved southward through the forest at a steady clip most of the morning before finally finding the creature. It was already near death from the wounds Mikahl had inflicted with Ironspike’s magic.

Mikahl woke to the news, brought back from by rider just after midday. A wagon was sent to bring the carcass into town, and upon seeing Mikahl’s hung-over condition, the General informed the men to take their time as they would be staying in Tip for one more night.

Later, after seeing the massive body of the dead boar, the townsfolk of Tip put on a feast for the General, his captains, and the hero of the day, High King Mikahl, who, according to the men, had more or less killed the beast single-handedly. As much as he wanted to, Mikahl didn't drink more than a goblet of ale that night. He didn't like the attention these people shoveled onto him for such a trivial deed as defending himself. It was a deed that he couldn't even credit to his own action. Everything he had done had been a reaction. Nevertheless, the people of Tip were happy and relieved, and that was enough to keep the smile on his face genuine until he found his way to his bedroll.

Five days later they passed through Kasta, a small city and fully fledged trading center that had only tasted a minimum of damage from Pael's army. "The undead just marched right through," the people told Mikahl and the General. "They killed a few, but didn't stop long enough to do much more."

Pael, it seemed, hadn't been around when his army of living corpses had passed. All of the people of Kasta knew who Pael was, though. Dreen was just up the road, and of the several thousand that had lived there, only a few hundred had escaped the death and destruction Pael had wrought. The story was that half the people of Kasta had moved to Dreen to claim the shops and farms of their dead families.

The entire two days it took for them to march the troops around Kasta, Mikahl was swamped with invitations to enjoy the hospitality of every noble, and some not so noble, house in the city. Both afternoons were spent wading down the avenues with a small detachment of Blacksword soldiers, through the sea of gathered crowds that just wanted to see and cheer the great young king who had defeated Pael.

In the evenings they went out of their way to avoid the persistent city folk, but it didn't matter. The crowd came to them. The last time Mikahl had seen this many Valleyans gathered in one place, they had been living corpses, wielding everything from farm implements to two-handed swords, trying to kill him and Queen Willa's soldiers. Now they were wielding the Valleyan banner, a dark shield on a red and yellow checked background, and they were cheering the very people they had been trying to kill. The

Valleyans had been attacking Queen Willa and Highwander even before Pael had come along. It amazed him what a common enemy could do to get folks on the same side.

Besides being accepted by the Valleyan people, the only good thing to come of the attention Mikahl's arrival was generating was the young, proud, and fully trained destrier that was presented to him that second evening. Thunder was the beautiful animal's name, and Mikahl graciously accepted the horse. He had a squire get the information of the house that had given him the gift and hand wrote a letter of appreciation.

Thunder had the ill luck of being owned now by Mikahl. Thunder had heavy horseshoes to fill. Mikahl would take excellent care of the creature, but he would also compare the horse's every action and detail to Windfoot. Mikahl had already vowed to retrieve Windfoot from the Skyler Clan village when he had the time. Thunder would never find a more caring owner, but when Windfoot came home, Thunder would probably spend a lot more time in the stable than he was used to. Windfoot and Mikahl had survived a lot together.

Mikahl was glad to get Kasta behind them. The road to Dreen seemed to be as crowded as the city had been. Many a cart and wagon was passed on the way to the Red City. Swine herds, goat herds, people making the journey on foot as well. Nearly all of them stopped to cheer Mikahl as he and the Blacksword detail rode past. When they finally reached Dreen, an escort of Valleyan cavalry led them from the outskirts of the fringe settlements into the big red clay brick wall that surrounded the capital city itself. Beyond the city, to the north and west, the Wilder Mountains rose up out of the arid plain.

When they approached the wall Mikahl was awestruck, not by its height, but by the amount of space it enclosed. It was said that, on foot, a man might take most of a week to walk the top of the wall all the way around the city. Mikahl didn't doubt it. The main gates and the sections of wall to either side of them had been newly rebuilt. The fresh clay brick was a lighter shade of pink than the weathered brick around the gates. And the thick wood planks that had been bolted to the old rusty iron bands of

the gate itself were still fresh and white. All that could be seen rising above the thirty foot wall were two crenellated towers that were set deep into the city.

When they passed through the gates, Mikahl saw that the wall was half as wide as it was tall. Clanking iron portcullises were being raised on the inside. Once clear of them he found that the Red City was not misnamed. Nearly all of the well-spaced buildings were made of the same clay brick as the outer wall. No building was higher than two stories save for the twin towers, which reached up out of what could only be King Broderick's modest castle. The streets here were not crowded, and every other building appeared to be empty and abandoned. Most every structure boasted a fenced corral; some held prized Valleyan horse stock, others held sheep or goats. There were a few head of cattle here and there and more than one weary looking bull, but mostly there were horses ranging in the pens. The clay streets were wide and pocked with the hoof prints and cart tracks of the millions of animals that had been driven through over the years. The bulk of High King Mikahl's host made an encampment near the east gates where they entered the city. King Broderick's cavalry attachment led the others—King Mikahl, General Spyra, two archery units, and Spyra's fifty man guard attachment—through the city toward the castle. They had to stop for the night before reaching it, and it was well into the afternoon the next day when they finally came to the unimpressive head-high wall that surrounded Broderick's abode.

A pair of full-size stallions rearing to fight decorated the ornate double gate. They were a study in detail and craftsmanship. The dark stone they were carved from was veined with blood red and pinkish white. The color went well with all the red clay around them. Mikahl found that he wanted to get out of Thunder's saddle and examine them closer, but decided against it. General Spyra eased close to him, and as they waited for the gate guards to announce them to the castle, he spoke.

"Notice that the people who live inside the red wall are a little quieter about your arrival?" The General grinned. The sun reflected off of his bald head into Mikahl's eyes. Mikahl had to squint when he looked back at him.

“Aye. Days of being cheered, then all of a sudden only stares and nods inside the wall. Why?”

“Outside the walls,” the General leaned in close so that he could whisper, “the craven king’s power is thin. They would put you in his seat in a moment, I assure you. But here, inside the walls, Broderick has thousands of ears and a much stronger base of support. He’ll lick your boots, but he’ll do it in private.”

If the capital of Valleya was unimpressive compared to Xwarda or Castlemont (before Pael had destroyed them), then King Broderick was a total letdown. The large, fleshy man was robed in wrinkled layers of golden cloth trimmed in red. His black hair and beard were thick, curly, and unkempt, and the people who were gathered around him at the top of the castle’s entry stair looked about as happy to be there as they would at their own execution.

Mikahl had an urge and followed it. Before the craven king could say a word, he spurred Thunder forward and quickly closed the space between him and the foot of King Broderick’s entry stair. The Valleyan King’s Guard was surprised by the move, but more than one of them stepped up, with hand on hilt, ready, if a little reluctantly, to defend their big sloppy king. Mikahl drew Ironspike and the purplish glow of its blade was clearly visible in the midday sun. The people around Broderick, guardsmen included, instantly shrunk back from him. It was as if they all half-expected Mikahl to take off the man’s head in that instant. King Broderick himself seemed only slightly impressed by Mikahl’s display. Still, he was more than a little nervous as he glanced over at his court announcer and gave a sharp nod. “Thump! Thump! Thump!” sounded the butt of a staff on the sun-baked clay surface. “All hail High King Mikahl Collum, the Blessed Uniter.”

Reluctantly, King Broderick went to a knee. Every person in sight of the scene followed suit, save for one, a slim man who was dressed quite regally and standing in the castle’s entry way behind King Broderick’s retinue. Mikahl’s eyes met his and the man gave a nod of respect, no more, no less. Mikahl smiled and returned the gesture.

At least there's one here not ready to lick my boots, Mikahl thought, and found that he had more respect for the one in the doorway than anyone else he'd met here so far.

"Rise," Mikahl commanded with forced authority in his voice. He had to bite back a laugh when he heard General Spyra mumble under his breath, "He might be too fat to get up."

General Spyra was correct, for two men quickly stepped up on each side of the Valleyan king and helped him to his feet. All around them, the Valleyan people started to cheer. The look on Broderick's bright red face showed that this wasn't the introduction he had envisioned, and that he was none too pleased about the situation. The smiles on the faces around the King of Valleya showed Mikahl that it was an introduction they had enjoyed, though. King Broderick had been put in his place swiftly, and publicly, right from the start, and those who'd seen it, especially the curious man in the doorway, had enjoyed it immensely. Mikahl wasn't really amused, though. In fact, he found that he was disgusted by the way Broderick carried himself.

Chapter eleven

The boat Dreg loaned Lord Gregory was as small as a watercraft could be and still be considered a boat. It was nothing more than a child's skiff, with two oar locks, a rudder for steering, and two bench seats. With Lord Gregory and the man Dreg sent to escort him both sitting in it, the boat sat so low in the water that the slightest ripple threatened to wash over the sides.

The deal was fairly simple: Dreg would keep the chunk of gold, the horse, and Lord Gregory's sword until he returned with or without his wife. If he did indeed return, they would travel to the cavern Lord Gregory said he had wintered in, where he had supposedly found the nonexistent deposit of gold. From there it would be an equal split. Lord Gregory had no choice in the matter that he could see. He hated to give up his sword, but it was only an object. His wife's well-being was far more important to him than the blade.

Dreg was a snake, a slaver, and an opportunistic thug. There was a time when Lord Gregory would have imposed justice in King Balton's name, and taken the man's hands off, or worse. As it was, Dreg had the boats, and the men. Lord Gregory was nothing but a broken down cripple who was patiently bailing water from the boat as Dreg's man, Grommen, cursed and pulled on the oars.

The flow of the river channel was carrying them in the right direction, but the boat kept drifting into the deep swamp grass along the edge of the marshes. It was a repetitive pattern: row over close to the western bank and then drift down river and back across the channel toward the swamp grass for most of an hour, row back, and start all over. By working the rudder to maximum effect, the crosscurrent drift

could be delayed, but not avoided. They had taken turns rowing at first, but Grommen saw the pain in Lord Gregory's face when he tried to work the oars. He'd taken over then. Not so much because he was chivalrous or kind, mind you, but because of the bugs. The western bank and the main flow of the channel were relatively free of them, but along the marsh grass of the eastern edge there were swarms upon swarms of flying, stinging, itching things that Grommen couldn't stand.

Lord Gregory had a mind to get them deep in the grass, thinking that while Grommen was fighting the bugs, he might be able to get him over the side of the boat, or possibly even get his dagger into the man's neck. If he thought he had the strength in him to manage the boat by himself, he might have done it. He didn't, so he patiently bailed the water that seeped and slopped into the craft and watched with a sinking heart as they went floating by the upriver outposts of Settsted Stronghold one by one.

The single towered, squat gray stone buildings were manned now by glittery green-scaled, bug-eyed, lizard-men wearing mismatched pieces of armor. Lord Ellrich's proud river guardsmen used to have that duty. What bothered Lord Gregory the most was the banner flying in place of Westland's prancing lion. The bright yellow trio of crossed lightning bolts on the black field was irksome. The zard-man sentries, and their huge geka lizard mounts, weren't even necessary at the outposts. There was no threat of attack from the swamp now.

The zard were natural creatures of the marshes and they came and went across the river freely into the endless expanse of muck that stretched from Westland's border, south and east, all the way to Dakahn.

It was surprising that the boat went along unmolested. Not once were they hailed or stopped as they drifted down the channel. They passed a few fishing boats and were waved at by the human boys and zard working together in the nets, but not much else. His worries were blanked out of his mind when he got his first glimpse of Settsted itself. The ancient stronghold had fortified all of the men who manned the outposts along the marshland border. It had stood longer than Westland's history had been

recorded. Now it was nothing more than a crumbling ruin. The great green moss covered stones of its outer protective walls and main structure were scorched black and caved in.

The village that stood between the stronghold and the river was alive with humans and zard-men alike. Many of the old dwellings still lay in piles, but plenty of new ones had sprouted up. And the dock, an over long wooden intrusion out into the river channel, was as crowded and alive as Lord Gregory had ever seen it.

It was an eerie feeling, seeing the familiar place under such unfamiliar conditions. The blasted golden lightning-bolt banner rippled and furled from the stronghold's remaining tower, from the masts of the larger vessels tied to the docks, too. The strange lizard-men, with their fist-sized black eyes and their long tapering tails, moved and worked amongst the young boys and older human men as if they'd been doing so forever. To Lord Gregory, it was as fascinating as it was sickening.

He had no doubt now that Lord Ellrich had fallen. Either here, or in the battle for Wildermont, he couldn't say, but he knew that his oversized friend would have rather died than allow the land they both loved to be taken over by skeeks.

As Settsted faded behind them, Lord Gregory hit on the hardest question about the situation. How could you take Westland back? The people seemed content with the conditions. If this so-called Dragon Queen was fair and just, who would help Mikahl reclaim his birthright? Who would want to? Obviously the land was doing better than it would have with Glendar running it. Lord Gregory wasn't too quick to judge the situation, though. Things might be going smoothly along the marshes where there was more work to do in a day than a man could get done, but what of Lakeside Castle, or the city outside its gates? What of the men who were being whipped to pull that breed giant up and down the streets of Locar? No, those with the strength to rise up against these things that had taken over would most likely do so, if they had leadership. The problem was, there was no one left here but old men and young boys. It

made Lord Gregory's blood boil. There was no honor in marching over the helpless, and he found himself spitting the taste of it over the side of the little boat into the river.

"Strange to look upon, eh?" Grommen said. He was manning the tiller now, trying to slow the boat's way over toward the swarming swamp grass.

"Very," Lord Gregory replied. He turned his gaze on the man in the boat and studied him.

Grommen was a barrel of a man, stout and hard, but not quite as tall as Lord Gregory. His studded and ringed leather armor vest was well worn and boasted several battle scars on its finish. Grommen had a square face with a prominent jaw covered by ginger whiskers. The hair on his head was a few shades lighter. He was a handful of years younger than Lord Gregory, and his dark eyes were stern, but not too serious. The man's accent was a mixture of Valleyan and Dakaneese. All in all, he was built like a rounded block of stone. It was clear that the sword at his hip was no stranger to him. He was there to make sure Lord Gregory returned to show Dreg the location of the nonexistent cavern full of gold, yet Lord Gregory sensed an air of defiance about the man. He hadn't made even the slightest of threatening moves toward him since they had left Dreg back in Low Crossing. In fact, Grommen had barely said a word until now.

"We'll make camp after we pass the next outpost," Grommen said. "I know a place where we shan't be hassled."

"Whatever you say," Lord Gregory agreed sarcastically.

"Look man," Grommen started with narrowed brows. "I know, and you know, that you'll not be coming back to show that donkey where the gold is, if there even is any. This..." He pounded at his chest, at the insignia of the mercenary company he worked for embroidered upon it. "This is our only pass key. I might kill for coin, but I'm no slaver like Captain Dreg. Give me an unruly lordling to fight in a field of battle, or a troubled patch of road where I can kill bandits, or be one, but I'm no slaver. I don't deal in human flesh." He cursed then, and let go of the tiller. He swatted at that gnats beginning to

swarm around his head then took the oars up again and started desperately rowing them away from the marsh grass.

The sun was getting low in the sky. Lord Gregory imagined Grommen was tired. He had rowed them back across the river's hardy current at least a dozen times. Lord Gregory wasn't sure what Grommen's little speech was leading to, so he chose his words carefully, but before he could open his mouth, Grommen looked up and began speaking between his heavy pulls on the oars.

"I seen ya... Ungh! Seen you take the Valleyan fighter down... Ungh! I lost a fat purse that night a few years ago, Lord Lion. I know who you really are." He stopped rowing and met Lord Gregory's eyes. "You did right back there. He would have killed you had you not told them lies. From now on, I'm your paid escort. You're a merchant, come to Westland from Dakahn and you're going to pay me good, Lord Gregory. My treachery is most expensive."

Lord Gregory could find nothing to say to that, but he found a huge smile on his face. Of course, sooner or later, someone had to recognize him. How could he have thought differently? He was a renowned champion of Summer's Day. His name was etched into the Spire itself. His only regret at the moment was the fact that Dreg had his sword.

At the fire that night Lord Gregory learned of Mikahl's triumph over Pael. A load was lifted off of his heavy heart. From what Grommen was telling him, Mikahl had Willa the Witch Queen's armies behind him now and was working on rebuilding and uniting the eastern kingdoms. It seemed amazing to him—Ironspike's power being wielded by young Mikahl was an incredible thought. Mikahl, when he had been Lord Gregory's squire, had been the talk of the training yard. By the time he started squiring for King Balton he was recognized as the best young swordsman in Westland. King Balton had kept Mikahl out of battle, though, even at Coldfrost. Lord Gregory had never understood why until King Balton died. King Balton hadn't wanted Mikahl to draw any sort of attention to himself.

With the good and welcome news of Pael's defeat and King Glendar's demise came some bad news, though. Most anybody of note in Westland, be they lord, lady, or wealthy merchant, had been sold cheaply to King Ra'Gren of Dakahn, who was now ransoming them to anybody who would pay. More than one Westland lady was now a pet, or a slave to a Dakaneese overlord who could afford such an exquisite trophy.

The idea of his Trella being forced to service some greasy old Dakaneese bastard sickened Lord Gregory. He had sent young Wyndall off to warn her when the fighting first started at Summer's Day. He hoped and prayed that she understood the warning, and somehow made it out of Westland before the zard attack. He had friends, many of them older men who would not have been drafted into Glendar's military campaign. Hopefully some of them had survived and would know of Trella's fate. And what had become of young Lady Zasha? Lord Ellrich's daughter was a budding girl, the apple of her father's eye. Lord Gregory owed it to his friend to try and find her as well. If he had to, he would buy them from the Dakaneese slavers. There was no price too high. He would find the coin one way or another.

Just before midday the next day, they came upon the last of the Settsted watchtowers. Here the river split yet again around the heavily wooded island of Salaphel. Salaphel had a small port on the far side where they shipped out barges full of timbers to the rest of the realm. Grommen took the westward flowing branch that would carry them out to where the river met the sea at Southport. The going became slower, the force of the spring melt on the river's current lessened where the river was wider. Here the water was a brackish affair, and the tidal pull of the moon worked at times for the current, and sometimes against it. Lord Gregory rowed as often, and for as long as he could, but it wasn't much compared to Grommen's determined effort. The mercenary had taken a more vigorous interest in his own defection from Dreg's company when Lord Gregory had shown him the fat sack of golden Westland coins he still had in his pack. There were forty of them, a small fortune in times like

these. Grommen happily took ten of them as a down payment for his services, which was twice what he'd make in half a year working for Dreg.

"I knew I was making the right choice," he said with a grin. "But know this, Lord Lion. I expect more—a lot more. After Dreg figures this out, after he knows what I'm about here, he'll put a healthy price on my head, and I'd hate not to be able to afford to return the favor."

"If you help me find the Lady Trella and Lady Zasha," Lord Gregory replied, "I'll make you a lord and personally mount Dreg's head on the gate of your keep for you."

"I'll help you do it," Grommen grinned, "but even if we don't find them ladies, you still owe me."

"Aye," Lord Gregory nodded that he understood.

It was with this stronger bond of gold-sealed promises that the two of them worked their way westward.

Grommen rode them up to a dock at the outskirts of the town of Oraphel. It was just after noon and the dock was only mildly busy.

"Why are we stopping?" asked Lord Gregory.

"You need yourself a hooded cloak for one. If I can spot who you really are, so can your countrymen. The ones that are still alive that is," Grommen said. "Besides that, you're supposed to be a wealthy Dakaneese merchant looking for wares. We can't row up to Southport in a bucket looking like starving dogs."

Lord Gregory laughed at his good fortune. He would pay this big intelligent oaf one way or the other. The man was no fool, and he was risking his life and reputation to help him.

As instructed, Lord Gregory waited in the boat while Grommen walked into Oraphel. No one bothered him. He kept his head down. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched one of the zard-men cleaning the bottom and sides of a fishing boat that was still in the water. The zard would scrub one side of the boat from the deck down then keep going under it, staying submerged for impossibly long lengths

of time. The zard-man would appear again on the other side in a rush of bubbles and work his way up to the deck. Then he would move over a few feet and work his way back down, scrubbing briskly with his brush as he went under again. Another zard dove in to help him, and Lord Gregory saw how fast the lizard-men could swim. It was like watching a snake slithering across the river's surface.

"Does he get to keep the thin man?" A voice from the dock above startled Lord Gregory. He looked up to see Grommen and the man who'd spoken, along with a commanding looking zard-man whose big black eyes reflected the world around him in such a distorted way that Lord Gregory had to look away from them.

"The thin man is my master," Grommen said with a grin that only Lord Gregory could see. The other man said something in a gurgling clicking language to the lizard-man. The zard responded and the men translated for them.

"He says the little bucket is worth a silver piece at best. He'll give you seven coppers for it."

"Tell him eight and the deal is done."

The translator did his job, and after brief pause, an exchange took place. Grommen threw a wadded black cloak down to the boat. After Lord Gregory had it fastened about his neck he raised its hood and extended a hand. Grommen helped him onto the dock then bowed, as his role dictated. The zard-man took the rope that held the boat and, without a look back, strode to the edge of the pier and dove into the river. The boat was pulled away from the dock by its rope and went trailing after the lizard-man's wake.

"Fargin crooked skeeks," the translator said to Grommen and Lord Gregory with disgust. He paled, though, when the zard who was cleaning the nearby boat hissed.

Grommen ignored the exchange. "We have a wagon carriage waiting for us, Overlord. If we hurry, we can be in a Southport inn by dark fall."

Chapter twelve

The power of the ocean storm was relentless and violent. The *Seawander* rolled and swayed, and it seemed as if it had been dark for days. Thunder crackled and boomed, and lightning streaked through the sky in wicked, jagged flashes. Several times it felt like the bottom had fallen out of the world, like the entire ship was tumbling through a great void. Then the *Seawander* would smack into the ocean, sometimes with bone-jarring force, sometimes at some off-kilter angle. The timbers creaked in protest and the constant hum of the wind blasting through the tight rigging made a ghostly whistling chorus that could be heard over the pelting of the heavy rain.

When Phen finally woke from his alcohol-induced slumber he felt much better. He and Hyden were thrilled, in a morbidly terrified sort of way, by the power of the storm. The storm had been raging for days. It had been dark so long that Hyden couldn't say how many. Phen, feeling seasick no longer, found a volume of text that was written on the subjects of whirlpools and tempests, among other forces of nature. He was reading excerpts of particularly scary content to Hyden in the common room. They were both sitting at the booth with Talon perched nearby watching water wash over the porthole and the occasional flicker of yellow lightning outside.

Phen had to re-read his text every now and then due to the crazy gyrations of the lantern swinging overhead. Hyden, at that moment, was more worried about the lantern dashing itself against one of the roof beams and showering them with flaming oil than he was about the storm, or Phen's horrors. Nevertheless, he felt a chill as Phen read about an old ship passing by a giant whirlpool and nearly getting caught in its deadly grasp.

“ ‘... the Captain emptied a bottle of sweet brandy in one long gulp then corked the vessel and tossed it overboard,’ ” Phn read on. “ ‘I thought he was giving up, downing a bottle, a final toast to a good run at sea, but I was mistaken. The Captain watched the bottle’s course as it spun away from the ship in a huge radial arc. He carefully gauged its speed as it floated around and down into the bottomless siphon.’ ”

“What is ‘radial?’” Hyden interrupted. His eyes were glued to the jerking sway of the lantern as if hypnotized by its motion.

“It’s a variation of radius,” Phn answered impatiently, forcing Hyden’s attention from the light. “The bottle’s path moved in an arc around the center of the whirlpool away from the ship.” He showed Hyden on the tabletop with his fingers.

Outside, a quick strobe of lightning flashed through the water rolling down the window beside them. Before its light had even faded, low rumbling thunder growled its way into a sharp series of cracks, almost like breaking wood. Phn gave Hyden his ‘creeped out’ look of mock terror, causing Hyden to laugh, in spite of his overwhelming sense of unease.

“ ‘The Captain,’ ” Phn continued, “ ‘watched the bottle’s course as it spun away from the ship in a huge radial arc. He carefully gauged its speed as it floated around and down into the bottomless siphon. He was calculating in his head. Then, all of a sudden Captain Spratt had it. He began barking out orders to his crew. A sail dropped into place and snapped full of wind. The oar drum began a quick and steady rhythm, yet we were still drawing closer and closer to the swirling hole in the sea. More orders were screamed, more sails unfurled, and the tattoo of the drum boomed faster and faster, keeping time with the thundering of our hearts. It seemed as if we were doomed...’ ”

The door at the top of the stairway that let down into their cabin flung open for a moment and someone stepped in. The wind slammed the door shut with a sharp bang.

“By the gods, Phen,” Brady said weakly as he sloshed in from above. “Can you not read something less frightening?” He was soaking wet and dripping on the plush carpet, but no one seemed to care. The whole room stank of dwarf anyway. Oarly still hadn’t left the privy. If you had to go, you had to get wet.

“Where’s that flask?” asked Brady. He still looked a little green around the gills, so Hyden reached down and pulled the tin from his boot and gave it to his friend. Brady drank from it deeply.

“Oarly likes it when I read to him.” Phen nodded at the privy door with a grin. Brady sighed and slid into the booth next to him.

“Let me finish. I’m almost done with this passage,” Phen said. “Where was I? Oh yes... ‘It seemed as if we were doomed. For long hours the rowers pulled and pulled for their lives. It was as if we had come to a standstill. The water rushed by and the rowers rowed against it, and we didn’t move any further away from the siphon, but at least we didn’t get any closer to it. Captain Spratt called on the gods of wind and sea, and when they didn’t respond, he cursed them and urged his men on. Then, finally, we broke the grasp of the vortex. A finger’s breath, and then two. Then we moved a foot. Ever so slowly we crept away from that hole in the sea. That night the Captain tapped a cask of rum and we all drank ourselves into a merry stupor. Then we thanked the gods, and more properly the brave Captain, for our lives.’ ”

Phen slapped the old book shut with a boom that made Hyden and Brady both jump. Even Talon squawked and flapped his wings at the sudden sound. “See,” Phen said, amused that he’d startled them. “It ended well.”

“Ah, but the very next day a giant thresher shark ate the bottom out of the ship and they fed the fishes at the bottom of the sea, like they say happened to King Glendar,” Brady said.

“Could you tell if it was day when you were out?” Hyden asked Brady.

“I think daylight has come and gone,” Brady replied. “It’s as dark as dark gets out there.”

“Aye,” Hyden nodded.

The door to the privy creaked open and a waist-high jumble of wild matted hair, with a bulbous nose in its middle, peeked out. "Did I hear somebody say something about a flask?" the haggard dwarf ventured weakly.

Brady took another small sip and, after Phen and Hyden both refused it, he stood and stumbled over to the dwarf. Oarly took the flask and emptied it in one gulp. The ship swayed and rolled, sending him stumbling back into the privy. The door slapped shut and Brady stood there long moments before he realized that Oarly wasn't coming back out.

Just as Brady resumed his seat beside Phen, the door atop the stairs opened again. A moment later, a gust of rainy wind and Captain Trant came blasting in. The Captain's wet and bedraggled monkey, Babel, was sitting on his shoulder looking miserable. As the Captain gained the carpeted floor, a curious look came over him, and after wrinkling his nose a time or two, he turned to look at the privy with distaste.

"Still won't come out of there, eh?" He chuckled and shook his head in wonder. Water trailed from his matted beard. He wiped his hand across his face and plopped down onto the divan with a slosh.

"Cookie was bringing you a meal, but he lost it on that last lurch. He's gone to fetch another for you," said the Captain with a wry grin. "Quite a storm, huh?"

"Yes it..." Brady started to reply but Phen cut him off.

"Have you ever sailed around a whirlpool?" the boy asked Captain Trant.

"Nay, lad, and I hope to never have to. But I can say, and so can you, that we've sailed through a true tempest. I don't know what else to call a storm such as the one we've just bested."

Phen grinned. He couldn't wait to tell the other apprentices back in Xwarda that he had sailed through a tempest.

Thunder rumbled outside, and lightning flickered in the window again. "So we're through the worst of it then?" asked Brady.

“Just so,” Captain Trant answered with a strange look at Hyden, who was staring at the lantern swinging above the booth again. “It’s near to impossible to break one like that.”

Hyden glanced at the Captain and flushed with embarrassment. “When will we see the sun again?”

“Not so long from now. This time on the morrow we might be able to see the Isles of Kahna.”

“Are we going to get to go ashore there?” Phen asked excitedly.

“That’s precisely what I came to discuss.” Captain Trant leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. His burliness made him look like a wet bear. Babel the monkey shivered away the excess water from her blue fur, crawled on the back of the divan and made herself comfortable.

“We’ve taken some damage...” The Captain saw Brady’s look of alarm and quelled it quickly. “It’s nothing to lose sleep over, mind you. We’ll make the islands just fine, but we’ll be ashore there for a few days while we’re getting the *Seawander* right again. She’s a strong ship. She got us through the storm. We just need to make her ready for the next one.”

“How long do you think, Captain?” Hyden asked.

“Two days at best, but more likely four. Five if we have to cut and fit our own timbers.”

Hyden nodded his understanding and Brady seemed relieved. He glanced at the privy then back at the Captain and a devious look came over him. “If we can get Master Oarly out of there while we’re on the island, can you have someone affix a lock at the top of the door?”

“Yeah,” Phen chimed in with a giggle. “Make sure it’s high enough that he can’t reach it.”

The Captain roared out a laugh. “I think we may be able to do that. I’m certainly going to have to replace this shag when this adventure’s through, and that smell...”

“What is there to do on Kahna Island while we’re stuck there?” Phen asked the Captain.

“There’s great line fishing along the landward docks, and there’s those old tombs to explore.”

Captain Trant looked more to Brady than the others and winked. “There’s also fire dancers after the sacred moon feasts. We might be in store for one. They have them often enough. They say the native

girls go into a trance as they gyrate.” The Captain grinned. “I seen ’em once. They were far too naked for me to notice if they were really in a trance or not. I can assure you that they know what parts to gyrate, and just how to gyrate ‘em.”

Hyden seemed just as interested in seeing that spectacle as Brady was. Phen wrinkled his nose. His mind was still on the tombs.

“What’s in the tombs?” he asked, determined not to let the subject wander again.

The Captain sighed with an understanding smile on his bearded face. “The islands are full of primitive folk. They have juju wizards and the like. There’s a cavern full of shrunken heads, and some spectacular underground lakes and tidal pools.” Seeing Phen’s growing interest, the Captain leaned closer and spoke in a creepy conspiratorial voice. “Legend says that there’s a giant emerald hidden down there in the depths of one of those sea tunnels, but no one can find it because it’s hidden by spells and guarded over by ancient juju creatures.”

Hyden felt a sudden chill climb up his spine. Tempting things hidden in the depths of the earth was exactly what had drawn his younger brother to his demise. The look of excitement and determination on Phen’s face was exactly as Gerard’s had been after the crazy old soothsayer told them their fortunes. The resemblance literally scared Hyden to the bone. He had to forcefully draw breath and remind himself that Phen was not Gerard, and that these tunnels and tombs that the Captain was speaking of probably didn’t lead down into the darkness of the Nethers. He decided that, if Phen wanted to go into them, then he would go too and make sure no harm came to him. They wouldn’t waste time looking for lost jewels, though. One treasure to find was enough.

“I wonder who or what is guarding Barnacle Bones’s treasure?” Phen asked out of the blue.

“Actually, I guess it was Cobalt’s treasure last. What sort of magics would an ancient dragon put up to guard its hoard?”

The room fell silent. Hyden hadn't put much thought into that part of the quest. Brady and Captain Trant were both looking at him for an answer. All he could do was swallow hard. A peal of deep thunder filled the silence. The sudden crack of the door at the top of the stairs being whipped fully open by the wind startled them all. The sound of the rain and the ghoulish chorus of the wind whistling in the rigging came to them. Talon awkwardly leapt from his perch and glided through the air to land on the table between Hyden and Phen. The bird wasn't at ease being inside the cramped cabin for so long. Knowing this, Phen ran his hand lovingly over the hawkling's feathers and cooed softly.

The room filled with the savory smell of fish stew and hot bread as the cook and his helper eased carefully down the steps. Apparently their arms were full, for the door stayed wide open as they descended.

Hyden was glad for the intrusion because he was hungry, but more so because he had to think about Phen's question. What would a wise old dragon do to guard its hoard? He should have asked the White Goddess when she shared her knowledge of the Skull of Zorellin. He really should have asked Claret. Captain Trant and Brady would both want an answer sooner or later, especially when they drew closer to Cobalt's lair.

Later that evening they sailed out of the storm and into relatively calm waters. Behind them, the nasty wall of gray churning clouds and rain-streaked violence moved northward toward the rocky Valleyan coast. Even Oarly came up from below to see the sunset. He didn't stay long, and barely spoke. When he did, he asked Master Biggs to fill the flask he'd taken from Brady. Once it was full, he eased back down to the cabin and found his bunk.

Phen made the rounds, quizzing every man on the *Seawander*, from the Captain to the cook's assistant, and every hand in between about the tombs of Kahna. Only six men on the ship had ventured through them. To Phen, the tombs sounded like nothing more than a distraction for kingdom folk whose ship had to lay over on the island, but all the men he questioned agreed on one thing: that there was a

great emerald down there somewhere in those depths, and you could find it, and death, if you dared to go looking for it. Phen, as it turned out, was planning on doing just that.

Hyden didn't like it, but his objections got caught in his throat when Brady began helping Phen prepare. It was Brady's reasoning that brought Hyden around. "We can feast and watch naked girls gyrate then go on a fool's quest for a few days, or we can sit around in an inn, bored silly, and listen to Phen read about the same sort of things and pester us until we're crazy."

Hyden conceded that was the truth of things. So the next afternoon, when the call of "Land ahoy!" came, Hyden joined in the preparations for Phen's little adventure. He decided that Phen should have probably been more involved in the planning of the greater quest that they were on. The boy did his job well. Phen questioned the seamen again, eliminated the tombs and tunnels that they'd seen already from his list, and planned his itinerary so meticulously that, by the time they had rowed to shore, Hyden found himself believing they might actually have a chance of finding the legendary jewel.

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