The Portal

By

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All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

To my wonderful children: Jenice, Josh, and Elissa.
I hope you know how much I love you all.

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CHAPTER 1

The two rangers crept through the forest foliage, both little more than shadows passing amongst the thick undergrowth with no more noise than a whispering wind.

The rangers were twins, a young man and woman, both of them blond, lithe, and dangerous. Sunbeams filtered through the trees in the early morning, and dew kissed every leaf of every plant around them, dampening their clothes and leather armor as they cut through the verdant forest with surgical precision.

A brighter glow ahead hinted at a clearing in the trees, and a low gurgling gave testimony to a cool brook. The two rangers pressed their bodies close to the ground, their clothing absorbing even more of the cold morning dew through their hardened leather armor. The pair scuttled under a young pine tree, scanned the clearing ahead, and forced themselves to control their emotions and not gasp in wonderment at the beauty they witnessed, so as not to give themselves away.

A majestic unicorn drank at the edge of a clear spring, its ivory horn gleaming in the sun. Its coat was pure white and as unblemished as a virgin snowfall. An elderly woman—strong, imposing, and majestic in her own right—stood next to the beautiful creature, one hand stroking its pristine flank while she hummed a soft, wordless tune. Her dark brown hair, streaked with grey, cascaded down her back. Her simple, homespun robes did nothing to diminish her aura of majesty. The twins had never beheld such a spectacular sight, and they held their collective breaths so as not to startle the lord and lady of the forest glen.

A black-fletched arrow sprouted between the woman's shoulder blades, throwing the picturesque scene into chaos and horror.

The magnificent unicorn paused just long enough to cast a look of utter sorrow at the dying woman before it jumped the stream in one amazing leap and bolted through the forest. As the graceful woman fell slowly to the earth, she cast a baleful and accusing gaze toward the dark figure emerging from the shadows at the far side of the glade, bow in hand, and cursed the assassin with her dying breath.

"What the hell, man?" the druid demanded.

"Sneak attack! That's four times base damage plus I rolled a natural twenty for a crit shot! Too bad the unicorn got away though. Those horns are worth a fortune," Chase crowed, excited with his one-shot kill.

Drew, the dark-haired, gothic-looking dungeon master, glared across the table at the young man playing the thief.

"Dude, that was your contact for the quest you have been on for the past three weeks. She was the only one who knew where the staff of Oberin was. Now you can't finish your quest, you won't get your reward from King Thadius, and Ted can't get his artifact," Drew shouted accusingly.

"Yeah, and without the staff of Oberin we can't kill the lich king. Way to go, idiot," Theodore, a thin, young black lad with owlish glasses lamented.

The ranger twins, who were twins in real life as well, raised their voices in protest.

"What were you thinking? Philip asked.

"Why would you kill some old woman petting a unicorn anyway? You know unicorns are good-aligned creatures, and we're a good-aligned adventuring party," Felicia said, berating Chase for his usual foolish actions.

"I'm a thief and an assassin. That's what I do. Besides, we're only a good-aligned party because chunky butt over there won't play in an evil group," the thief defended, jabbing a finger at the heavyset Gabriel sitting across from him.

"Someone has to try and keep you heathens from the fiery pits of hell. Fantasy is the first step to reality. If you pretend to be evil, it is only a short step to becoming evil and committing evil acts in real life. You should thank me for saving your souls," the portly, curly-haired boy said.

Chase dismissed Gabriel's sermon with a snort and turned back to the dungeon master. "You're the DM. Just make up someone else for us to meet that has the information we need. It's not that big of a deal."

"It's not that big of a deal?" Drew said. "I spent over a month planning and writing this adventure and then you go and derail the entire thing with another idiotic action that made absolutely no sense. That's the problem with the world today. No one cares about the work of someone else. They just trample it on a whim, destroying another's creative processes because they don't understand them."

"Does this always have to be about you? No one understands me, this world sucks, human society is degenerating at an alarming rate and nobody cares, blah, blah, blah," Chase ranted, mimicking the moody teen.

Drew wore the nickname Dour Drew as a badge of honor. He was pessimistic about everything and everyone around him, dressed in black clothes, and listened to mournful gothic music. However, he was a good DM and an all right friend, so everyone just wrote it off as one of the many quirks of their Dungeons and Dragons group.

They all had their own peculiarities. Gabriel was a devout Christian and always played the cleric, but his character was a devotee of God instead of some made-up mythological deity. He was also the conscience of the group, often forcing, or at least coercing, them to follow the path of kindness and righteousness in their game.

Chase was an unrepentant kleptomaniac who stole anything not nailed down and usually brought a pry bar for anything that was. He had already been banned from Staples, Best Buy, and two of the three Wal-Marts in the city for shoplifting. Gabriel had made reforming Chase his personal quest. It was the main reason he played with the group. Plus, being an outcast at school made him long for any kind of friends.

Theodore, or Ted as he preferred to be called, was a thin black youth whose major passions outside of playing the wizard in Dungeons and Dragons were math, chess, science, languages, stamps, computers, and just about everything that could possibly make a person a true nerd, or a potential candidate for the king of nerds.

The true oddballs, however, when looking at the group as a whole, were the twins, Philip and Felicia. This was not because they had any peculiar quirks, but quite the opposite.

They were perfectly normal, blond-haired, attractive, got good grades without being nerds, were school champions in fencing and archery, black belts in ju-jitsu, and enjoyed the outdoors. The closest they came to being nerds was that Philip was an Eagle Scout, and Felicia was in the 4-H club and FFA. The only thing that made them less than popular was the fact they also liked to play D&D with the "dorks" and cared less what the other high school kids thought of them or their choice of friends.

"Forget about it. I'll come up with something for next weekend," Drew relented, knowing that Chase would never concede any argument. Chase would stand before a cop stark naked and argue until he convinced the officer that he was not the streaker they were looking for.

"It's getting late anyway, and Phil and I have some stuff to work on before school tomorrow," Felicia added.

The group began scooping up dice and stuffing their costumes into backpacks and duffle bags. They usually played in full costumes of leather and chain mail they either bought online or made themselves, and wielded swords, knives, and the recurve bows of Phil and Felicia. A loud knocking at Drew's bedroom door interrupted their packing.

"Hey, time for you nerds to wrap it up! Mom and Dad are going to be home soon, and you have school tomorrow," the voice of Drew's older brother, Josh, sounded through the locked door.

Josh was a senior at the high school they all went to, except for Gabe who attended a private Christian school. All but Ted were sophomores, who was a junior because he had skipped two grades

already. Technically, he could graduate with the credits he already had if he truly wanted to.

By contrast, Chase should have been a junior, but he was held back due to his numerous delinquencies, truancies, and lack of scholastic ambitions. The friends bid each other farewell and left Drew in his room as they all went home.

"Seriously, dude," Josh told his little brother once everyone left, "you are never going to make it if you keep hanging around dorks and playing that stupid game all the time. That's probably half the reason you're so weird now. Try doing some sports or something."

"Oh, like lacrosse, so I can run around and beat people with sticks like we used to in the good old days when humans were still trying to master fire? The world has degenerated into a bunch of savage Neanderthals trying to kill each other with sticks and corporate greed. No thanks, I'll stand with the last true bastion of humanity."

"You must be adopted," Josh muttered as he turned from his brother's doorway and walked back into the living room to watch hockey. "Better yet, maybe I am."

As usual, Drew went to bed before his parents got home. They were gone a lot, either working or traveling on the weekends now that their two children were old enough to take care of themselves for a couple of days at a time.

Drew woke up the next day and dressed for school. He donned his usual dark attire to suit his mood. He thanked the pagan powers that be that his school had not gone with the standardized school uniform many of the other fascist, life-controlling authorities of society had decided to adopt.

He ate a quick breakfast of Cheerios, grabbed his bag, and walked to the bus stop. He could have had his mom or dad make Josh let him ride with him in his car, but he did not find it worth the trouble. Drew was not in the mood to listen to Josh complain about being conscripted as his little brother's chauffeur and did not want to force his company on him anyway.

The long, yellow school bus with its signature broad, black stripe running down its length pulled up to the stop at the corner of his street about ten minutes later. Drew climbed the three tall steps and headed toward the rear of the bus as the pneumatic doors whooshed closed behind him. He spied Chase sitting three rows from the back and made his way to the seat his friend was holding for him.

The younger kids occupied the front seats and would be dropped off at the grade school before him and the rest of the high schoolers. The older, and therefore bigger, seniors and juniors took the back seats in a societal hierarchy he would likely never be at the top of but was forced to take part in. It was from those distant seats that the usual accusations and harassment came.

"Hey, vampire boy, does your mom know you're wearing her makeup? You going to go and suck some blood?" one of the upperclassmen called out.

Drew ignored the taunting as he always did, bottling it up inside of him as just another drop of poison, further deadening his numbing heart. Chase, however, was not so accepting of the abuse.

"Chase, don't. It's not worth it," Drew said, trying to keep his friend from getting himself in trouble on his behalf.

As always, it was too late to stop Chase from acting the fool. Nothing in the universe could move faster than Chase's mouth when he was bent on causing havoc.

"I got something you can suck right here, buddy!" he shouted at the older teen while he stood on his seat grabbing his crotch.

"You little punk, I'll kick your smart ass!" the senior threatened.

"Actually, my brain is in my head, not in my ass but, compared to you, I guess my ass would seem like a genius."

The older boy started to get out of his seat to make good on his threat, but the decelerating bus saved Chase from an early morning beating. Chase lost the precarious perch he was standing on and tumbled head over heels into the seat in front of him, or rather behind him since he was facing the rear of the bus.

Chase went sprawling onto the sticky floor of the bus, his head below the seat and his legs sticking up between the two girls seated on the padded bench. As humiliating as his tumble was, it did have the benefit of giving him a rather good view of the legs coming out of the skirts of the two girls occupying the seat.

"Nice day, eh ladies?" Chase commented as he stared up the legs of the two girls with a wide grin. "Hello Kitty to you too," he said with a lecherous grin, having caught a glimpse of the cartoon picture emblazoned on one of the girl's underpants.

"Ew, get away from us, you pervert!" they cried, then commenced hitting and kicking him as he tried to crawl out from under the bus seat.

"Everyone, get back in your seats," the bus driver demanded.

Chase managed to crawl out from beneath the bench seat, enduring a flurry of blows from the two girls wielding book bags and the laughter of nearly everyone on the bus. He resumed his seat next to his friend. His tumble and resulting hilarity seemed to have defused the situation enough that Drew figured that would be the end of the confrontation, assuming Chase did not do anything to provoke anyone else for the rest of the short trip.

"Sorry about wrecking the game last night. I was just trying to play in character and got carried away," Chase apologized, as he usually did once he had time to think and realized his mistake.

"It's no big deal. There were things I wanted to do different anyway. I was starting to get bored with the whole campaign."

"So you already thought up something new for us for the long weekend?" Chase asked, referring to the four days off they were getting at the end of the week for some holiday and subsequent teacher's workday none of them really cared anything about, except for the fact it meant no school for a few days.

"I'm not sure what I'll do. I was thinking about doing something totally different. I'm going to go to the bookstore after school today and look for something I read about online this weekend."

"You mean that weird Wiccan bookstore with the skulls and magic crap in it?"

"It's not crap. People have been praying to and using the power of the earth for thousands of years before Christians came along and vilified it."

"Sorry, I didn't mean it like that. It's kind of a cool store, and the chick that works there is pretty hot!"

Drew shot him a sidelong glance. "She's like, twenty years old, you perv. Besides, you're not her type."

"Oh, and you are, I suppose?"

"More than you; at least we belong in the same circle."

"Just because you went Wiccan and got all Goth doesn't mean you're in the same league. Besides, you'd tear your face up on her piercings anyway."

"I'm not a Wiccan, I just believe in the spiritual interconnectedness of people, plants, animals, earth, and the cosmos," Drew explained.

"So what are you looking for there anyway?"

"It's just a book that contains some interesting things that may be cool to try. You know that abandoned house at the end of Heritage Street?"

"The big haunted one? Yeah, what about it?"

"It's not haunted, but I thought it would be cool to have our meeting there this weekend."

Chase looked at his friend doubtfully. "Seriously? I don't know… I heard some strange things about that place, and you know getting Gabe to go in there is going to be nearly impossible."

"Maybe we can tell him we want him to perform an exorcism or something and purify it of the devil's taint," Drew suggested, then laughed.

"ROFL. You said the devil's taint," Chase laughed, sounding out the Internet chat speak as *roffle*.

"Is your mind always in the gutter?"

"Usually. If it finds itself anywhere else, it feels like a stranger at someone else's birthday party."

The bus arrived at the high school, having already dropped the younger kids off. Chase and Drew debarked, walked to the front steps of the school, and ran into Ted and the twins, who were waiting for them as usual.

"What's up, guys?" Felicia greeted them.

"Not much. I got a nice up-skirt peek of two girls on the bus, and Drew wants to hold our next game at the haunted murderer's house on Heritage Street this weekend. You know, the usual," Chase supplied with a straight face.

"There was no murder there. It's just an old abandoned house," Drew insisted.

Ted added in his usual analytical voice. "Yeah, there is no scientific proof of the existence of any kind of spiritual entities. In fact, nearly every event of so-called paranormal activity has been disproved by legitimate scientific enquiry."

Phil rolled his eyes. "We better get to class. The bell is about to ring and Felicia and I have fencing practice first period, so we need to go change. Take care. We'll see you at lunch," he said with a cheerful wave as he and his sister broke off down the hall toward the gym.

"I've got a calculus exam, so I better get going too," Ted said, then left his two friends next to their lockers as they stowed their stuff and took out the books they would need for the morning's classes.

Chase and Drew had nearly identical schedules, which was one of the only reasons Chase was actually passing his classes and not being expelled for truancy. Their first class was world history, a subject Drew felt was nothing more than the exultation of humanity's long history of depravity and abuse.

"Drew, can you tell the rest of the class what Christopher Columbus contributed to the new world?" Mr. Lowbosky asked his student.

"Hmm, let me think," Drew said, leaning back and tapping an extended finger against his lips. "Christopher Columbus's contributions to the New World… Let me see… He contributed to—" he began ticking off the examples on his fingers "—the destruction of a world that

was already there thousands of years before he *discovered* it, the near genocide of the indigenous populations, and the destruction of an entire people's beliefs and way of life. He brought war, death, slavery, sickness, and syphilis to a people who built monuments on a far grander scale than anything known to most of Europe, and who also knew more about the movements of the stars and planets and their place in the universe than the greatest of western astronomers. Oh, and he also destroyed nearly every written work they created."

"That kind of attitude is precisely what creates radicals whose sole purpose is to disrupt an orderly society. Christopher Columbus is one of the world's most renowned men whose accomplishments led to the creation of one of the greatest nations on earth!" his teacher declared, angry at what he perceived to be the perversion of accepted western history.

"How can you celebrate a man who tried to find India by sailing west when the Greeks had already made a pretty good estimate of the circumference of the world centuries before the start of your Christian calendar? That would be like celebrating Isaac Newton as the man who discovered gravity by jumping off a cliff," Dour Drew scoffed.

His statement got a good laugh from the other students, but his humor went entirely unappreciated by his teacher.

"Young man, that is the most ridiculous analogy I have ever heard, although I suppose I should expect such a thing from someone like you," Mr. Lowbosky returned.

"You're right, it's totally off base and ridiculous," Drew agreed, pausing just long enough to allow his teacher's look of triumph to spread across his face. "Isaac Newton would have had to crush two entire continents of indigenous people on his way down to come close to Columbus's accomplishments."

"Go to the principal's office right now! I will not have you disrupting my class with this kind of talk. Do you understand me?"

"*Da*, comrade, loud and clear," Drew replied in a thick Russian accent as he goose-stepped out of the classroom leaving everyone in fits of laughter behind him.

First period and I'm already going to the principal's office, he thought to himself. I'm off to a good start today!

When he arrived, one of the office administrators told him to take a seat outside Ms. Burnstrom's office. About fifteen minutes later, one of the office workers informed him that the principal was ready to deal with him and to go on in.

The principal glared disapproval over her horn-rimmed glasses as he entered. "Take a seat, Drew," she snapped at the troublesome student. "Mr. Lowbosky told me what happened over the intercom."

Ms. Burnstrom was a slim, grey-haired, hatchet-faced woman who had been the principal of the high school for the past fifteen years. She wore a grey skirt suit with a white ruffled blouse and a pair of black-rimmed glasses that she often let dangle around her neck by a silver chain affixed to the arms of the spectacles.

Her office was furnished in the typical principal décor: brown leather furniture, overly large hardwood desk, dark wood bookshelves full of thick, random books, and an antique-style globe cradled in a polished walnut stand that probably concealed a hidden liquor cabinet.

Drew took a seat in the small chair directly center and a few feet in front of her desk. She tried to skewer him with a stare over the top of her glasses.

"You know that you cannot disrupt class with these outlandish proclamations. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Drew let out an exasperated sigh. "He asked me a question but didn't like the answer. I guess it went too much against the ingrained programming of the establishment."

"That right there is why you are here to see me today. When you come to school, you need to park your personal feelings about rules and order and your conspiracy theories at the steps, young man. Do you understand what I am telling you?"

Why do people who think they are superior always ask you if you understand them? Just because someone disagrees with them, they think

you are unable to comprehend the same language or something, or that you are somehow mentally deficient, Drew thought to himself.

"Yes, Ms. Burnstrom."

"Very good, Drew. Remember what I said."

"Yes, Ms. Burnstrom, I'll park my personal feelings about rules, order, and my conspiracy theories at the schoolhouse steps," he recited as he walked toward the exit. "Right next to my first amendment rights," he finished as he darted through the door.

Ms. Burnstrom called after him, but Drew was already down the hallway before she could react and pull him back into her office. He knew she would probably not bother to call him back for his parting shot, but he hurried anyhow, having suffered enough totalitarian dictatorship for one morning.

The rest of the day went about as well. He was hammered by dodgeballs in gym class, berated for his paper on the subjugation and suppression within the vowel family for the "i before e" rules in English class, and was rebuked in math class for his dealing with absolutes even within the rigid confines of mathematical law. The math teacher, Mr. Wilkinson, got so mad he choked on the mint he always had in his mouth to try to hide the whiskey tonics he drank in the morning to take the edge off and help him deal with students like Drew. Fortunately, his coughing fit lasted so long the bell rang before he could send Drew to the principal's office once again. Overall, it was a pretty good day for a Monday.

CHAPTER 2

General Haskins sat upon his warhorse overlooking the battlefield. His archers were deployed in five lines of one hundred men behind more than three hundred pikemen arrayed three ranks deep. Behind his archers stood two thousand footmen wielding swords and spears. When the battle commenced, his footmen would advance to stand directly behind the pikemen while the archers simultaneously retreated once they became vulnerable. His rearmost elements consisted of five hundred reserve troops and his artillery.

Five ballistae hurled six-pound javelins over five hundred yards while his six onagers lobbed stones the size of a man's head. His heavy cavalry, which was in the very capable hands of Captain Acadis, numbered nearly five hundred horses and was cleverly hidden in a large depression behind a tree-covered hill less than a quarter-mile away. There they would wait until the battle horns ordered them to charge into the enemy's flanks.

Though he was outnumbered nearly two to one, he was confident that he could drive the horde of goblin kin back, at least this time. The monstrous army was normally undisciplined, and their only cavalry were wolf-riding goblins. Although quite swift, they were lightly armored and easier to bring down than an armored man on a warhorse. His greatest concern was the ogres. If those huge beasts closed with his men, they would wreak havoc on his lines with their tree-limb-sized clubs and brutish strength.

A horn's shrill cry rang across the valley as the goblinoid army advanced, slowly at first, then in an all-out charge. The wolf riders sped

ahead of rest of the evil host as they bore down on the humans. The goblins shouted guttural battle cries while their huge wolf mounts slavered at the jaws, eager for the taste of human flesh.

General Haskins watched as the wolf riders reached the first pile of stones his men had stacked for use as a range marker and allowed them to pass as they loped toward the next marker.

"Hold it, hold it…!" the general commanded, keeping his arm raised above his head until the wolves reached the second range marker. "Now, loose!"

At his command, his archers let fly five hundred steel-tipped arrows at the onrushing wolf riders. The onagers and ballistae launched their deadly payloads at the advancing enemy infantry who were just now reaching the farthest range marker.

The archers' shafts were the first to find their targets, and the rain of wood and steel splashed down amongst the goblins and their mounts, sending scores of the monsters crashing to the earth with wooden shafts protruding from their wounded and lifeless corpses.

The heavy javelins and stones crashed down upon the enemy foot soldiers. Some of the rocks landed directly on the enemy; other shots fell short but skipped and rolled over their targets with equally lethal results. The ballistae-launched javelins were just as devastating, skewering multiple enemies on a single shaft where they landed amidst the horde. When they fell short, they tumbled viciously through the air, sowing chaos and disorder.

The wolf riders closed within range of their shortbows and let fly scores of shafts into the humans' forward troops. The archers fell back as arrows from the goblins found their mark amongst the pikemen and lodged in the shields carried by the footmen as they jostled their way between the ranks of retreating archers.

Most of the wolf riders wheeled away, loosing more arrows in a strafing run across the front lines of humans, but scores of others charged into the pikemen, swinging shortswords and hand axes while impaling themselves on the long, steel-shrouded spears.

The footmen advanced to stand with the pikemen, fending off those enemies that were able to avoid the pikes and render their lengths less than useless. Swords hacked and shorter spears thrust into the goblins and the snapping jaws of their wolf mounts as the archers retreated farther uphill to send their shafts against the wolf riders that continued to harry the footmen from range.

The artillery lowered their aim to continue to pound the advancing army until they were too close for such heavy weapons. The wolf riders finally drove their mounts back behind their infantry kin. The goblins and orcs threw themselves against the human infantry, hacking with axes and swords, and bashing with spiked clubs. The human archers concentrated their fire on the slightly slower, lumbering ogres in hopes of thinning their numbers before they could engage the much smaller and weaker humans.

General Haskins watched the dreaded ogres advance even through the hail of arrows, some striding forward with as many as a dozen shafts sprouting from their thick, knotty hides, but they seemed unperturbed for the most part.

"Sound the cavalry charge!" the general ordered. His command was answered by two long blasts from a brass war horn.

"That's our signal, men!" Captain Acadis told his soldiers. "We'll hit them hard. Aim for the ogres and wheel about for a second pass once you're clear!"

Within seconds, the sound of two thousand horse hooves pounding the earth thundered above the din of battle. The heavy cavalry smashed into the flanks of the ogre ranks less than one minute after the battle horns called for the charge.

Long lances capped with steel pierced the tough hides and organs of the ogres. Captain Acadis and his men crashed through the spread ranks of the huge brutish creatures then wheeled their horses around in near perfect precision for another pass of destruction. Once all his horses came abreast, he ordered another, merciless charge, a charge

nearly as powerful as the first, since he had lost only a few riders and horses in their initial attack.

The second attack would be far more costly as many of the mounted warriors had lost or snapped their lances in the bodies of their enemies and would have to engage with swords. The men and horses once again slammed into the ogres, but this time the ugly creatures were better prepared.

As the knights swung razor-sharp swords, the ogres unhorsed them with their huge clubs, knocking them from their saddles and crushing them once they were on the ground. Several ogres simply struck the riders' mounts in their broad heads, bringing down both horse and rider at once.

"Reserves, engage the ogre and goblin kin's flank!" General Haskins commanded, seeing his cavalry hard-pressed in the rear of the battle.

The five-hundred-man reserve ran down the hill, sweeping to their right as they bore down on the enemy's right flank. Spearmen harried the ogres with their eight-foot heavy spears while swordsmen hacked at them from closer range by darting in and retreating, each assault drawing more blood.

Fifty crossbowmen wielding arbalests fired heavy bolts into targets of opportunity from only a few yards away. At close range, the arbalests inflicted far more damage than the archers' longbows and wreaked havoc even against the monstrous ogres.

Seeing the monster army finally beginning to break apart, General Haskins charged ahead to personally lead the final assault and bloody his blade on the merciless attackers. "Push forward men. Follow me!"

Rallied by their supreme commander, the footmen let out a cry, pushed forward with renewed effort, and savagely cut into the enemy. The goblin kin finally broke and ran back toward the thick woods. Shafts from the archers fell amongst the retreating foes, and the horsemen continued to cut down and harry the fleeing monsters, especially the slower, gruesome ogres.

Once the surviving creatures made it to the relative safety of the dense trees, the cavalry broke off and returned to their own battle lines.

Captain Acadis rode his lathered mount up to General Haskins who was regrouping and hailing the bravery of his men.

The cavalry leader pulled up next to his commander and saluted smartly. "Sir, I report that the invaders have fled into the woods with less than a quarter of their original force, and only a score of ogres surviving the battle. My men have suffered the loss of some twoscore riders and mounts. My lieutenants are tallying the wounded at this moment."

"Excellent, Captain, your men did an outstanding job," General Haskins said. "As much as we all feel the loss of each of our men, I feared a much heavier toll at the beginning of this battle. Our own losses were not light, but we are still an effective fighting force, and we saved the city of Kanea. We will have to maintain a strong garrison, however. Several hundred orcs and goblins are not something we want to allow to roam free. We will regroup back at Kanea and implement heavy hunting sorties to flush them out, exterminate them, or drive them back from whence they came."

"Yes, sir. Once the wounded are tended to and loaded for travel, I will order my men to lead our return to the city," replied Captain Acadis.

The general waved absently. "Very good, Captain, carry on."

The small army received a grand welcome upon their return to the large city of Kanea. Women blew kisses, children threw flowers, and men made sure the throats of the valiant warriors were never dry at the inns and taverns that night.

There was an entirely different celebration occurring at nearly the same time in a much smaller city some one hundred miles away in the town of Faluna. Ogres and goblin kin ran the streets, looting everything of value, and drinking every bit of wine, ale, and spirits they could find. Many homes and shops were burning, and although most of the former inhabitants had already fled or been killed, the occasional human scream could still be heard from people who prayed fervently for the release of death.

A dark-robed figure strode through the ashes and destruction of the town. He was a short man with grey hair and steely eyes hidden beneath his deep cowl. Although he was much smaller than the ogres and appeared almost frail, every one of the creatures bowed before him and gave the man a wide berth.

Next to him walked an armed man in black mail with a deep red cloak fastened at the neck with a silver clasp in the shape of a skull. He was speaking to the robed man, one of the few who even dared do so.

"My Lord, your army has achieved a great victory here; however, my sources tell me that we did not fare so well at Kanea. They were routed and fled back into the woods, and the city still stands," the armed man said hesitantly, fearing the reaction from the deadly man he walked with.

"Fear not, my faithful Lucien. It is as I expected. I had no real intention of sacking Kanea—at this time. They were simply a necessary diversion for my goals here," Lord Darkrell replied in a quiet, raspy voice.

"Forgive my impertinence, My Lord, but had we committed the troops here at that battle we may well have taken Kanea, a much larger and richer city," Captain Lucien hesitantly suggested.

"Lucien, how many warlords have used the evil races to further their goals, power base, and wealth over the centuries?"

"I am not sure, Great One; dozens at least, I would imagine."

"And how many have succeeded for any appreciable amount of time?"

"I know of none, master," Lucien replied after giving it a moment of thought.

"Of course you do not. That is because there is none. Oh certainly, there have been tyrants, warlords, and conquerors who carved pieces of the human kingdom out for themselves, but they never held it for more than a single generation. Most of them reigned only a scant number of years, if they were lucky. No, the brutish forces of the goblins, orcs, ogres, and other dark races are simply too chaotic, ill-disciplined, unintelligent, and too socially weak to make an effective army capable of

not only conquering, but occupying and settling the rich, human-controlled lands," Lord Darkrell explained, educating his war leader.

Lucien, looking confused, studied the ground before him, trying to comprehend his master's brilliance. "If we cannot hold the cities, then why do we expend the forces to conquer them? Simple plundering for wealth seems considerably beneath you, My Lord."

Lord Darkrell chuckled. "Very astute, Lucien; I would have been greatly insulted had you thought otherwise. This town, as well as several other locations within the realm, contains ancient ritual sites long forgotten by most men. These sites not only enhance a spellcaster's power, but more importantly, I believe they are the nexus for gateways to other worlds. It is my belief that in one of these other worlds, I will find weapons, magic, or warriors that have the necessary strength to accomplish my domination of this world."

Lucien paused to think before he spoke once more. "So with Faluna's populace and garrison removed, you are now free to exploit this site's nexus and travel to one of these worlds? When shall I order the troops ready to depart, master?"

"Your bravery impresses me, Lucien. It is a rare man who would jump to do battle in another world. Unfortunately, we will not be traveling so far anytime soon. I have nearly all of the possible nexus points under observation, but I do not hold the key to use them myself. I am searching diligently for such a key, but it has eluded me thus far. For the time being, we will continue to harass and bleed the humans until either I locate the key or someone, possibly from one of the other worlds, comes through with the knowledge I require. When they do, my watchers will be ready," Lord Darkrell assured his commander.

CHAPTER 3

Dour Drew finally escaped the rigid and oppressive confines of his school when the last bell of the day rang through the halls. Instead of getting on the school bus as he normally would for his trek back home, he walked several blocks and waited for the city bus. The bus pulled up with a hiss from its air brakes, and Drew climbed on board and dropped his money into the fare box.

Twenty minutes later, he was downtown and walked the few remaining blocks to the old bookstore. Bells suspended above the door chimed as he pushed it open and strode into the air-conditioned building.

Shelves of books lined the walls and stood in the center of the relatively small store. Bins of incense and racks with crystals and scented candles of all different sizes, shapes, and colors—over half of them black—were arranged throughout the store.

He was intimately familiar with the books on magic and the occult and knew that none of the ones on the shelves contained what he wanted. He shoved his hands in his pockets and approached the counter where a darkly dressed young woman sat on a stool flipping through a Gothic magazine and chomping loudly on a piece of gum.

Her skin was pale, her eyes accented in black eyeliner, her lips painted with black glossy lipstick, and her black hair sported a thin red stripe running from the corner of her long bangs past the back of her head. Metal studs protruded from her left eyebrow and lower lip, a thin

metal ring dangled from her right nostril, and a glimmer of metal could be seen on her tongue when she spoke.

Minus all the ornamentation and the paint job, she would have been a very attractive girl. To Drew, she looked fantastic just as she was, and his teenage hormones revved into overdrive.

The young woman glanced up briefly before looking back down at the magazine spread open on the counter.

"Looking for something?" she asked in a very disinterested voice, then popped her gum loudly.

"Um, yeah. I was looking for a book on magic incantations and summoning," Drew stammered.

"Back corner to the right. We have a couple new ones on the second shelf at eye level," she replied, not even bothering to look up from her magazine.

Drew paused before gathering his courage and speaking to her again.

"No, I'm not looking for the usual stuff. I'm looking for something old, something real that was used back when the elders were really able to tap the energy of the earth and ether," he insisted, not wanting her to blow him off as some typical, modern Wiccan who just wanted to belong, socialize, and pretend to re-enact the ancient pagan traditions.

The young woman looked up and gazed into his eyes while pursing her lips in thought for several long moments before closing her magazine.

"All right, wait here," she instructed, then disappeared through a narrow open doorway in the wall behind the counter, oblivious to the boy whose eyes were enjoying the view of her tight-fitting black jeans as she walked away.

She reappeared a few minutes later with a tome that looked as old as Stonehenge. She set it down on the counter with a thump, dislodging some of the dust that had gathered on the cover.

"My grandfather kept this and a few other old books in the back because he didn't want to part with them. Just between you and me, if he doesn't start making some money he's going to lose this store. This is

my inheritance. I'd like it to be here when it comes time to collect. Take a look and see if it's what you want," she told Drew whose heart raced even faster at the sight of the old leather-bound book.

He gently opened the cover and found the contents to be in surprisingly good condition given the probable age. The paper was yellowed and very dry, but not crumbling, and the ink was perfectly legible. It showed only a bit of fading over what were likely centuries of aging. He was able to read the words written in Elder Futhark, but he would need help from Ted with the Latin. What he was able to read left no doubt in his mind that this is what he had been searching for.

"How much?" he asked.

"That book is probably worth at least a thousand bucks, but I'll let it go for five hundred."

Five hundred! He had emptied his bank account and only had three hundred and fifty dollars.

"I only have three fifty, can you please let me have it for that?" he pleaded, desperate to possess the book.

The young woman started to object but looked outside through the window and saw an old man walking across the street toward the store.

"All right, let me have it, quick," she demanded, snatching the money from his hand and shoving the book into a paper bag. "Here, take it and go now."

"Thanks, thanks a lot!" Drew exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Yeah, no problem, now go!"

The teen ran out the door just before the old man walked into the store.

"How was business while I was gone?" the old man asked as he walked behind the counter and hugged his granddaughter.

"Good. I sold some books, made more than we have all week, Granddad."

"There, you see? I told you it would pick up. You worry too much."

"You're right, Granddad."

Drew rode the city bus home and went straight to his room to study his new acquisition. He had some homework to do, but this was far more important. Besides, his schoolbooks were filled with nothing but lies and reality twisted by history's victors.

He set his cheat sheet of Elder Futhark runes next to the open book so he would not make any translation errors. Several unfamiliar runes he had to look up on the Internet, as well as most of the Latin. Drew found one summoning incantation he was sure he could manage on his own. He would study that one for this weekend's meeting and get Ted's help with the rest of it later.

His mom and dad were both home for a change, but he gulped down his dinner with barely a word and went back to his room. Drew had learned that he preferred to be by himself rather than with his family, and no one seemed to mind his desire for solitude. Time with them was no longer that important to him, and it hadn't been for a couple of years now. They wouldn't understand him anyway.

Drew pored over the tome, knowing that he had to do everything perfectly. After several hours of reading, his eyelids were getting heavy and the runes were starting to all run together, so he decided to put it away for the night.

The rest of the week fell into its usual pattern. Drew caught the bus to school, Chase *almost* started a fight, they all talked about the coming weekend, and Drew put up with a bunch of crap from other kids and teachers. Chase ditched the last couple of classes to steal something from some store, and Ted either blew something up or started a fire in chemistry class in his attempt to create a better fuel.

Drew spent every free minute reading what he could in his new book. He read it in the library during lunch, in class, and every day as soon as he got home until he went to bed. He was sitting under a tree studying the ancient text while waiting for the bus to take him home when the book was snatched out of his fingers.

"What's this, freak, your spellbook or something?" a freckle-faced kid with unruly sandy brown hair asked snidely, flipping through the pages.

"C'mon, Kevin, that was expensive so give it back," Drew said with forced patience, hoping to reason with the bully.

"You want it? Come get it, dork."

Drew stood up and walked over to Kevin and his two friends, who were finding his distress extremely amusing.

"Just give it back," Drew urged, despite knowing that his pleadings would just fuel the bully's tormenting.

Kevin flashed Drew a derisive sneer. "I don't know, you might cast a spell on me and turn me into a frog."

"No, I won't. That would be a higher life form than you are now. It would be easier to turn lead into gold than a turd into a frog."

As much as Drew criticized Chase for his uncontrollable mouth, he knew he was not much better. He regretted his insult as soon as it escaped his lips.

"Did you just call me a turd, you little freak?" Kevin demanded, throwing the book to one of his friends and lunging at Drew.

Kevin's hands gripped Drew's shirtfront and pushed him back several steps until Drew lost his footing and fell hard onto his back. Kevin fell forward with him, landing heavily on top of him before lifting himself up enough to start punching at Drew's face.

Drew lifted his forearms in front of his face and managed to ward off most of the blows. Kevin realized most of his punches were ineffective, so he stood up and started kicking at the smaller boy's sides and back as he tried to roll away from the beating.

Drew thought Kevin was never going to stop until a blur slammed into the side of his attacker and knocked him to the ground with a cry of surprise and pain.

"Ha, sneak attack!" Chase cried out. "That's bonus damage!"

Kevin wiped blood from his nose and lip, and his right ear rang furiously.

"Kill him!" Kevin shouted in rage as his two friends dropped Drew's book and tackled Chase, who kept shouting insults even as they pummeled him.

Drew rolled to his feet to try to help his friend, but Kevin was also on his feet and put him back on the defensive. Phil and Felicia appeared and pulled the two boys off Chase. Phil grabbed one of them by the shoulder, lifted him to his feet, and delivered a hard jab to his stomach. The swift blow knocked the wind out of Chase's attacker.

Felicia tugged at the other boy, who stood up and spun toward her with his fists raised.

"Hey, you're a girl. I can't hit a girl!" he cried.

"Too bad for you the same rules don't apply to me," she countered, then struck him in the face with a spinning roundhouse kick.

"You're lucky your nerd friends are here, freak!" Kevin shouted when he saw that he was outnumbered. "C'mon, you guys, let's go."

The bullies walked off, probably feeling they won on points. Drew didn't care; all he wanted was his book and he staggered over to retrieve it.

"Thanks, guys. Nice backstab, Chase," Drew groaned as he picked up his book. "Are you OK?"

"No, I think I broke something," Chase said, holding his side.

"Crap, do you think you broke a rib?" Phil asked, worried that he may have to go to the hospital.

Chase pulled something out of an inside pocket of his jacket. "No, one of the Xbox games I stole from the mall during lunch today," he said mournfully.

His friends just shook their heads and laughed at having fallen for his terrible joke.

"Is that what you were looking for at the bookstore?" Chase asked, indicating the book that Drew picked up off the ground.

"Yeah, I think it will be pretty cool tonight. Ask your parents if you can sleep over. It may be a long night."

"I know I can. My mom doesn't care what I do," Chase replied with a shrug.

"I'm sure we can too. Have you called Gabe yet to see if he can stay over?" asked Phil.

"No, I'll call him now. You guys go find Ted and see if he can stay over too. My parents are going to the coast or something all weekend, so there's plenty of room and no one to bug us."

"Except Josh," Chase reminded him.

"Yeah, there is that, but he and Chuck are watching ten years of Stanley Cup highlights on DVD this weekend, so he'll probably be too absorbed in the TV to bother us much."

Drew and Chase caught the bus home while the twins looked for Ted. While the bus rumbled toward home, Drew pulled out his cell phone and called Gabe.

"Hey Gabe, it's Drew. See if you can spend a night or two over at my house starting tonight. OK, call me back as soon as you find out."

Gabe hurried up the steps to his house and stepped through the door. "Mom, I'm home!"

His mother stepped out of the kitchen to greet her son. She looked like a modern day June Cleaver in her modest dress and apron, her well-kept hair tightly rolled into a bun, and overall wholesome demeanor.

"Did you have a good day at school today, dear?" came the usual question.

Everything followed a strict routine at his house; from dinnertime, to church, to what was for dinner on what day, and what television shows were going to be watched during the allowed two hours of TV time. His life was safe, predictable, and most of all, boring. As much as he tried to get Chase to change his sinful ways, he envied the other boy's free spirit. These thoughts were lost as soon as his mother offered him a cookie from the latest batch.

"Mom, can I spend the weekend over at Drew's house, please?" he begged between bites.

"Oh, I don't know. He seems like a nice boy but he dresses so odd. Is that Chase boy going to be there?"

This is the point where every other teenager in America would simply lie and say no, but Gabe did not lie, ever. "Probably, but we won't get into any trouble, I swear."

"You know I don't like that boy. I do not know why you even want to play with him. He's nothing but trouble."

"But Mom, doesn't Jesus tell us to care for our brothers and steer them onto the path of righteousness? What would have happened to Mary Magdalene if Jesus had not bothered to change her sinful ways?" Gabe reasoned, using the only argument he knew could sway his mother.

"All right, but you have to be home for church on Sunday," she insisted.

"Thanks, Mom, I'm going to go pack a bag."

Gabe ran upstairs and packed a few pairs of clothes, more than was needed for just two nights, but he liked to have a backup. He also stuffed his D&D gear into the suitcase, which included his dice, a pewter figurine, several D&D books, a chain-mail shirt, and a mace he bought at a renaissance fair.

Gabe was the last to arrive by the time his dad dropped him off at Drew's house. He lugged his suitcase into Drew's room, which was already crowded with five other teens and their stuff.

"Hi guys! Man, I thought I overpacked," he commented as he looked at the duffle bags stuffed with gear in the room.

"We're going to have a little campout," Felicia replied.

"Where?" Gabe asked hesitantly, as he was not fond of the ruggedness of the outdoors.

They looked from one to the other before answering, not sure who was going to tell him.

"At the house at the end of Heritage Street," Drew said, preparing for the expected outburst.

"You want to camp out in a haunted house?" Gabe asked, his voice rising as fear set in.

"It's not haunted, and I'm sure you know how to perform a cleansing or an exorcism if you want to," Chase replied.

"Why do you want to go in there? Why can't we just play D&D here like we usually do?"

"Do you know what today is?" Drew asked the chubby, frightened boy.

"Thursday."

"It's the thirty-first. It is also the night of the black moon, which is only in alignment once every five years. The house on Heritage sits on top of an old Indian ritual site. I bought a book with ancient druidic and Celtic ceremonies in it. There is one I thought would be fun to try tonight of all nights," Drew explained, his words spewing out of his mouth like bullets from a machine gun.

"You want me to spend the night on top of an old burial ground and practice some pagan ritual and spellcraft? Are you crazy?" Gabe asked shrilly.

"Gabe, doesn't the Bible teach us that everything we do is in the name of God, and that everything is of God and for God?"

"Yeah, but…"

"God is in everything around us: the air, the earth, the stars, and in the energy and magic of the world. Didn't God create the world using some type of magic?" Drew persisted.

"Well, I guess so," Gabe agreed hesitantly.

"So let's do it. It will be fun and set the mood for an awesome D&D game," Drew declared.

"I guess, but I'm making some holy water first," Gabe reluctantly agreed, then started pouring water into several small jars before praying over them fervently.

"Can you even make holy water?" Chase asked. "Don't you have to be the pope, or at least a priest?"

"No, you only have to have the proper conviction and have accepted Jesus Christ as your savior and the son of God. At least I hope so. Either way, I'm not going into that house without it," Gabe insisted.

Chase looked doubtful. "I bet they don't use tap water. Hmm, fluoridated holy water; no wonder angels always have such nice teeth!"

Gabe, as usual, was not amused at Chase's attempt at religious humor.

The youths strapped on their packs and headed out. They all walked the few blocks over to the Heritage Street house after Drew told his brother they were going camping.

"Whatever, dweebs," was Josh's only response.

The house was a large, three-story Victorian that had seen better days. The grass grew nearly waist-high in the yard, and most of the windows had long been broken out and boarded up, as had the front door. The kids went around to the back and pulled out the bottom of a sheet of plywood nailed over the kitchen door, which had been pried loose.

"There's a big bedroom on the second floor where we can set up," Drew informed his friends. "We can put our stuff in the room across the hall for now."

They followed his instructions and placed the bags in what appeared to be another bedroom. Phil pulled out a kerosene lantern he and Felicia used when they went camping so they did not have to waste the batteries in their flashlights to illuminate the dark room.

Drew pulled out a bag of salt, several candles, and the book. He read a few passages from the book and showed it to Ted in the lantern light, pointing out several verses in Latin with which he needed help.

The sun went down, and the black moon slowly and invisibly rose as Drew sketched out an elaborate pattern on the floor with chalk, and then traced it with a thin line of salt.

"This will contain the energies that are summoned. Make sure you don't break the salt line or the energy could escape," Drew warned.

"What happens if the energy escapes?" Gabe asked, clutching one of his vials of holy water and his bible.

Drew shrugged. "I'm not sure. The spell may collapse and fizzle, or it may expand out of control and destroy us all. Who knows?"

Gabe started praying fervently at Drew's warning. "Yea Lord, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil—"

"He's just kidding, Gabe. Nothing is going to happen. It's just for fun," Felicia assured him.

"OK, the moon should be well up now. Let's do it," Drew said as they all took a seat on the floor.

"Shouldn't we wait until midnight?" Phil asked.

"I don't think so. Although many people think midnight is when the moon is at its strongest, if we waited until midnight, technically it would be the first not the thirty-first," Drew answered as he lit the candles, turned down the kerosene lantern, and began to chant the words of the spell.

Ted realized the difference in Drew's chanting of the spell to that of a typical Wiccan rite. For some reason, Wiccan spellcasting always had to rhyme. Drew's chanting lacked any semblance of rhyme, but seemed to contain a hypnotic poetry all of its own.

About halfway through the spell, the candles began flickering, causing the encircled group's shadows to look as if they were dancing to the rhythm of the chant. Gabe held a hand up to the boarded-up window yet felt no breeze slipping between the dried wooden slats. He gripped his bottle of holy water even tighter and continued to pray under his breath.

The black candles' tiny flames wavered madly, and then began to go out one by one until the room was plunged into darkness. Only the faintest orange glow was visible in the barely burning lantern. Seemingly compelled and lost in the ritual, Drew unexpectedly pulled out a small knife and drew the sharp edge along the heel of his palm. Blood welled up from the cut and dripped onto the salt-traced rune.

The room slowly lost some of its gloom, and Gabe thought his eyes were beginning to adjust to the dark until he realized that the light had a bluish tint to it, which emanated from a small point in the center of the rune drawn on the floor, and it was getting brighter.

A brilliant cerulean aura flooded the room and reflected off the astonished faces of the young troop gathered in a circle. A small eddy of wind swirled around the inside of the salt-outlined image on the floor, pulling a few of the white grains into it, but staying within its prescribed boundaries. At least it would have had Gabe not panicked.

With violently trembling fingers, Gabe unscrewed the top of his holy water to anoint himself. Unfortunately, his hands had become so shaky and sweaty that the bottle shot from his grasp like a bar of soap in the shower, struck the wooden floor, and rolled toward the protective circle, trailing a cleansing rivulet of water behind it.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion, like watching a tipped glass roll toward the edge of a table. The fall seemed to take an eternity before the inevitable crash.

Gabe lunged for the rolling bottle, shouting out a long and drawn-out "No!" He did not know what would happen if the circle or the rune inside it were broken, but he did know that he definitely did not like what was happening now, and a broken circle was not likely to improve matters.

The bottle rolled over the circle, sloshing its contents, washing away the salt and marring the chalk. The eddy instantly became an angry azure vortex as air forced its way out of the small opening in the circle in an explosive gust.

"Everyone get back!" Drew commanded, shouting to be heard over the raging wind.

"Drew, how do you stop this thing?" Ted cried.

"I don't know! I don't know how I even started it! I think that may be in the part written in Latin!" he shouted back, shoving the book into the other boy's hands.

Ted tried to read the passage, but the wind was flipping the pages about making it difficult to keep his place.

"Get out of here; it's tearing itself apart! Go, I'm going to try to fix the circle!" Drew insisted as he dropped to his hands and knees, crawling toward the rent in the circle with his chalk clutched firmly in his shaking hand.

Gabe reached the door first and tried to push it open, but it felt as if someone were pushing on it from the other side. The entire room was now in a vacuum, caused by the reverse pressure from the vortex trying to suck everything into itself.

"Move it, lard butt!" Chase ordered, then pushed hard against the door.

The door slowly opened as Chase blocked it with his foot to keep it from slamming shut. "Everybody go, now! Drew, come on!" he called back as he braced the door open with his shoulder.

When his friend failed to answer, he chanced a quick look over his shoulder just in time to see Drew as he reached out with his chalk to try to repair the drawing. A blue filament of light snaked out, wrapped itself around his wrist, and pulled him inside the swirling vortex.

"Drew!" Chase called out as Phil and Ted grabbed him and hauled him through the door.

The door slammed hard against its frame as Chase tried to heave it back open.

"Chase, stop it, what are you doing? Where's Drew?" Felicia demanded.

Chase's face was pale and his hands were shaking. "It ate him! That portal or whatever it is sucked him through!"

"Oh my God, what do we do?" Gabe cried, in a barely controlled panic.

"Ted, you have the book. What does it say?" Phil asked the boy who was scanning the pages as they spoke.

Ted read the passages in the book as fast as he could, trying to make sense of what was happening. "It looks like this spell was supposed to conjure some kind of portal or gate to another world, a world where the ancient druids were able to tap into a stronger source of magic than what was available in our world. The rune allowed the druids to conjure the gate while the circle kept the gate stable. Drew must have been pulled inside it when the circle was broken."

"So what do we do? Call the cops?" Phil asked.

Chase glared at Phil. "Are you kidding? First of all, the stupid cops wouldn't believe us. Secondly, if they did, they would just cordon off the house, put it under guard, and call the government. The government wouldn't give two craps about some gothic kid, who is known to hate

the establishment, and would never try to rescue him. They would keep it under wraps and study it until they could figure out how to either squeeze oil from it or make a big-ass bomb."

"We can't just leave him there!" Felicia cried in angst.

"What do you want to do, go after him ourselves?" Phil asked sharply.

"No!" shouted Gabe.

"Yes!" Chase shouted at the same time. "Damn it, Gabe, we were all in on this, and we're going to stay together and help Drew. He would come after you if you got sucked into another world; even if there were big alien creatures that snuck up behind you and jammed their mouths through the back of your head and ate your brains out!"

"You think there are brain-sucking aliens?" Gabe stammered, his face paling even more from terror.

"Stop it, Chase," Felicia warned. "There are no aliens, Gabe. Most likely, it's going to be just like here. He's probably waiting for us right on the other side. We just have to go get him."

"Actually, it will probably be more like our world hundreds, maybe a thousand years ago," Ted piped in.

"Why do you say that?" Phil asked.

"Well, according to the book, the portal led to a world where magic was in greater abundance and usage. That would likely suppress the need for technology, possibly replacing it altogether. Think about it; would we go through all the trouble of drilling and ruining our environment for oil if we could just cast a spell to heat our homes or power our lights?"

Felicia said, "You have a point, but if the portal took Drew to that world, wouldn't he be able to just walk back through it?"

"I think the portal is one way, maybe for safety reasons, or maybe it has to do with some fundamental laws of magic or physics. The book says that in order to open a portal to come back, a person must create the same rune on the other side as the one used on this side," Ted explained, translating the words and reciting them to his friends. "He also sealed the rune with his blood, so the blood of the one who opened it must be used to reopen it from the other side."

"Then how was he able to open this gate without knowing the rune on the other side?" Chase wanted to know.

"I think it has to do with the way the gate draws power. This gate gets its power from the world with magic, but since our world has very little magic, a gate coming from the other side needs an anchor of some sort on our side," Ted reasoned.

Chase stepped forward and decided to take charge. "All right, Gabe and I will go get Josh. He'll need to be told what happened. Phil, Ted, and Felicia, you go and get everything we might need for an extended camping trip. I hope we'll just have to jump through and get Drew to open the gate home, but let's be prepared in case it's not that easy."

"Be prepared, that's my motto," Phil chimed in.

"That's your Eagle Scout motto, you goob," Felicia shot back.

"Same thing."

Chase was already heading out with Gabe in tow. "OK, let's go."

The twins ran home and packed their usual camping gear as well as their compound bows and a few dozen arrows. Chase and Gabe ran back to Drew's house and pounded on the door.

Josh answered the door, irritated by the distraction. "What do you guys want? I just rented a hockey highlights DVD and you're interrupting. Where's Drew?"

"Josh, you have to come. Drew's in trouble," Chase shouted frantically.

"What do you mean? What happened?" Josh demanded, his annoyance turning to concern.

"Yo, Josh, what's going on?" a huge, thick-necked upperclassman named Chuck asked as he walked up behind Josh.

"These guys say something happened to Drew. So what's going on?"

"Drew cast this spell, and a portal opened up and swallowed him," Gabe cried out.

"Are you serious? You interrupted my game for some of your Dungeons and Dragons crap?"

"It's true! We were up at the old house on Heritage Street, Drew made this drawing on the floor, and actually cast a real spell, and now he's gone," Gabe said adamantly.

"Just come and see, we're not lying," Chase pleaded.

"Bull, you always lie," Chuck responded accusingly.

"Yeah, but the fat one never does." Josh said, irritated at the interruption. "I had better go have a look. Mom and Dad would totally freak if something happened. All right, let's go."

"Aw man, we were just about to order pizza! All right, I'll come too. That way, if they're lying, I can crush their skinny necks," Chuck threatened, clenching his meaty fists in front of him.

"I think you've crushed too many beer cans against your head and given yourself brain damage," Chase retorted.

"We only need one of you to show us where we're going, you little twerp, so you better watch your mouth."

"Yeah, and you only need one ass, but for some reason God put a second one on top of your neck."

Since everyone tried to keep up with the sprinting Chase, who was being hounded by the furious Chuck, they all made it back to the abandoned house in record time.

"You little turd, I'm gonna smash you!" Chuck shouted at Chase's back.

Josh put a restraining hand on his friend's big shoulder as they ran around to the back of the abandoned house. "Chuck, let it go, he's not worth it. Besides, we need to find out what's going on. If this is all a bunch of crap, you can ball him up later."

Chuck breathed out heavily and let the rage drain from him as they went into the dark house. "Jeez, it's dark in here."

"There are some flashlights upstairs in the room across from where that—thing is," Gabe said from the rear.

The group felt their way along the wall and up the creaking stairs. As their eyes adjusted to the increased darkness, they were able to make out vague shapes and find the room where they had stashed their gear. Chase and Gabe felt around in the bags, brought out two flashlights, and

flicked them on. The bright LED-generated light lit up the room in a broad beam showing the peeling, mildewed wallpaper.

"So where is Drew?" Josh demanded.

"Across the hall in the other room; follow me," Chase instructed.

Chase, Josh, and Chuck cautiously crossed the hall where cobalt light could be seen radiating from under the closed door. Gabe peered around the open doorway across the hall.

"It's in here. I'll try to open the door. There was a lot of pressure against it last time."

Chase handed his flashlight to Josh and gripped the doorknob with both his hands while bracing his left leg against the doorframe. He twisted the knob and pulled in a hard but controlled manner against the door. Whatever force had previously acted against the door was gone now. The door opened almost easily, with only a slight feeling of vacuum against it.

Chase stepped aside and made room for Josh. "Take a look. That's what ate Drew. It must be full because it was a lot angrier before. Hey, maybe eating Drew made it sick! Think it will puke him back up?"

Indeed, the maelstrom that had existed in the center of the room had calmed considerably. Only a slowly swirling azure haze floated in the center of the room. Josh peered through the doorway at the portal and closed the door with a look of amazed disbelief on his face.

"What did you dweebs do?" he asked, partially in shock.

"Pretty f'd up, huh?" Chase declared, crossing his arms in an *I told you so* fashion.

Josh shot him a look of incredulity. "No, a random act of terrorism is f'd up. Our economy is f'd up. Our public schools are f'd up! That thing in there is about ten levels beyond f'd up!" he shouted, waving an arm at the door.

"Hey, guys!" Felicia called out of the darkness, eliciting some screams of surprise.

"Holy crap, you guys, you almost gave me a heart attack sneaking up on us like that," Chase accused them, holding his hand over his rapidly beating heart.

"I gotta go look in my bag for a new pair of pants. I'll be right back," Gabe informed them, then closed the door.

"Are you going to go with us to rescue Drew?" Phil asked Josh and Chuck.

"You guys want to go into that thing?"

"Of course. We can't just leave him there," Chase said.

"We have to go to the police! This is not one of your stupid Dungeons and Dragons games, this is real!"

Chase reiterated why they could not go to the police. "Besides, if your parents come home and find out you lost Drew, they're gonna be pretty pissed."

"It's not my fault!"

"You're the big brother, and you were the one left in charge," Chase said.

"I can't believe we have to do this." Josh ran his hands through his hair. "I have to go back to the house and leave a note just in case something goes wrong."

"Sure that sounds good," Chase said. "Dear Mom and Dad, Drew got sucked into a magic portal he conjured using an ancient druidic spell, and we went after him. Hope to see you soon, Josh. That'll sound great."

"I can't just take off to another world without telling someone. What if we don't come back for several days—or even weeks? Hell, what if we don't come back at all?"

"Just say that Drew came here with us to play D&D and disappeared, and we all went looking for him," Gabe said from the doorway, wearing a new pair of pants.

"When you go back home, grab some spare clothes and stuff in case we are gone for a while. We have extra weapons and some armor, so we're good there," Felicia told Josh.

"Weapons and armor, are you serious?" Josh asked.

"Yeah, we stopped by Douglas's house and borrowed some swords. His are authentic, not cheap stainless-steel replicas like ours," Felicia explained.

Chase's eyes went wide at the mention of Douglas's name. "You went to Douglas's? Are you crazy?"

"He's not that bad. We just have to invite him the next time we do a live-action role play, that's all."

"He's not that bad? He's forty-two years old, lives at home, works in the comic book store, and practically lives for the renaissance fair. All he lacks is a van with a big sign on the side advertising free candy!"

"He's not a freak, just a really old dork. Lighten up," Felicia said with a wave of her hand.

"Whatever. Do you guys really think we'll need weapons?" Chuck asked.

"We? Are you going too, Chuck? You don't have to go, you know," Josh told his friend.

"I know, but you're my team captain and my friend. I told you I always got your back, and I keep my word."

"All right, you guys wait here. Chuck and I will be back in a bit. Make sure you're ready to go."

The two young men went back home while the rest of the teens started unpacking their gear and sorting out what they would need. Phil and Felicia put on the stiff leather hauberks and greaves they wore for the D&D games and the renaissance fair. They also strapped on small, round bucklers made of oak, which Phil made in woodshop, to their off-hand forearms.

Felicia buckled on a slender rapier she often fenced with, while Phil donned a heavier broadsword with which he trained and fought mock duels in his western martial arts club.

They each slung a quiver of carbon-fiber arrows on their backs and checked their compound bows. They then stuffed their hiking packs with food, clothes, rain gear, small dome tents, and various other camping supplies.

Chase put on his dark cloak and strapped on several knives just as his character wore in his game and packed his backpack. Gabe owned a chain shirt and dropped it over his head, stuffed what he needed in a spare pack the twins had brought, and gripped his mace tightly in his hand.

Ted basically looked like Ted but in a dark blue cloak with some sort of mystic symbols sewn into the thick material with silver thread. He clutched the old tome in one hand and held a polished, ornately carved wooden staff with a crystal embedded in the wood at the top in the other.

Chuck and Josh returned just as the others finished arming and packing. Josh wore football pads and a helmet and held a hockey stick in his left hand while Chuck maintained a white-knuckled grip on an aluminum Easton baseball bat.

"All right, are you guys ready?" Josh asked the younger kids.

"We're ready. Here, Chuck, you can use this shield and sword Douglas loaned us," Phil offered, handing him a teardrop-shaped wood and metal shield along with a plain but very sharp longsword. "There's also a chain shirt he wears to the fair. You are a lot bigger, but he's a lot fatter, so it should work. Josh, I think this claymore would be a little better than your stick," Phil suggested, handing him a huge sword that had to be wielded with both hands.

Josh hefted the massive blade, took a few steps back, and performed a couple of practice swings. It was heavy, but he was strong and able to wield it with relative ease.

"Cool. Thanks," Chuck and Josh both said gratefully.

Chuck slipped the chain shirt over his head. It was a little short in length and a bit loose in the stomach, but it would do.

"What if I get hit in the legs? I don't have any armor there," Chuck observed, looking down at his denim-covered legs.

"Don't worry about it. You probably won't get hit in the legs, and you don't have any vital organs there anyway," Chase assured him.

The group of young warriors opened the door and walked toward the portal.

"So, Chuck, what made you go on this clearly insane quest?" Chase asked the big football player.

"Like I said, Josh is my best friend and I got his back. Besides, if it wasn't for him I would have never gotten accepted to the University of Oregon."

"You're going to college?"

"Yeah, I got a scholarship for football."

"What do you plan on studying?"

"I don't know. I was thinking forestry maybe. It sounds pretty cool," Chuck replied.

"Forestry is actually an excellent idea. I think it would work out well for you," Chase said supportively.

"Yeah? You really think so?"

"Definitely, some day you might be able to find Bigfoot and return to your people."

"You little smartass, I'll clobber you!" Chuck threatened, hefting his sword a little higher.

"Oh look, it's our turn," Chase shouted, leaping into the portal after his friends.

Chuck took one deep breath and followed closely on his heels. Ted let out a sigh, shook his head, and jumped in after them.

CHAPTER 4

The portal raged wildly out of control. Drew thought it might well expand until it sucked the entire house into itself along with his friends. Chase sprinted to the door and tried to wrest it open, fighting against the intense vacuum created by the portal. He knew he had to do something.

If I can fix the circle, I can bring it back under control, he thought.

Drew grabbed his chalk and crawled toward the breach, hoping he could repair the drawing and push the salt at each side of the division together to close it once again.

As he stretched out, fighting against the invisible grasping force that threatened to pull him into the maelstrom, he touched the chalk against the wooden floor and pressed hard, trying to remake the line. Unfortunately, the wood was wet from Gabe's flask of water and resisted his efforts.

That's when a wispy blue tendril of ethereal substance wrapped around his wrist. Drew felt as though he were being stretched like a rubber band and about to snap. He looked at his outstretched hand, and his fingertips looked so far away from him he could hardly make out the individual digits.

It felt as though someone had released their grip on his feet and he shot forward through an azure passage of time, space, and dimension. The unmovable force of solid ground abruptly halted his freefalling vertigo. Drew rolled and skipped across the dirt, stone, and pine needles carpeting some unknown forest.

He knew he had stopped moving, but as he stared up at the evergreen canopy, he saw that the forest was not so immobile. The green

treetops, along with the grey and white pieces of visible sky, whirled high above him. He fought down the queasiness in his stomach and the trees slowly came to a stop. He turned his head left and right and saw nothing but forest and pinecones. Drew stood on his feet and looked at the swirling portal several yards away.

"Holy crap, it worked."

He cautiously approached the portal, hoping to return to his world, but as he got closer, he felt an invisible force repelling him. The closer Drew tried to approach, the more he was repelled—like trying to push together the same poles of two strong magnets. He felt panic start to suffuse his body as he began to realize that he might be trapped here.

"It's OK. Chase and the others will come for me. Crap, if I had the book I could probably get myself back. Ted has the book and he can read it better than me. He'll know better what to do anyway," he assured himself as the sound of his own voice calmed his nerves. "OK. What is my situation? I have clothes but nothing warm, no weapons, no food or water, and no shelter."

He felt his pockets, reached in, and pulled out his lighter and a pocketknife. The lighter was one of those good windproof ones that campers and crackheads prefer. The pocketknife was a Swiss Army model that his dad had gotten him for his birthday.

"I have fire and a tool. Primitive man existed and flourished with far less."

The sound of snapping twigs alerted him to the presence of someone—or something—else, and it was coming closer. He whirled about and came face to face with a dozen warty creatures standing a little over three feet tall with skin ranging from yellow to dusky red.

"Whoa! Goblins!" Drew shouted, more excited than afraid.

The creatures held their weapons menacingly as they drew forward. "You wizard, come through magic gate?" a red-skinned goblin demanded to know.

"You can talk! I mean, you can speak my language," Drew exclaimed.

"I talk common very good. You come with us. Go see master. You be no trouble or you get thumped. No magic or you get thumped. No run away or you get thumped," the goblin warned.

"I can't go. My friends will be looking for me," Drew tried to explain but the goblin was not about to listen to his protests.

"You argue, you get…"

"Let me guess, Thumped? Yeah, I think I see the pattern here despite its complexity," Drew responded.

Drew was starting to get worried. All he knew about goblins was what was in his D&D books, and he had no reason to think the two would correlate. D&D was a game and entirely fictional, but this was real.

Unless he was dreaming. If he were dreaming, then all the rules of the game would apply because everything in this world would be entirely based on his own knowledge. Except that everything felt much more real than any dream he had ever experienced.

The goblins were drawing closer, apprehensive but intent on capturing him. Drew decided to make use of their nervousness. He slowly picked up a dried pinecone and pulled out his lighter, carefully keeping it concealed in his hand as much as possible. He pushed the button on the lighter, engaging the tiny magneto, and produced an invisible, extremely hot flame.

"Stay back, foul creatures!" Drew shouted as he held the pinecone aloft in front of him. *Foul creatures indeed,* he thought, as he got wind of the pungent odor coming from the goblins. "I am a powerful wizard. I created this portal and traveled from another world. Come any closer, and this is what will happen to you all!" he shouted in his most menacing voice, which was not terribly intimidating given the fact that it cracked several times.

Drew held the lighter to the back of the pinecone, causing it to burst into flames. He held the flaming, sparking, popping tree dropping in front of him threateningly. The goblins appeared neither frightened nor even impressed with his display. The only reaction he got was a club

thrown at him at rather great velocity and accuracy. He turned and raised his shoulder while ducking his head as the projectile struck him hard in his upper left arm.

"Ouch, son of a bitch!" he cried out in pain.

The goblins began their advance again and Drew tried the only thing he could think of.

"Look, a dragon!" he shouted, pointing behind the goblins.

To his amazement, every goblin before him actually turned to look. Drew wasted no time in gloating at his cleverness and the stupidity of goblins. He turned and ran into the woods as fast as he could, slipping the lighter back into his pocket. Drew heard the angry cries of the duped goblins behind him. He chanced a glance over his shoulders and saw them starting to give chase, but his legs were longer and had the power of fear propelling him like a strong wind filling the sails of a ship.

The terrified young man turned his head back around to watch where he was going. He did not want to end up like one of those stupid bimbos in a cheap slasher flick who trips over everything while looking at the machete-wielding maniac chasing her at a slow walk.

He had just enough time to register the sudden appearance of another half-dozen goblins as they sprang up from the bushes directly ahead of him. Strong, sinewy arms wrapped around his legs as they pulled him to the ground, piled on top of him, and shoved his face into the dirt and fallen pine needles. The goblins trussed his hands behind his back and rolled him over. Drew looked up and stared into the angry face of the red-skinned goblin that had spoken to him just a moment ago.

"We surround you. You think we be stupid, but you be stupid," the goblin spat, then laughed at his own cleverness in capturing the "wizard."

"I'm stupid? You're the one who looked," Drew shot back.

Drew knew he had pushed the goblin too far as the creature drew back his club and brought it down hard on the top of the young boy's head, plunging his world into darkness.

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Josh, Phil, Felicia, Gabe, Chase, Chuck, and finally Ted, arrived in the alien world dizzy and disoriented. The trees and ground spun crazily before their eyes. Gabe fell to his knees and threw up.

Ted clutched the book tightly to his chest as if it were a floatation device and he was lost in the raging sea. He turned just in time to witness the portal that had brought them all here vanish out of existence with little more than a spark and a small pop.

As everyone was getting his or her bearings back, Josh walked over to Ted. "Where did the portal go?"

"It must have dissipated once the book came through," Ted guessed.

"Then how are we going to get home? Can you make another one?" he asked, frightened at the thought of being trapped in a strange world.

"Only Drew can open the same portal back to where we were. If I opened one, I would have no way of knowing where it would take us. I assume it would be in our world, but it might dump us out at Stonehenge, or in the middle of the Australian outback, or another world altogether for all I know."

"OK, we came here for Drew anyway. Does anybody see him? Drew!" Josh shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth, spinning a slow circle as he shouted for his brother.

"Quiet, you idiot!" Chase hissed. "You don't know who or what may be around here."

"There's no one here but us and maybe Drew somewhere close by. Drew!" he shouted again.

A rustling in the thicker bushes several yards away answered his call.

"Drew?" Josh asked, somehow certain it was not his brother. "What the hell is that?"

The goblin raised himself up from the brush he had been hiding behind, followed by several more of the gangly creatures. More rustling betrayed the presence of at least a dozen of the creatures surrounding them about thirty yards away.

"I think those are goblins!" Ted exclaimed, obviously afraid yet excited.

"What do they want? Do you think they know where Drew is?" Josh asked.

His answer came from the yellow-skinned goblin wielding a shortsword. "You surrender or get thumped like other wizard," the goblin ordered.

"You have Drew? Where is he?" Josh demanded, hefting his huge sword.

"Wizard taken to master. You go to master or get thumped," the goblin threatened again.

"If that little freak tries to thump me, I'll crack his ugly little head open," Chuck declared.

"Should we go with them?" Josh asked, not really liking the idea of being at these creatures' mercy.

"Goblins are evil and notoriously untrustworthy," Phil answered. "I don't think it would be a good idea."

"You can take us to your master, but we will keep our weapons," Josh told the goblin.

"You drop weapons. You prisoners," the goblin responded.

"What do we do?" Josh asked.

"If we go with them, we'll probably find Drew, but we won't be in any position to rescue him," Phil responded.

The goblins started to advance. "You come now. You drop weapons or get thumped!"

At that moment, the forest erupted into pandemonium. An arrow protruded from the throat of the lead goblin, dropping him instantly.

"Attack. Kill the humans!" the goblins screamed, rushing forward.

Without thinking, Phil and Felicia started launching arrows from their powerful bows into the charging mass of goblins. The force of the speeding missiles was enough to send the razor-edged tips clean through the backs of the smaller creatures.

"Oh my God, what do I do?" Chuck cried in panic.

"Simple," Chase responded, "you put the pointy end of your sword into the bad guy. You use your shield to keep the bad guy from putting the pointy end of his sword into you. I realize it may be a bit more sophisticated than the rock-tied-to-a-stick type of weapons you are accustomed to, but it should be simple enough for you to understand," Chase explained sarcastically.

"Yeah, OK, got it." Chuck strode forward, holding his shield out in front of him.

"He'll never make it," Chase muttered, then disappeared into the woods amidst the chaos.

An ugly goblin charged at Chuck swinging a crude club. He intercepted the blow with his shield and swung back with his sword, nearly cutting the smelly creature in two.

"Hey, this is like catching hockey pucks and high-sticking a guy that gets too close to the net!" Chuck exclaimed, confidently seeking out a new opponent.

Josh swung his huge, two-handed claymore with deadly effect, cutting down any goblin unfortunate enough to come within his long reach. The twins stood side by side, launching arrows until the goblins' proximity forced them to drop their bows and engage them with their swords. If the goblins thought they had caught an advantage in pressing the archers into melee, they were about to be proven very wrong. Brother and sister flew into a deadly dance of swinging steel, chopping and thrusting with their blades in a display of skill the other humans lacked.

One goblin singled out Gabe, who was holding his mace in one hand and clutching his bible to his chest in the other. Today would be the first time his devotion would save his life instead of just his soul.

The goblin ran forward and hurled a nasty-looking dagger straight at the terrified boy's heart with fantastic accuracy. Gabe let out a shriek, closed his eyes, and held his bible out in front of him. He opened his eyes when he felt the blade thunk heavily into the holy book. His now open eyes filled with rage as he beheld the sacrilege.

"You little son of a bitch; look what you did to my goddamn bible!" he cursed in fury. "And you made me curse! And blaspheme!"

The goblin was unfazed by Gabe's curses and accusations. It strode purposefully forward, pulling out a second wicked dagger as an evil grin spread across its face. Gabe lashed out in righteous fury with the steel-headed mace and connected solidly with the goblin's lumpy head. The goblin fell to the ground with a sickening crunch as the pious young man realized what he had just done.

"Oh my God, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he pleaded, not knowing what else to do.

Ted's mind raced, desperate to figure out a way to help. He lacked the strength and fighting skills of his friends and was shocked that even Gabe had brought down an enemy. As more of the goblins advanced on him and his friends, he threw his powerful mind into the task as he did with his calculus and science problems. He was a wizard when they played D&D, but he did not know any real spells. Or did he?

He thought about everything he had read in Drew's book while Phil and his sister were packing their gear. He thought about the strange words and their purpose. The drawings and runes that seemed to make no sense earlier started to become clear in his mind.

The images the book described were like geometry and other higher mathematical equations. He translated the complex descriptions and overlaid them on a grid system in his mind as he did when he created three-dimensional objects on his computer.

The book described x, y, and z points that had to be drawn and connected in sequence while chanting out the spell described in the book. Fortunately, he had an exceptional memory and pictured one of the spells in his mind. He dropped the book into his pack, held his staff in the crook of his arm, and began chanting the arcane words and drawing the mystic rune in the air.

The air started to shimmer before him as a tingling filled his body. Goblins rushed at the seemingly frail human boy with murderous intent. At the zenith of the gathered energy, Ted pointed his hand toward the goblins and shouted the final word of power that would release the

eldritch energy his body had accumulated. A scorching jet of flame arced out from his extended hand, engulfing two of the goblins in its blazing wake.

"Oh my God, I just cast a spell. I just cast a real magic spell!"

The exhilaration that the gathering energy filled him with sapped an equal amount of energy when he released it. Ted felt like he had just run a hundred-meter dash and forgotten to use his inhaler.

Chuck was slashing away with his sword and bashing with his shield with wild abandon when he felt a burning pain lance into his calf muscle. He swung about and brought his shield up just in time to deflect a second arrow from two goblins firing bows from twenty yards away behind a concealing mass of bushes.

The goblin that had fired the shot that struck him nocked an arrow to his bow and drew back for another shot as the second goblin fumbled for another arrow. Chuck held his shield up, hoping he could deflect the arrows a second time. It was a lot of ground to cover, and Chuck's shield was not so large that it could cover both his torso and legs at the same time. He also knew he could not just stand there and keep taking shots. Eventually, one would get through and hurt him far worse than the first one had.

Just as he started to advance on the goblin archers, the one with the arrow drawn arched back, launched its arrow harmlessly skyward, and collapsed to the ground. A dark figure loomed behind the second goblin as the creature fitted its second arrow to the bowstring. The figure pumped its arm forward, and the goblin let out a piercing shriek and fell to the ground alongside its kin.

"Backstab, you nasty little bastards, WOOT!" Chase shouted, then ducked back into the bushes, disappearing in the thick foliage.

It was then that the young party realized they were not alone. Several other dark shapes were moving in the woodline, firing arrows or cutting down goblins with swords. Josh figured there were perhaps half a dozen at best and, as long as they were killing the goblins, he was glad to see

them. Only a few of the malodorous creatures were still standing, and they fled once they realized they were significantly outmatched.

It was not until they were able to pause and process what had just happened that Chuck looked down and realized the severity of his wound. A goblin arrow was deeply embedded in his meaty calf.

"Freaking hell, I've been skewered!" Chuck protested loudly, sitting down heavily on the ground. He touched the offending projectile and cried out when it sent a shooting pain up his leg.

"Great job, guys. We were awesome!" Felicia exclaimed when she saw that everyone seemed OK.

"I cast a real spell, you guys! Did you see it?" Ted asked, hardly able to breathe through his excitement.

"I saw it, Ted," Phil answered. "That was the coolest thing I have ever seen. How on earth did you do that?"

"Drew's book has some spells in it, and I figured out they are basically mathematical equations, kind of, but different. Anyway, I know how to use them. I can't wait to read some more!"

Josh saw Chuck sitting on the ground holding his leg. "Chuck, are you all right? What happened?"

"Looks like Chuck got stuck," Chase replied, appearing out of the brush. "Hey, that rhymes! Teddy, gimme a beat!"

Ted launched into an improvisational beatbox while Chase broke into a rap.

"Look at our friend Chuck.
The big ape got stuck.
Guess he should've ducked,
But he was outta luck.
Took an arrow below the knee,
Says it burns worse than when he pees."

"This is not a joke, you idiot!" shouted Chuck.

"Yes it is, Chuck, you just don't get the punch line because you *are* the punch line," Chase said.

"Oh no, Chuck, are you OK?" Felicia asked, very concerned but still trying not to laugh at Chase's impromptu rap.

"No, one of those nasty gremlins shot me and it hurts like hell!"

"They were goblins, Chuck, not gremlins," Gabe informed him.

"Whatever. All I know is that I got shot, I'm bleeding, it hurts like hell, and that twerp is singing about it!" Chuck complained.

"Quit crying, you sound like a big baby," Chase admonished the wounded lad.

"I have an arrow in my leg! You said I wouldn't get hit in the leg!"

"I said you *probably* wouldn't get hit in the leg. Kind of like I said you probably would never develop a language beyond grunts and clicks but hey, just look at you now, opposable thumbs and everything!"

"I'd like to see how you would act if you had an arrow in your leg, you jerk!"

"I know I wouldn't be crying like a little girl! The thing is hardly even bleeding."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" Felicia demanded.

Chuck took advantage of Chase's momentary distraction, reached up, and grabbed his arm. He dug his thumb deep into the soft flesh in the crook of Chase's elbow.

"Ow! That hurt, you big horse's ass!" Chase shouted, rubbing his arm.

"Imagine how it would feel if I drove my thumb all the way through it!"

"All right, fine, it hurts. I get it."

"We have to get the arrow out," Phil insisted.

"Perhaps we can be of assistance in that," a deep voice came from the edge of the small clearing.

The group had completely forgotten about the strangers who had seemed to help them in their battle with the goblins. Now that Josh thought about it, he was sure it had been one of them who started the fight by shooting the goblin with an arrow.

"Who are you?" Josh demanded, lifting his sword.

Phil and Felicia took up their bows again as they all stood shielding Chuck who was still sitting on the ground nursing his wounded leg. An

older man in soft woolen clothes and a cloak stepped forward, and raised his hands in a gesture of peace.

"Be calm, young warriors. I am Elderin, a druid of this grove and the surrounding forest. The goblins are invaders and have no place here. We thank you for your assistance in dispersing them."

"You could have gotten us killed attacking them like that!" Josh accused them, looking down at his wounded friend.

The druid at least had the decency to look contrite when he answered. "I am sorry we were forced to bring you into the fight like this, but we could not allow you to go with them. If you had, you likely would have been lost along with your friend."

Josh figured the druid was talking about his brother. The thought of Drew in the hands of those foul creatures made his blood boil.

"Where is he? Where is my brother?"

"The goblins have been watching this ancient site for some time now. Your brother appeared before I was able to summon enough help to deal with them. He was taken two days ago by the goblin scouts."

"Two days? That's impossible," Josh said, shaking his head.

"Time can flow wildly when traveling through such gates. The time variances are usually not too far out of flux, but an unstable gate can have significant disjunctions in time," Elderin explained.

"Look, guys, I hate to interfere with your socializing, but I have an arrow in my leg! I think I heard something about someone being able to help with that," Chuck cut in frantically.

"Of course; how inconsiderate of us. Let us deal with your friend's wound first, then we can go back to our camp and discuss these other events," the druid offered.

Four men dressed in leather and chain armor concealed under camouflaging cloaks stepped soundlessly from the trees. Each carried longbows and swords. Josh and the rest of the teens ignored them for now, intent on helping Chuck.

The druid knelt down beside the wounded young man and examined his leg. "I can extract the arrow, but magical healing is not a

skill I possess. I can make a poultice that will prevent spoiling of the wound and aid in its healing."

Elderin began chanting in a strange tongue that even Ted could only partially understand. The wooden shaft of the arrow drooped, losing its rigidity. The onlookers gasped in surprise as the vine-like arrow shaft began slithering like a snake, extracting itself from the wound and pulling the steel head out with it.

"It is fortunate that the arrow was not barbed. That would have been far more difficult to remove," the druid explained with relief.

As soon as the arrowhead dropped to the ground, the wound began to bleed profusely. Elderin pulled out a swatch of cloth, wadded it up, and pressed it to the wound, eliciting a renewed hiss of pain from Chuck.

"Crap, that's a lot of blood," Ted remarked as the bandage became soaked with the sticky bodily fluid.

"Gabe, you're supposed to be a cleric. Can't you heal him?" Phil asked, desperate to try to do anything to stop the bleeding.

"That's in the game, not in real life!" Gabe wailed, terrified and feeling helpless at the sight of the blood coming from Chuck's leg.

"Yeah, just like Ted is a wizard in the game, but here he can cast real spells," Felicia urged.

"We're not even in the same world anymore. I don't know if God can even hear me here! Even if he did, why would he listen to me? I'm just a fat kid from Oregon, not Mother Teresa!"

"Gabe, God is everywhere; that's what you tell us. Are you saying you don't really believe? Are you just another hypocrite who goes to church to feel better about themselves for another week?" she asked.

"No!"

"Then help him. At least try."

Gabe let out a sigh of resignation and knelt down next to Chuck's prone form. He placed his hand over the spot where the druid was pressing against the bandage and prayed, his voice quavering and cracking.

"Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," he prayed, clenching his eyes until he finished the Lord's Prayer.

When he opened his eyes and lifted the bandage, the wound was still bleeding as badly as before.

"You see, I'm not good enough!" Gabe wailed, tears streaming down his face.

"Well you never actually told God what you wanted. Maybe you need to be more specific," Chase told him.

"The Bible says all you ever need is the Lord's Prayer. God knows what you want before you even ask. He does not like people who ramble on in their prayers. It says so in the Bible," Gabe explained between sniffles.

"Just try it, Gabe. Maybe the Bible isn't a hundred percent accurate in everything. Plus, things are different here," Felicia urged.

"OK, I'll try again." Gabe squeezed his eyes shut once more and began to pray with all of his heart. "Dear heavenly father. Allow me to be your vessel. Let your divine radiance fill me and heal this brave man of his afflictions. Let your holy power flow through me so that I may restore one of your beloved children to wellness. In this I pray, amen."

Gabe was the first to notice a change. His body tingled and filled with warmth and a sense of immense calm. Gasps of astonishment came from all those around him as his hands began to glow with a golden radiance.

Chuck felt the pain vanish under the warmth spreading from Gabe's hands. When Gabe lifted the blood-soaked cloth, another gasp of surprise issued from the youths. The wound in Chuck's leg had closed, and fresh skin covered the hole with barely a perceptible scar.

"That was amazing. I can't believe I just saw the power of God, and it flowed through Gabe!" Chase shouted.

"We should leave this place now and go back to my camp. We have many things to discuss," Elderin urged the group.

Chuck stood, and they all followed the druid out of the clearing while the rangers silently formed a wide circle around the party.

Gabe stared at his bloodstained hands. "Does anyone have some water to wash this off? I think I'm going to pass out," he begged, his face pale now that the wonderment of what he had done was rapidly being replaced with the return of normality.

"Here you go," Chuck replied, offering his canteen. "I just wanted to say thanks for fixing my leg. That was pretty amazing back there."

"Thank God, he is the amazing one, not me. I was just the extension cord to his power tool," Gabe said modestly.

"Still, I doubt anyone else could have done it, so thanks."

"I just hope I don't have to do it again."

They walked for over an hour before the group passed another dark-garbed man who blended into the foliage so well, they would have seen him if he had not moved. Although they could not see anyone else, they all felt several more pairs of eyes watching their approach.

"Who are these men?" Josh asked the druid as they walked into what must have been their camp.

"They are mostly rangers who answered my summons for help. Others are woodsmen who live not farther than a few days' travel and wish to protect the land from the infestation of the evil goblins and their leader," Elderin explained.

The camp was like none even the twins had ever seen before. If it were not for the small firepit and the two dozen men sitting around on fallen logs and tree stumps, they would never have known the place was occupied.

No tents were erected, and no trash littered the ground. No clothes were strung up to dry, and all personal gear was tightly packed, ready to be slung on the back, and moved out at a moment's notice. Only the nickering of horses and the ringing of a hammer shaping steel somewhere out of sight presented any substantial signs of habitation.

Everyone dropped their packs and took a seat wherever they could find one. Exhaustion had finally set in once the excitement of what had happened wore off. Most of the young band lay back on their packs and

closed their eyes. Ted was too excited at his discovery and opened the old tome to study the incantations within it.

"That was quite some fighting you and your friends did back there, though I would wager none of you are experienced in combat; excepting, of course, the two young siblings over there."

"Chuck and I play some pretty rough sports; that's about the closest we have ever come to real combat. I guess that helped a bit. Mostly, I think it was just fear and wanting to get my brother back. Can you help us find Drew? Do you know what happened to him?" Josh asked, his eyes beseeching the old druid for help.

"I can offer some equipment, information, and hopefully some knowledge. Knowledge can sometimes be the greatest of weapons, if used properly. As far as providing direct help with any kind of force of arms…" The old druid shook his head regretfully, "I am afraid I will be able to give little in the way of help. None, in fact, beyond these woods,"

"We would appreciate anything you can do."

"The young man you are looking for was taken, alive and well, about two days ago. They are moving swiftly and you will not be able to catch up with them, so please stay here for a short time so my people and I can do what we can to give you the best chance for success."

"But the longer we wait the farther he will be taken and the harder it will be to find him," Josh said plaintively.

"I know where they are likely taking him and will point you in the right direction. Do not fear on that part. I am also certain Darkrell will not harm him. Of time, you have a little; but of experience, you have none. If you rush off prematurely, you risk total failure. If you fail, you fail your brother and do him no good at all."

"Who is Darkrell and what does he want with my brother?"

"Lord Darkrell is in one way a typical evil tyrant bent on ruling the world. Unlike nearly all of the previous tyrants, he realizes that he cannot carve out a kingdom with just the evil races. Evil eventually destroys itself from within, almost without exception. He knows this and he is very patient, or at least he has been so far. For years, he has been searching for a way to open one of the ancient portals to one of the other

worlds in an attempt to find warriors, magic, or weapons to aid him in conquering this world," Elderin explained to the young man.

"What has that got to do with Drew? He doesn't know any magic, doesn't have any weapons, and is certainly not a warrior. He got beat up by a girl last year!"

"He needs your brother to reopen the portal to your world in hopes of finding what he needs. Once he gains access to your world, he can take control of the portal on your side and travel as he pleases. Does your world have weapons or warriors that he may find useful?"

"Definitely. There are weapons you can't imagine and millions of people who will fight for the right price."

"Millions…by the gods." The druid breathed out, his face going pale at the thought. "He must not be allowed to gain access to the portal. I must keep my men here and increase their numbers. I cannot hold the portal on my own. I need an army of more than just my rangers and woodsmen. We will do what we can to slow them and harass them. I will have to try to convince the king's lords that this is where the truly important battle will take place."

"What should I do now?" Josh felt lost in this world, and his voice and face clearly showed it.

"Spend at least a few days here with us. We can teach you some basic fighting skills, and your other two friends have found abilities they have never before possessed. I can help them both understand and use them to better effect. I cannot make you and your companions great swordsmen, or the other two lads master spellcasters, in only a few days, but it will help. It may mean the difference between success and failure, but only if you all are quick learners and willing to put forth your greatest efforts."

"We are, thank you, sir," Josh said, grateful for any help he could get in this strange world to help rescue his brother.

"Go and rest a bit. We can talk more tonight at supper," Elderin said kindly.

Josh went and sat next to the studious Theodore, who was presently absorbed in his book.

"Hey, Tad, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Um, it's Ted, but sure you can. What's on your mind?"

"Oh, Ted, sorry. Yeah, I definitely have questions. I have so many questions I don't even know where to begin," Josh said, shaking his head and rubbing his eyes. "First off, how is it we are in another world yet they speak English?"

"Actually, they are speaking what they call common. It is similar to how English is the universal language of science and business. Why it sounds like English, I can only theorize. The fact the gate Drew opened linked our world and this one suggests that people from both worlds have met before. It is also possible that this world is simply another version of our world, meaning it is the same world in another dimension, timeline, or alternate universe. Some scientists think that there are thousands of worlds, variations of 'what if' worlds."

"'What if' worlds?"

Ted smiled as he truly enjoyed showing off his intellect and knowledge. "What if Columbus had never sailed across the ocean in 1492? What if Hitler had developed the A-bomb and used it first? What if German had been chosen as the primary language of the United States?"

"Are you serious?" Josh asked.

"Yes, imagine how different World War II may have played out if that had been the case. In one of the 'what if' worlds, that is exactly what happened. Americans spoke German, joined Hitler's team, and ruled the world under the Fuehrer. In this world, English evolved just as it has in ours."

Josh expressed his relief. "Whatever the reason, it makes our job a lot easier."

"That's for sure. I'm good at languages, but it would have been painful progress with nothing to base it on."

Josh looked at the old book in Ted's hands. "So, what have you found in the book so far?"

"It's amazing! There are actually quite a few offensive and defensive spells in here, far more than ritual castings like the gate summoning Drew did. I used one of them today, and have memorized three more already."

"Yeah, that was awesome. I've never seen anything like that," Josh said, impressed with the young boy's display of magic. "I saw a lot of things today I never would have thought possible."

"And that is just one of the lowest-level spells. There are some in here that are a lot more powerful. At least, I think they are," Theodore said dubiously. "They are definitely more complicated. It's going to take me a while to decipher them."

"How did it feel when you burned those goblins up?"

Ted's eyes lost some of their excitement at the mention of the deaths that they had caused.

"I don't know. I try not to think about it. I try to tell myself they would have killed my friends and me, and that I acted in self-defense. I can still smell it. I never imagined the smell when I played the game," Ted said, dropping his eyes and looking at his feet.

"Yeah, me neither when I played video games," Josh confided quietly.

The party rested for the remainder of the day. As night fell, the small fire was built up and a large pot of stew was suspended over the flames to heat. Later, as they were dining on rabbit stew and hard bread, a couple of the rangers sat next to Phil and his sister.

"That's quite a bow you two have there," a tall, dark-haired, powerfully built ranger stated. "May I have a look?"

"Sure," Phil consented, handing over the cam-driven compound bow.

The ranger hefted the bow, a look of surprise plain on his face at the weight and quality of construction. He drew the string back to his cheek and astonishment replaced surprise as the cams engaged and relieved most of the pressure against his fingers and arm.

"By the gods, this is magnificent!" the ranger exclaimed as he passed the bow to his comrade who reacted in a similar manner. "How is such a weapon made, and of what kind of material? It is constructed of no metal I know of."

"It's made of a carbon composite, like the arrow shafts," Chase explained, pulling one of the arrows from the attached rack, which held six of the long, deadly shafts.

The rangers examined the razor-headed arrows with equal amazement.

"May I make a drawing of this weapon? I am something of a craftsman, and I would like to see if I might duplicate it on some level," the ranger said. He proceeded to pull out a thin, hardbound book, and Phil saw several charcoal sketches as the man flipped through the book until he came to a blank page.

"The original compounds used a pulley system here and here instead of cams. It may be easier to replicate them with the materials you have available. Also, you may have to tweak down the power a bit. Our bows have so much power in the draw that they can fracture a wooden shaft if there is any flaw in it," Phil offered.

"I don't think that will be too much of a problem. Our longbows have a pull of up to a hundred pounds. A well-crafted arrow can handle it, I think," the ranger replied, continuing his sketch.

The twins and the rangers continued to exchange questions as they ate their simple supper.

Elderin took a seat next to Gabe as he ate his stew from a wooden bowl. He looked at the slightly rotund boy for a moment before speaking.

"There is a strong link forged between you and your god," the druid stated.

Gabe looked up from his wooden bowl and answered the kindly druid. "I hope so; I know every verse in the Bible by heart."

"This bible is the written tenets of your god?"

Gabe nodded in answer to the question, spooning another helping of stew into his mouth.

"What is the name of your god, young man?" Elderin asked.

"God," Gabe answered simply.

"Yes, your god. What do you call him or her? Mine is Terrellen, the great forester."

"That is his name," Gabe explained.

"Thadis is your god's name then?"

"No, not Thadis. God is his name. Just God.

The druid smiled kindly at the obviously confused young man. "No, god is what he is, his title."

"It is also his name. That is what we call him because when he appeared before Abraham that is what God told him to tell everyone his name was," Gabe explained patiently.

Now Elderin was starting to lose his patience with this young man. "That is ridiculous. If you just call out to your god with the name God, then how do the gods know for whom you are asking? You might be bombarded by a multitude of divine replies. You have the attention of every god in the heavens saying, *Who me? Yes? Who are you and what do you want?"*

"In my world we have only one god, and He knows when you are praying to him," Gabe replied, unfazed by Elderin's discomfiture.

"So everyone in your world is of the same religion and prays to your one god?"

"Well, no. Different cultures and religions pray to different gods or to God but in a different way, but my god is the only true god," Gabe said with conviction.

"So there are other gods. Yours is simply the overgod; the god of all," the druid stated, thinking he was finally beginning to understand this new faith.

Gabe swallowed another mouthful of stew before answering. "No, he's the only one."

"But you said other people prayed to different gods?"

"Yeah, but they're wrong and misguided," Gabe replied.

"That strikes me as being a bit conceited."

"Maybe, but I think it's only conceited if you're wrong."

The druid pulled his head back at the statement as if he had been slapped, but then forced himself to relax again. "Still, it seems rather obtuse not to have a proper name for your god. It is like wielding a sword of divine power, pulling it from its scabbard, and brandishing it in front of a horde of evil foes. Its holy radiance blinding in the eyes of evil, you stride forward and shout, *'behold the awesome power of the most holy sword…Sword!'* It just does not have the same ring of authority as, say, Excalibur, does it? Such a generic name would not seem to inspire the same kind of courage in your comrades or instill fear in your enemies."

"It seems to be working for us so far, so I best just stick with God," Gabe stated simply, wiping out his empty bowl with a chunk of bread.

Elderin wandered off to speak to one of the others, muttering to himself and shaking his head. After they had eaten, Josh had everyone gather around him to talk about what they would do.

"Elderin has offered to spend a few days teaching us what he and his people can to give us a better chance of rescuing Drew. As much as I hate the idea of letting my brother get farther away, I have to admit that if we just run after him without a plan, we'll probably do him no good," Josh explained.

Chase did not like the idea of waiting. "But if we wait, we may never find him!"

"Elderin says he knows where they are likely taking him. Two days have passed since Drew was pulled into the portal, and we will be unable to catch up with them before they reach wherever they are going. He is sure that whoever took him wants him alive, as well as needing the book Ted has, so we have time."

"But wouldn't we be bringing the book to the bad guy, giving him both pieces of the puzzle?" Felicia asked.

"Drew is more important than the book. Maybe we can work out a deal if we can't steal him back. Besides, Ted needs the book in order to play his part, and we need the book when we get Drew back so he can get us home again."

"So, what do you want to do?" Chase asked.

"I think we should stay here for a couple of days. Ted needs to study that book some more, and Chuck and I definitely need some training on how to use these weapons. Speaking of which, we all need to talk about what happened today. How does everyone feel about what they had to do, about taking a life?"

They all looked at each other, but Felicia spoke first. "I looked at it as one of my martial arts matches, fencing duels, or archery practice. I just kind of put the fact that my targets were real beings to the back of my mind. Besides, it was self-defense. They would have hurt us or killed us if we did not defend ourselves."

"It creeped me out a lot more than I thought it would have when I stabbed those two goblins," Chase added. "But like Felicia said, we didn't have much of a choice. It was them or us, and I'll choose us every time."

"What about you, Gabe? You cracked one of those goblins pretty hard with that mace of yours. How did that make you feel?" Josh asked the softhearted boy.

"It stabbed my bible and I got really mad. Then I felt like throwing up."

"But will you be able to defend yourself again, or defend one of us? We all are going to have to rely on each other to have any chance of success. One of us could get hurt or even die if someone hesitates to do what has to be done." Josh stared into the eyes of every one of them. "This is not a game, people. This is real. The danger is real and your enemies are real. None of us can afford to act like children. We will all have to pull ourselves up and act like the warriors, the *soldiers*, we are right now."

Gabe blanched at the thought of hitting or killing another living thing. "But the Bible teaches us to not kill, and turn the other cheek."

Chase asked the pious lad, "Gabe, how many times did God tell the Israelites to attack another city, to kill and conquer them in His name? Even Jesus was a warrior when he had to be. Remember when he went on a rampage in that temple, flipping tables and cussing out the Pharisees because of their selfishness and hypocrisy?"

"Yeah, I guess so. How did you know about all that?"

"You told me about it."

"You were actually listening to me?"

"Yeah, I may not be the perfect choirboy you are, but the words mean a lot to me, just as you mean a lot to this group. We need you, Gabe, but we need to be able to count on you. Can we do that?"

"All right, I will be God's holy warrior in this. You can count on me," Gabe assured them.

"Chuck, how about you? How do you feel about all of this?" Josh asked his large friend.

"Are you kidding? One of the ugly little suckers shot me in the leg. I'll squish every one of them I can," Chuck promised without hesitation.

"All right then, everyone go and get some sleep. As soon as the sun comes up, Elderin and some of the rangers are going to be teaching us some things. We will all need to focus and learn as much as we can in a short amount of time."

Phil and Felicia pulled out three collapsible dome tents and set them up. These also greatly intrigued Lucas, the ranger who sketched out their bows. He made several notes on their construction and went back to work on forming something out of clay near the fire.

The teens split themselves up between the three tents, rolled out their lightweight sleeping bags, and instantly fell asleep. Despite their fight and fear-induced exhaustion, sleep did not come easy. The chirping of crickets, the sound of the wind rustling through the trees, even the smell of the forest and soil felt strange and alien despite its familiarity. When they did finally succumb to fatigue, dreams of the battle replayed themselves endlessly in their heads, causing a restless night's sleep.

CHAPTER 5

The world slowly came back into focus. Bright light leaked through his partially closed eyelids as they began to flutter open. Drew's first vision was of treetops slowly passing by overhead. It gradually dawned on him that he was being dragged through the woods.

He looked up and sure enough, two goblins were dragging a travois with him strapped on, feet up, head near the ground. The second thing Drew realized was that his head hurt like hell. He tried to bring his hand up to touch the source of the pain but found his hands were tied to the sides of the travois. One of the goblins marching behind him called out in a strange gibbering tongue Drew assumed was goblin speak.

Too bad Phil or Felicia isn't here; their characters both speak goblin. He laughed as his brain registered what he was thinking. This is real, you idiot, not one of your games.

The red-skinned goblin leader looked down at him. "You think being dragged through forest by goblins be funny? Most humans be scared now. Maybe think goblins eat them."

Drew wondered if that was an attempt at humor. If it was, something was definitely lost in translation. The goblin leader said something in their guttural tongue to the two goblins pulling the travois. Without warning, the pair dropped their burden ungraciously to the hard earth. The immobilized teen fell to the ground, and the impact sent a throbbing jolt of pain into Drew's injured head.

The red goblin bent toward him with a sharp knife in his filthy hand. At first, Drew thought he was going to inflict further harm on him, but the goblin simply cut the cords that were binding his hands to the rails

of the travois. Drew rolled off the makeshift sledge and rubbed his wrists. They had been supporting a great deal of his weight for some time and had fallen asleep. The cords had bitten deep into his flesh and caused some ugly abrasions.

"You stand up, you walk now. We goblins, not mules," Red ordered.

Red is what Drew had decided to call the goblin leader. As he stood up under the watchful eyes of two spear-wielding goblins, he realized the creature probably had a name.

"So what should I call you? It looks like I'll be in your company for a while, and I can't just keep calling you, *Hey you*," Drew insisted as Red bound his hands tightly behind his back.

Red hesitated, then glared at the young man before him, looking for some sign of trickery. He did not know what kind of human this was. He had come through the magic gate, so he might be a powerful wizard. From what he knew of humans, this one appeared to be young and was easy to capture, so he probably did not know any magic beyond that little flame he conjured in his hand. (These were highly sophisticated thoughts for a goblin, which is why he was a pack leader.) He would not show fear in front of this human child, he decided.

"My name Droog. Droog be pack leader. You are captive of Droog. You do what Droog say. Droog say you no use magic, ever. You say Droog's name in a spell, and Droog stab you, no thump, stab," the goblin promised, emphasizing his point with the sharp knife. "You walk now."

Droog seemed to be in a talkative mood at the moment, so Drew decided to find out what information he could while he followed the goblins in front of him. "Why did you capture me, Droog?"

"Master tell Droog, watch this spot. Master tell Droog take prisoners of anyone come through magic gate."

"How did you know I would be coming? Did your master know?"

"Droog watch spot for three moons. Master not say when you come."

Maybe he did not know I was coming, Drew thought.

"Did your master tell anyone else to watch for magic gates?" Drew asked the goblin.

"Master send other pack leaders to watch other spots. Droog not know if they capture any wizards yet. Droog have prisoner, Droog get big reward. Droog important goblin now." Droog visibly swelled with pride, puffing out his scrawny chest at his accomplishment.

"So is anyone watching the portal now, or is your job done?" Drew asked, hoping that if his friends did come to look for him that they would not fall into an ambush like he had.

"Droog leave other pack to watch portal. Grunok number two pack leader. He take prisoner any more humans come through gate. He work for Droog. Grunok prisoners is Droog's prisoners," the goblin said thumping his chest for emphasis.

Drew's hopes fell. He was now very worried about his friends. He was certain Chase would come for him if he could, and he would likely bring the others. Despite Chase's many faults, he was the most loyal friend Drew had ever heard of. He would jump into any fight to help his friends, no matter what the odds.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Droog take you to master. Master far, long walk, many days. You hope goblins not run out of food," Droog said slyly with an evil-looking grin.

This time, Drew recognized the twisted attempt at humor. "Your master sounds very powerful. I bet he is very strong and very scary."

"Master very strong—strong magic. All scared of master. Even big humans scared of master."

"It sounds like he wants me pretty bad. Am I really that important to him?" Drew said, drawing the dimwitted goblin into his trap.

"Yes, master say you important. Droog get big reward for capture you," the goblin beamed, a huge needle-toothed grin spreading across his ugly face.

"Well then, Droog, you had better make sure nothing happens to me on our little walk. I bet the master would be very angry at whoever was in charge and let me come to any harm. You better hope that thump

you gave me did not make me forget anything important," Drew said, closing the trap, a smirk creeping onto his own face.

Droog's smile evaporated in an instant as he realized he had just been tricked and had lost a great deal of influence over the human. He glared at the clever human and stalked off toward the front of his troops, shouting and thumping a couple of them at some perceived slight.

Drew thought about his friends and what to do if they did come looking for him. The more he thought about it, the more he was sure they would come after him. They probably were not too far behind. Even if they had not followed right away and went for help or supplies first, they would not be more than a couple of hours behind.

He imagined Chase jumping through the portal as the others argued about what to do. Chase would not wait very long without very good reason, and any reason anyone gave him he would discount in short order. His friends might even be following them right now, watching from a distance, and just waiting for a chance to rescue him. While the twins were avid outdoorsmen, Drew did not know if they knew how to track animals and follow a trail or not, but he doubted it. They were campers and hikers, not survivalists.

Drew formulated a plan to help anyone who may be following or looking for him. He picked out a protruding root up ahead and edged toward it as he walked. Instead of stepping over it, he allowed himself to trip and fall heavily with a shout of pain. Droog sprinted back from the front of the column to see what had happened to his prisoner. Fear warred with anger when he saw the sprawled-out human getting unsteadily back to his feet. The human had a scrape on his head since he lacked the use of his hands to break his fall, but he seemed to be otherwise uninjured.

"Stupid human! You need be dragged again?"

"No, I'm all right. I just tripped. It's hard to walk with my hands tied behind my back. Good thing I didn't hit my head on a rock. The master would be mad if I couldn't answer his questions." Drew tried to sound innocent while clearly implying the threat.

Droog growled out what Drew assumed was a rather vile curse and cut the binding on his wrists, but he rebound them in front of him. "You walk, no run!"

"No worries there, Droogy. I think I twisted my ankle a bit. But don't worry, I'll keep up."

Drew did keep pace but dragged his left leg a little, leaving clear marks in the dirt; a trail he hoped even the most unskilled tracker would be able to follow. Drew wondered what he would be able to get away with, and how far he could push the goblins. Well, he would find out before long.

The goblins force-marched Drew through the woods. They gave him few rest breaks and just enough to eat and drink to keep his strength up for the trek to wherever it was they were going. When they finally called a halt for the night, the goblins spread out a sleeping roll, which they had probably stolen, for him to sleep on. Droog also gave him a scratchy wool blanket, which Droog informed him was to protect his weak, human flesh from the cold. The other goblins simply lay on the ground near the fire and covered themselves with a blanket or animal hide.

Droog posted guards, rotating them out during the night to watch the woods for intruders as well as to keep an eye on their captive. Drew was far from an expert on military-style doctrine or duties, but it was not difficult to see they did so with lackluster diligence. With nothing else to do, Drew studied a small hole in the ground where Droog had ordered him to sleep and stay put, spending nearly an hour simply watching large red ants scurry in and out of the entrance to their underground warren. Some carried dead insects down into the hole, while others shoved out grains of sand and dirt that they had excavated from somewhere inside their labyrinth of tunnels.

The goblins fed him some bread and a few chunks of meat from some mysterious animal. It was a dark meat, so he was not worried it had come from anything that had been able to talk. It was gamy and chewy,

but he forced himself to eat it; he would need the energy and protein it provided when he escaped.

Droog posted his guards, laid himself down by the fire, and began snoring along with most of the other score of goblins. A few stayed awake for a couple of hours, chattering away in their vulgar language, and taking turns drinking some noxious liquid from a gourd they passed around.

From the smell and the way it affected the goblins, Drew presumed it was highly intoxicating. The party animals finally passed out and added their own chorus of snores to the rest of the band.

Drew stayed awake for another hour looking for signs of movement, but the camp lay still with the exception of a glimpse of movement from one of the lazier guards that did not feel like staking his post any farther from the camp than necessary. Droog was lying close to him, not wanting to be separated from his prisoner. They bound his feet after he had eaten, but that was fine. He was not going to try to escape—not tonight anyhow.

The captive human rolled over toward a pile of logs and branches the goblins had gathered to keep the fire going. One of the guards returned, threw on another log, and returned to his post, so Drew figured he had an hour before he came back again. He selected a branch an inch or two in diameter and nearly four feet long. He then rolled back over toward the ant colony and Droog. The setup could not be better. Droog was between three and four feet from the entrance to the ant's lair. He rolled onto his back, lifted the branch, and let it fall with a soft thump right onto the ant hole.

The soft thud of wood against the dirt failed to disturb any of the sleeping goblins, but it definitely got the attention of the ant colony. Thousands of tiny red warriors about as long as Drew's thumbnail (nearly half their length was a set of massive mandibles) swarmed out of the hole, ready to do battle with whatever intruder was foolish enough to have disturbed them. Drew dropped the other end of the branch right behind the sleeping Droog and watched as a steady stream of angry, six-

legged, red demons raced along the foreign object near their home to investigate what manner of intruder lay at the other end.

Once he saw the ants on a full-scale march, Drew rolled away, well out of their path and potential battlefield. The ants of course found the warm-blooded, snoring goblin and postulated that this must be the source of the attack. The ants crawled over the slumbering form, under his blanket, and under his clothes to locate the relatively soft flesh beneath. Once they determined their numbers to be sufficient for the task (Drew estimated it to be at least several hundred), an inaudible order was issued and every ant unleashed their fury in a simultaneous assault.

Droog's eyes flew open as hundreds of angry ants used their huge mandibles to deliver painful, stinging bites into his soft flesh and rudely cut short his slumber. The assailed goblin flung away his tattered blanket and flew up into the air with a hellacious shriek that sent shivers across Drew's skin.

Gravity seized the goblin, who seemed intent on trying to break free of its grasp, and pulled him back down to the earth where he belonged. Droog began rolling and slapping furiously as every goblin in the camp snapped awake and stared at the screeching, flailing pack leader. Even the sentries raced back and were mesmerized by the convulsive actions and just stood by, mouths agape, as the stricken goblin mindlessly thrashed about then rolled through the fire.

The flames added another source of torment to the already embattled and beleaguered Droog, but they did seem to offer some aid against the tiny denizens that had declared a full-scale war on the goblin. It also provided the audience of goblins a source of uproarious comedy, and they burst into gales of uncontrollable laughter as they watched their leader rolling about the ground in an attempt to crush the ants as well as smother the flames.

Droog successfully rolled the fire out, stood up, slapped at the occasional ant he found bravely trying to chew through his flesh, stripped completely naked, and finally managed to scrape off the last of

the biting insects. He picked through his clothing and, declaring it free from infestation, thankfully donned it once again.

Drew lay near the fire, trying to suppress his own laughter at the goblin's plight, never having moved an inch during the entire debacle.

Droog glared daggers at the human, certain that he had something to do with his torment. Wizards were crafty like that, but he knew he could do nothing to prove it. Even if he could, he had very few options for reprisal. The ant attack was nothing compared to what Lord Darkrell would inflict upon him if his prisoner was not delivered alive and well.

The bites burned and itched like mad, and the fire had scorched several square inches of his arms, legs, and face. Droog failed to get any more sleep that night. Drew, on the other hand, slept soundly once he was able to stop snickering at the scenes that kept playing through his mind.

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The sounds of activity in the camp woke Josh. It was still dark, and although the stars were visible, Josh could see that the sky to the east was a deep blue under the blackness of the starry dome overhead. He pulled his clothes on and roused the rest of his crew. They emerged from their tents and stepped out into the brisk, early morning air tinged with the scent of burning wood and boiling oats.

"Good morn to you, my young friends," Elderin greeted them warmly. "I hope you are ready to begin your training."

"Ready or not, here we are," Josh answered the druid.

"I understand," Elderin chuckled, then nodded. "I imagine this must be all very frightening to you and your friends. Take comfort in the fact that you are not the first of your world to visit our own."

"We're not? Oh, of course not. Otherwise we would not have had the book or the ability to even come here."

Elderin nodded and smiled. "A very astute observation, young man. It is true that you are the first visitors to grace us in a very long time. I imagine it has been at least five hundred years since someone last opened

a gate joining our two worlds. You know, my own great ancestor came from your world."

"Really?" the teen asked in astonishment.

"Oh yes. My great ancestor was a druid who opened a gate at a place called Stonehenge many hundreds of our years ago. In fact, he was one of the last to travel between worlds. He came to study under the wise tutelage of the druids of this world. He enjoyed it so much, he never returned. So, let us break our fast and get started then."

The party ate a bland but filling bowl of boiled oats and goat's milk. Once they were finished, the rangers separated them into groups to begin their training. Elderin addressed his assembly and told them what was to be expected of them.

"I have spoken to each of you this past night in order to determine where your natural skills and aptitudes lie so as to devise a training strategy that best suits you. Phil and Felicia will join Rangers Brody and Lucas." He pointed to two armed men, one of whom was the ranger who had made sketches of their bows and tents. "Chase will go with Ranger Samone."

"What? That sounds like a girl's name," Chase exclaimed.

He found the back of a blade pressed against his soft neck as a feminine voice whispered in his ear. "It is a girl's name. Is that a problem?"

"Um, nope, no problem, none at all," Chase gulped, then stammered as a small, slender, dark-haired young woman gracefully and silently circled around to face him, laughing quietly at his surprise.

"Josh and Chuck will go with Rangers Jeffery and Bronk," Elderin continued, "while young masters Theodore and Gabriel will stay with me. I do not know how much we can teach you in the short amount of time available to us, but we will do everything we can to ensure your best chances for success. The rest will be up to you all. Pay attention, study hard, listen to your teachers, and may the gods smile upon you."

"Come on, handsome, follow me," Samone told Chase as she walked seductively (in his hormone-addled teenage mind) into the forest beyond the clearing.

Samone was perhaps twenty-three, and very attractive. Her dark tresses were cut short just above her shoulders, which accentuated her face. Her eyes were large and blue, set slightly wide above a pert nose resting between her prominent cheekbones. Her face tapered to a fine-boned chin just below her full lips.

"To the ends of the earth and beyond," Chase whispered quietly.

Chase followed Samone through the trees but lost sight of her after she ducked behind a particularly large tree trunk. He circled around the tree just seconds after she had vanished and paused trying to catch another glimpse of her curvaceous form, but she had disappeared.

"Samone?" he called out quietly.

Only the wind whispering through the treetops answered him. He took a few tentative steps forward and paused to listen and look again.

"Samone?" he hissed out again, unnerved by the silence and solitude of the empty forest around him.

"Looking for me, handsome?" Samone's voice came as a whispered breath on the back of his neck.

Chase let out a short cry of alarm and spun around to face the laughing young woman.

"I was told you were sneaky but untrained. It looks like they got the untrained part right. I am going to teach you how to move unseen, unheard, and disappear right in front of a person's eyes. Also, how to appropriate things you need from people who apparently do not find them valuable enough to guard properly," she told Chase as she waved two of the daggers he had been carrying in front of his face.

"How did you do that? And how did you vanish like that and not make any sound when you snuck up on me?" Chase asked in astonishment.

"That is what I am here to teach you. The trick to vanishing is blending in with your surroundings and not letting anyone see you when you do. When going from a position of visibility to one of concealment,

you must try to time it so you move when the person or people you are trying to hide from are not looking," she instructed, sounding much more like a teacher now than the flirtatious imp she had been previously. "You must take advantage of even the slightest moment of distraction—look out!" she shouted, then leapt to the side.

Chase reacted instinctively, dove in the opposite direction, tumbled twice, and popped up in a crouch, hands spread before him ready for action. He looked around but failed to see whatever imminent danger had arisen. He also could not see Samone anymore. The small clearing they were in was empty.

Samone's instruction continued from just behind him. "Every step you take, you need to be looking out for ambush sites, traps, routes of escape, and places to hide. You also need to be alert for anyone trying to sneak up on you."

"But you are so quiet! I can't hear you or see you."

"That is only because you are limiting yourself to two of your six senses. There are far more ways to detect someone than seeing or hearing. You must look and listen at all times, but do not discount your nose, tongue, or the hairs on your body."

"My tongue and hair?"

"People and animals all have a scent. Goblins and their kin are especially malodorous. When you breathe, do not do so just to fill your lungs. Run the air through your nose and across your tongue. Try to smell and taste what is in the air."

Chase breathed in a lungful of air through his nose, and he could indeed detect Samone's musky scent along with a sweeter scent of what was probably flower petals crushed and mixed with light oil. The soft, sweet scent left a slightly bitter taste on his tongue.

"You must also pay attention to the wind and air currents around you," she continued. "Every object disrupts and changes the flow of air. I recommend that you wear sleeveless jerkins and armor to allow the hairs on your arms to detect those changes, or at least roll them up to expose your forearms. Those are some of the most sensitive spots on

your body and will warn you of any changes in the air. Pay attention to the tingling you get at the back of your neck. Not only could it be a disturbance in the air, but another sort of sense altogether, warning you of impending danger."

Chase rolled his sleeves up above the elbow and felt for the subtle shifts in the air as Samone lectured and paced about him.

"The sixth method, or sense of detection, is up here and in here," she told him as she tapped a slender finger against her head then just above her left breast. "Never ignore your instincts. Paranoid people tend to live longer. If you believe someone is watching you, they probably are, particularly in your case. If Lord Darkrell discovers you are trying to steal away what he has stolen, you can count on being followed, watched, and attacked. Your job is also to look out for traps." The ranger surprised him by pushing him backward.

Chase took several steps back and felt his feet jerked out from under him. He swung back and forth, suspended by his ankles four or five feet above the ground.

"Look for things that seem out of place. This is not an easy task in that anyone adept at setting traps knows how to make them blend in with their surroundings. Use the same senses you use for detecting people. Sight will be the most prominent. Look for vines where few or no others exist. Look at the leaves and needles on the ground. Do they look like they fell naturally, or were they spread about to conceal something? If they are covering something, there might be a slight rise in the ground. If you are in a passage of carved stone or wood floor, look for signs that a flagstone or board may conceal a trigger to a trap. Is the stone or board elevated? Does it move? Is the dirt or mortar around it packed, or does there seem to be a slight gap?"

Chase focused on her words more intently than he ever had on any subject in school. He absorbed everything she was telling him and practiced it in his mind.

"There may come a time when you have to take something from someone without alarming them. Maybe it is a key to a room or treasure chest, maybe a document, or a coin purse. The trick is not to change the

weight or pressure the individual normally experiences by its presence. Do not tug the item loose or put pressure against the securing ties with a blade when cutting it free. In the case of a coin pouch, fill a small bag with sand or soil with the approximate weight of the object you are taking. Use a hook to quickly and easily attach it to the belt at the same instant you remove the object you are about to steal so the former owner never notices the weight of it is gone. Diversions are the best method of taking something from someone. Having a partner bump into someone while you liberate his or her possession is the best way. Waiting for your mark to become preoccupied is another. When these opportunities do not exist, and it is impossible for you to create those opportunities, then you must rely on quick and deft fingers."

She continued her lectures for about another hour, making her student repeat the things she had told him until he had every word and theory memorized. Once he was able to do that, they practiced relentlessly for the rest of the day, taking only short breaks for a bite of food or something to drink.

Chase learned that the lessons did not stop even then. Samone would filch one of his possessions while he was eating, sneak up on him and tell him he was dead, and slipped several sour berries into his waterskin to see if he would detect their presence before he drank. He did not and got a mouthful of bitter water.

The twins ranged several miles from the camp with Brody and Lucas. The rangers pointed out signs left by animals and identified plants that were edible, poisonous, or had medicinal properties. They told them how to read the clouds in hopes of forecasting the coming weather, and how to watch and listen to the activities of the animals to determine if there were strangers in the woods. Once they reached a clearing about an hour from camp, the two rangers set up a sparring match to evaluate the young man and woman's fighting skills.

"Your technical skills are good," Brody told the twins, "but your combat skills are lacking. This is no duel or tournament with rigid rules and fair play. The sword is only one of the weapons you bring to a fight.

Your off hand, buckler, and legs are also weapons. Failure to employ them all is like going into battle with half a sword, or wearing only half your armor."

They then practiced with their bows. The rangers passed each of the twins a sheaf of arrows that Elderin had strengthened with his magic since their carbon-fiber arrows were limited in supply, and they did not wish to risk losing or breaking them.

"You have great skill in hitting stationary targets," Lucas extolled them, "but most targets are not going to obligingly stand still, so we will see how you fare against moving targets." The rangers mounted a rope and caster system to two trees approximately fifty feet apart. A thick woven mat in the rough shape of a man hung beneath it. The archers set up about fifty feet back from the target. "Now, Brody is going to pull the target along at about a walking speed at first. As you become proficient, the speed will be increased, as well as your distance from the target."

Felicia and her brother took turns firing at the "walking" target, scoring rather well for their first time. In just a few passes, Brody increased the speed to that of a jog. Not every arrow found the heart, but they were certainly sufficient to stop a man. Once the rate increased to a running speed, the twins had a hard time striking the target. However, by the end of the day, both were adept at hitting a running target at almost a hundred feet.

Chuck and Josh's ranger instructors led them just a short distance from the camp. They suited them up in thick quilted armor covered with chain shirts and steel greaves.

"All right then," Bronk, a ranger even bigger than Chuck, loudly addressed them. "Jeffery and I are here to teach you how to use those swords well enough that you can inflict more harm on your enemies than you do on yourselves!"

The first image that came to both of the young men's minds when Bronk addressed them was of the marine drill sergeant in the movie *Full Metal Jacket*, only he was two to three times his size. They were both waiting to hear the sardonic nicknames he would issue them. They were

almost disappointed when their instructor just carried on with their lesson.

"I saw you both fight yesterday, and while you managed to use your brute strength and longer reach to overcome the assault of the pathetic goblins, let me assure you; you will need far more than effort and luck against even a slightly stronger or more skilled opponent. The first thing is to determine your choice of weapons." The large ranger looked at Josh. "You swung that massive two-hander like a woman using a broom to chase cats off her porch. How does the weapon feel to you in your hands?"

"Um, OK I guess. I play street hockey, which is a sport that uses a long stick with two hands. I just related the sword to that," Josh answered.

"And what about you?" he asked Chuck. "How do you feel about the sword and shield?"

"I liked it a lot! I used my shield like I was catching hockey pucks and swung my sword at anything ugly that got too close," Chuck replied enthusiastically.

"Then that is what we will train you on. We may also have some better equipment for you to take with you than what you came with. I don't know what blacksmith forged your weapons and armor, but I wouldn't let him shoe my horse given the skill I see used to make them."

The two lads were suited up, given dulled practice blades, and taught the finer arts of attack, block, parry, and riposte. After several exhausting hours of practicing those moves against the rangers, the young men were paired off against each other in a full sparring match.

Both were initially hesitant about striking out against the other with their full effort and strength but, as they tested each other's skill, they fell into a full-on practice skirmish, battling hard against each other's defenses. Having a shield gave Chuck a definite defensive advantage, but he could only swing his blade with one hand, which limited the speed and amount of power he could put behind the attack. Josh, on the other hand, had only his large blade to block and attack, which made it harder

and slower to return an attack after parrying. However, when he got the offensive advantage, his swings struck with extraordinary force and speed, which brutally bashed against Chuck's shield and sword.

Time and again, Chuck used his shield to block Josh's heavy blows, returning a strike whenever his friend left him an opening before he was able to bring his huge sword back around for another attack. The problem with the defensive strategy was that each hit against his shield rocked his body and sapped his strength. Chuck also telegraphed his swing by having to move his shield to the side when he counterattacked. Josh was usually able to leap back or to the side and avoid Chuck's strike. Josh's continued assault finally defeated Chuck's defenses when his arm no longer had the strength to hold his shield in place.

Chuck was still kneeling on the ground, breathing hard, while Josh loomed over him and patted him on the back when Bronk and Jeffery approached. "You two did well. Chuck, you have to go on the offensive, and don't declare your attack with so much movement of your shield. Shield and sword should be moving as one, otherwise you may as well shout out that you are about to swing. When you do block with your shield, try to deflect it at an angle. Your arm is numb and nearly useless because it spent the last half hour taking as much of a beating as your shield did. Josh, measure your attack and practice conservation of energy. That big sword of yours will sap the strength out of your arms in minutes the way you are fighting. Swordplay is a strategic endeavor, not one of mindless hacking as if you are cutting firewood or brambles."

Josh and Chuck nodded their agreement and understanding of their trainers' review. The bout of sparring and the days training left both young men exhausted and sore to the point of collapse. They were both used to a rigorous training regime in the sports they played, but nothing could have fully prepared them for this level of effort. Even so, they gave everything they had and learned a great deal in that first day. The thought of continuing the exhausting training filled them both with equal amounts of dread and anticipation.

Elderin took Ted and Gabe to a small nearby river and followed it upstream about a mile to where the water cascaded over a twenty- or

thirty-foot waterfall. "I have taken you both as my students since I am the only magic user in the area until more druids answer my call. Being a druid, the manner in which I summon and cast my magic is similar to how each of you cast your magic. Gabe, you are able to invoke feats of magic by communing with your god and beseeching his aid much as I commune with my god. You do not need a specific formula or ritual, as you do with wizardry. You request to wield a small portion of your god's power by praying to him in a manner that pleases him. And if you are found properly devoted, and your prayer is worthy, then he acts through you."

The druid turned to Ted and addressed him next. "As a wizard, your ability to wield magic is based upon your capacity to memorize the specific words and forms of power of a given spell. These forms and spells have been written down in books for millennia. The words of the spell open a channel to the magical energies of this world, as well as providing instructions on how to perform the somatic, or weaving, portion of the spell. The somatic portion of the spell is you weaving the multiple threads and lines of magical energy into the proper form that creates the desired effect. Much like weaving a pattern on a loom, the different threads determine the pattern. I also cast my spells in such a manner; however, most of my magical weavings are made to channel the forces of nature to work with me, as opposed to shaping and releasing arcane magic pulled from the ether."

"Gabriel, your ability to wield the power of your god is much more a thing of devotion and emotion. You must attune your heart and mind to your god so he will look favorably upon you. There are no forms or guidelines for what you do. You must let your heart and soul guide you. You have already shown you are capable of earning your god's favor, but now you must make that attunement as natural as breathing and thinking."

Gabe secluded himself in a small clearing and just sat, looked, and listened to the wind and wildlife while blocking out the distracting sounds of human labors. He closed his eyes and prayed while trying to feel the presence of God in everything around him. As he communed,

he felt a sense of peace, love, and warmth spread through him, and he knew his purpose.

Elderin was able to guide the young wizard's study more directly. Ted studied the spells in his book along with a smaller book of spells Elderin gave him. As he studied, and with the druid's assistance, he was able to decipher some of the more complex rituals and patterns, but many still lay beyond his understanding. Harnessing the power of magic was like wrestling a python. It fought him, and it took as much physical as mental exertion to bend it to his will. However, his knowledge and understanding still increased threefold just in that first day; his eidetic memory played a major role in his rapid learning.

The young trainees all returned to the camp about the same time. Only Chuck and Josh seemed to have come back early enough to get comfortable, and that was only because they had become too exhausted to lift their weapons any longer and had the shortest walk back. Even after the pair's grueling training had ended, the rangers had them stretch their sore muscles out while they lectured the finer points of offense, defense, and tactics. They described and demonstrated the strengths and vulnerabilities of armor, weapons, and potentially hostile creatures.

Bread and strips of venison were on the menu today. The young fighters were encouraged to eat their fill of the protein-rich meat to help them rebuild their torn muscles, not that they needed much encouragement. They were all famished after the day's exertions and training, and tomorrow it would start all over again.

CHAPTER 6

The goblin squad struck camp early the next morning. Droog was in an especially foul mood due to his lack of sleep, first- and second-degree burns, and numerous burning and itching ant bites. He clouted several goblins behind the ear for not moving fast enough, or just for having the misfortune of finding themselves within his reach.

Drew had to force himself not to laugh at the pitiful-looking goblin. He wore burn marks along both his arms and legs, his left ear had a huge blister on it, and he was missing a large patch of hair that may well never grow back to cover the scar that would surely form once the burn healed. Angry red bite marks covered every square inch of his exposed skin, and from the way he moved and scratched, a great deal of unexposed skin as well.

The morning was brisk, far colder than the world he had left, so Drew wore his ratty blanket draped over his shoulders. He figured it must be fall or early winter here, just as it had been in the world he had left behind. His blood warmed as they marched on and the sun burned away the early morning haze. In the distance, he could see the tall, imposing peaks of a mountain range and wondered if they would be traveling that far.

Droog marched toward the front of the procession of goblins, probably not wanting to look at the captive of whom he had been so proud just the day before. They tramped on in silence, Droog because he was still petulant, and the rest to avoid their leader's foul mood. Some of the goblins in the rear of the column whispered back and forth to

each other and occasionally looked at the back of their leader and snickered.

Around noon, Drew heard the sound of rushing water ahead. They soon came to a swift-flowing river with its white, turbulent water rushing past the shores. Droog issued an order in his guttural language and four goblins headed off both upstream and down. The goblins shared water, bread, and some dried meat while they waited for the scouts. In less than an hour, both parties returned, and the goblin troop walked downstream along the banks of the whitewater.

They stopped at a tree that had fallen across the river. The trunk of the tree on their end was propped up on a jumble of large stones jutting out of the earth. The river was much narrower here, but it was also several feet below them as it carved its way through a small chasm.

Drew looked downstream and saw that the river ended in a sheer drop, forming an impressive waterfall that cascaded some twenty feet or more before it continued its race downhill. Droog motioned for the goblins to cross the log bridge. They climbed the rocky outcropping and began scrambling across the log.

"Hey, Droog," Drew called to the goblin leader when it was his turn to cross. "That log isn't very big. I don't think it's such a good idea for me to cross on it."

Droog glared hateful eyes at the human then assumed a haughty voice. "You just scared little human boy. You not brave like goblins. You big and clumsy too. You cross. Droog show you how," the goblin sneered condescendingly.

Droog clambered up the rocks like a monkey and stepped out onto the log. Just for effect, he hopped up and down a few times to show off his balance and the sturdiness of his makeshift bridge. Drew saw that his jumping caused the far end of the log to shake just a bit as the near end dropped slightly with the goblin's weight. Several feet of the tree's trunk hung over a large boulder supporting their end of the log, and created something of a fulcrum point.

"I guess you are right, Droog. Sorry to have doubted you," Drew patronized the goblin as he climbed up the rocks to reach the log.

However, instead of stepping out onto the log as the others had done, he climbed higher up the rocks until he was standing on the top of a large stone three feet above the very end of the log. He waited until Droog was just beyond the halfway mark before he called back out to him.

"Droog, is it still safe?"

The goblin leader did not even bother looking back at the seemingly nervous human as he jumped up and down on the slick, mossy log to prove its stability.

"See, dumb scared human, it safe. Now move!"

"OK, Droog," Drew acquiesced, then jumped down from his perch and drove his legs as hard as he could onto the end of the log.

Drew nearly lost his own balance and barely avoided falling several feet to the hard ground, but he managed to stay upright on the end of the log as the timber dropped nearly a foot beneath the impact of his feet. Droog and another goblin currently crossing the log were not so fortunate.

Droog, caught in mid hop, was unprepared for the sudden shifting of the bridge. His arms windmilled, and he scrabbled for a hold that did not exist as he fell solidly onto the downed tree and slid over the side.

The goblin leader and one of his warriors fell into the torrent of water raging several feet below the span of the fallen timber. Drew listened to Droog's curses as the inexorable force of water swept him and his minion away. The cursing stopped when Droog paddled around to look at the source of the roaring of water behind him. His eyes widened in terror when he comprehended the danger of the waterfall he was fast approaching. The goblin's cursing redoubled in its intensity, along with his flailing in a futile effort to swim toward the shore.

The curses turned into a short scream as the two goblins were swept over the falls. Drew strode across the log, prodded along by the spears of the goblins behind him. The remaining goblins made it safely across, although none of them would set foot on the log until the human was across and on solid ground. Once safely on the far side, they turned

downstream once again and resumed their march, minus one goblin warrior and Droog.

They had been marching only about thirty minutes when silence fell over the chattering goblins. Drew looked up, wondering what had caused them to go on alert. The source of concern was apparent as a livid, sodden, bruised, burnt, bitten, and bleeding Droog bore down on the approaching troops.

The goblin company came to a halt as the furious Droog stalked up to the human captive, so angry he seemed unable to speak. He just glared at the human and breathed heavily. Drew looked down and smiled at the battered goblin benignly.

"I told you I didn't think it was safe, Droogy," Drew said piously.

Droog let out a shriek of rage and grabbed at the dagger sheathed at his belt. Several of the goblins standing guard over the captive restrained their leader and tried to calm him down by reminding him of what would happen if harm came to the prisoner.

Droog pushed them away and glared up at the smiling human. "You walk in front of Droog from now on," the goblin ordered in a hiss of contempt.

"Whatever you say, Droogy," Drew calmly replied.

The pack of goblins and their captive moved on, leaving the riverbank behind, and once again resumed their trek through the forest. They marched on for several more hours before stopping to make camp for the night, at least two hours before sunset. Drew suspected it was because the goblin leader was exhausted from his swim.

Droog ordered a large fire built so he could chase the chill from his bones, and then scoured the area around him for the next hour looking for any sign of ant colonies. Having declared his area clear and insect free, he huddled close to the fire and muttered curses against all humans—young captive ones in particular.

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Chase and his crew were also warming themselves by a fire, scores of miles and three days behind the goblin troop. Each of them complained and bragged about how sore their muscles were from their training. Even Ted admitted that his head hurt from studying.

"So what do you think Drew is doing right now?" Felicia asked.

"Probably arguing with goblins about the oppressive and self-destructive nature of all of the evil races in the world and generally being a huge pain in the ass," Chase answered, eliciting a wild round of laughter as everyone pictured Drew debating endlessly with the little monsters.

"Seriously though, I hope he is all right."

"I'm sure he is. Knowing Drew, he is halfway to being in charge right now," Ted assured her and everyone else who was concerned for their friend but was masking it.

"Yeah," Gabe put in, "he has a way of getting people to follow him. He could be a powerful leader if he ever actually tried."

"Pfft, good luck with that," Chase remarked. "Drew hates anything involving leadership and authority. He would harangue himself for a week if that happened."

"You know, for a goof-off and a punk from the trailer park, you use a lot of big words," Josh observed.

"I just don't show off my brains like Ted over there. I could get good grades in school if I wanted to, but I just don't feel like putting that much effort into it. Just because I don't go around winning science fairs and spelling bees doesn't make me stupid. Besides, it gives me an advantage when people underestimate me," he replied with a smile.

"Touché, O prince of rogues," Phil intoned.

"Man, I can't imagine how I'm going to feel tomorrow night. I am so sore and tired now I can't move. Another day of this is going to kill me," Chuck moaned, receiving universal agreement.

"I can tell you there is something you should be far more concerned with than tomorrow's training," Chase whispered conspiratorially.

"What's that?" everyone asked, truly concerned now by Chase's sudden earnestness.

Chase looked around to ensure the confidentiality of their conversation before looking gravely at his friends. "Not one of us packed a single roll of toilet paper! Hey Gabe," Chase shouted over the groans and laughter of the group as he stood up, "let me borrow your bible for a few minutes."

"What for? Oh, hell no, that's blasphemy and desecration!" Gabe cried out, clutching his bible protectively to his chest as the others laughed themselves into tears.

"C'mon, not the whole thing, just Numbers; you know darn well nothing important or even interesting happens in Numbers," Chase begged, laughing the entire time.

"No, not one single page, you heathen! You can use a blackberry briar for all I care," Gabe roared at Chase's back as he headed for the bushes deeper in the woodline, grabbing a shovel on the way.

The next morning's serenity was broken by the sounds of moans elicited by stiff muscles and sore joints. They ate a plain breakfast before being marched off by their instructors back to their training sites.

Today, Chuck and Josh were being trained to fight as a team against multiple opponents while using the terrain to their advantage, preparing ambushes, and employing tactics against a more numerous enemy or a larger foe.

Elderin taught Ted and Gabe how to focus despite distractions, fear, and pain, in addition to practicing their castings and prayers. He made Gabe recite his prayer requests over and over until he could call upon his god, without hesitation, to invoke the proper benediction at the crucial time.

He had Ted cast his spells into the water or at targets made of straw or bundled branches until he could conjure the most appropriate spell at any given time for a particular situation. The druid threw pinecones at him until he could complete a spell without disruption.

Phil and his sister were given more sword practice before working on trick shots with their bows, such as firing two arrows at once, quick drawing, shooting an enemy at point-blank range, and long-range sniping. Much of the day consisted of tracking animals and learning

about the properties of plants and the behavior of animals. That same day, they were taught to move through the forests as silently as a shadow and remain unseen while stalking prey or enemies.

Chase continued to learn the art of stealthy movements: disappearing, hiding, trap finding, lock picking, climbing, and sleight of hand, from his lovely instructor, who made his heart race and his toes tingle every time she referred to him as handsome. It was a lot to learn, but his attention and interest never flagged.

He was mesmerized by Samone's voice and body movements, but not so much that it detracted from his ability to concentrate on the information she was providing him with. Had he a teacher in high school who could so captivate him, he would be an honor-roll student and valedictorian.

The groups returned to their camp at the end of the day, once again so exhausted they could hardly speak to one another. Elderin approached Josh just before he joined the others in a well-deserved night's rest after dinner.

"I would like a moment before you retire for the evening, if you would. I know you are exhausted, but please indulge me for a moment," the druid requested.

"Of course, Elderin, what can I do for you?" Josh asked, concerned at the druid's seriousness.

"I believe it is near time that you and your friends must depart on your quest to find your brother."

"You think we are ready then?"

"If the option were available, I would keep you young people here for another year or more. It would take at least that long to take you even near the height of your potential, but alas, we do not have that luxury. You have all learned a great deal in your short stay, and you are much better prepared for the hardships and trials ahead of you. You will train for another full day, and then I am afraid you must be on your way," Elderin intoned gravely.

Josh became very concerned for his brother at the druid's sudden desire for haste. "Why the sudden hurry? Is Drew in danger now?"

Elderin smiled back at him in a reassuring manner. "Your brother has been in danger from the moment he stepped through that gate. However, he is reasonably protected by the knowledge he possesses and the role he must play in Lord Darkrell's plans. No, his disposition has little to do with my decision to send you on your way. In fact, I have heard from some of my forest friends that your brother is slowing the goblins' march as well as making life unpleasant for the evil creatures," Elderin told him, chuckling at Drew's exploits.

The druid told Josh about the torment his brother had been inflicting on the goblin leader. Elderin had used his ability to communicate with animals to have a hawk follow the goblins during the day and an owl watch them at night then report back to him. The hawk told Elderin about the event at the river and the numerous injuries the goblin leader seemed to have suffered.

Josh and the druid both laughed at the goblin's plight and Drew's tenacity. "That sounds like my brother, always sticking it to authority."

The druid left the young man to his rest and thought about what final training he would impart to his young charges on the morrow.

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Drew opened his eyes as dawn broke over the horizon and found himself staring into the yellow, bloodshot orbs of Droog, who looked like he hadn't slept all night. He got up and shook off the light dew covering his blanket before draping it over his shoulders.

"Good morning, Droogy. Sleep well last night?" he asked cheerily.

His only answer was a growl of disgust as the goblin rolled over, got to his large, flat feet, and stalked off, rudely rousing his warriors from their slumber with kicks and curses. Drew and the goblins ate another cold, stale breakfast then continued their trek toward the distant mountain range.

Maple and other long-limbed, normally leaf-bearing trees, slowly replaced the forest of evergreens. These new trees slowed their progress somewhat as they had to navigate past thick tangles of slender branches and scrub brush. Droog once again insisted that Drew walk ahead of him so he could keep an eye on any mischief the human might try to create.

The goblins found a deer trail through the willowy boughs, which greatly aided their progress. Drew studied the path up ahead and watched as the line of goblins ducked their bat-eared heads under a long slender branch stretching across the trail. The branch was just above waist-height on Drew, so instead of ducking under, he simply pushed it forward as he walked on. He glanced back and paused to see that Droog, while following along behind him, was concentrating more on the ground in front of his feet and muttering vile curses than watching what the human was doing.

"Heads up, Droogy," Drew called back, then released the long, willowy branch.

Droog followed the human's warning in a literal manner without pausing for thought. The goblin looked up just in time to catch the slender branch square in the face when it snapped back with the strength of a catapult arm. The force of the blow knocked the goblin leader off his feet and left a long, angry red welt just above where his eyebrows had been before they were burned off when he rolled through the fire a few nights past.

Droog scrambled back to his feet in a rage. In a tantrum of epic proportions, the goblin drew his dagger and hacked furiously at the branch, sending leaves and wood chips falling to the ground before finally chopping through the offending limb. Droog looked back and forth from his blade to the human while cursing and rubbing his battered face.

"I warned you to look out, Droogy," Drew reminded him innocently.

"You walk on Droog's side, here!" the goblin ordered pointing to his right. "No in front, no in back, right here!" he emphasized by stabbing at the ground with his long, gnarly finger.

"You're the boss, Droogy," Drew complied.

"Yes, Droog the boss! Droog, no Droogy!" he demanded.

"Sure Droogy, whatever you say. Oops, I mean Droog." Drew flashed the goblin a placating smile.

Droog let out a cry of frustration, shoved his prisoner forward, and fell into step on Drew's left side. The goblin muttered under his breath for the next four hours, split between cursing his captive and consoling himself by fantasizing about the rewards he would receive from Lord Darkrell.

The level path they followed through the trees began a slow but steady ascent as the band reached the foothills of the tall mountain range. Droog called a halt to eat a bit and rest before continuing up the inclining hills.

The goblins sat where they stopped and fished through their packs for tidbits to eat. The goblins gave Drew some water and dried meat while they sipped their awful-smelling spirits.

After about half an hour, Droog ordered them to move out, and they continued their slow, steady climb upwards. Near the top, the trail skirted around the hill, seemingly cut into the hillside. The right side of the trail became a steep incline that towered at least a hundred feet high before reaching the peak, while the left side of the trail became a steep drop-off of perhaps sixty feet before leveling out once more.

Jumbled rocks littered both the upper and lower steep hillsides, attesting to numerous small avalanches. As the party hugged the side of the hill, Drew saw a large pile of stones cutting across their path, dumped there by a more recent rockfall. A small tree, pushed nearly horizontal by the fallen rock stretching across the trail, clung precariously to the hillside perhaps six feet above the rock pile.

Neither the small tree nor the rock pile posed much of an obstacle. The goblins, walking two abreast, easily scrambled over the debris and crossed under the tree with a good two feet of clearance.

Drew quickened his pace just a bit as he started to clamber over the loose pile of stones so he could get a few steps ahead of Droog. He reached up and grabbed the slender trunk of the tree, little more than a bush really, in what appeared to be nothing more than an attempt to steady himself on the loose surface.

His true reason for grabbing the small tree became apparent as Droog walked beneath the branch on Drew's left side. The young man gave the tree a firm shake and dislodged a three-foot-long snake that had made a perch in the leafy branches. The otherwise harmless serpent secured a new grip around the goblin leader's neck. Droog let out a scream of terror, the snake let out a hiss of probably equal surprise, and both went tumbling over the side of the steep slope as Droog tried to leap away from the constricting reptile.

The snake only fell a few feet down the rock face, having surrendered its grip around the goblin's neck, and slithered under a large stone and hid. Droog was less fortunate.

The goblin tumbled head over flappy-feet down the entire length of the steep, rock-strewn incline. Drew was unable to comprehend the curses Droog spat out the entire way down, but from the abashed faces of a few of the goblins, he was sure they were particularly appalling.

Droog lay still at the bottom of the precipice for several minutes, breathing heavily, cursing heavily, and whimpering slightly. He slowly got to his feet and began the arduous climb back up the steep, rough grade while keeping a wary eye out for any more snakes.

As he neared the top, still examining the rocks to avoid another encounter with the snake, one of the goblins above thought to help his commander out by throwing him a rope. Just as the rope smacked the stones in front of the limping Droog, Drew shouted down to him.

"Snake!" he cried out.

Droog's response was as instantaneous as it was hilarious. His head snapped up at the warning just as the end of the hemp rope struck the rocky ground before him, and his brain registered a potentially life-

threatening situation. His natural reflexes caused him to throw his arms out wide and jump backward, away from the apparent source of danger.

Arms windmilling so furiously Drew swore he could feel the wind they kicked up against his face, Droog began a slow backward fall that turned into a rapid series of somersaults nearly the entire way back down to the bottom of the stony ravine. Droog lay there twice as long as before, wheezing and weeping, a fleshy pile amongst the mounds of rock.

"My bad, Droogy, it was just a rope!" Drew called down to the abused and beleaguered goblin.

The boy's call seemed to rouse the battered goblin back into motion. With the strength and disregard of a madman, Droog scrambled back up the slope at a furious pace that amazed Drew and the rest of the goblins watching his plight from up high. As Droog gained the ledge, several goblins offered a hand to pull him up over the lip of the drop-off. He contemptuously batted away the proffered assistance and threw himself over the rim and onto the trail.

The burned, battered, bruised, whipped, bitten, scraped, and gashed Droog stalked toward the grinning human. He was favoring his right leg, which gave him a comical, ambling gait that really rounded off the goblin's monstrous countenance quite well and caused Drew to burst into laughter at the sight.

Droog's hand darted toward his belt in a threatening manner. This time, not even his soldiers were going to get between their leader and the human, so great was the wrath written on his bruised and bleeding face.

"Nuh uh, Droog, you don't want to make your master angry," Drew warned condescendingly, shaking his finger in front of the goblin's long nose.

Droog responded with a shout to his followers who sprang at Drew and wrestled him to the ground. As they held him down, Drew started to think he might have pushed the goblin too far this time. He looked behind him as he heard the snick of Droog's heavy leather belt being drawn and the clatter of the sheathed blades it secured as they fell to the ground.

"Droog, you can't hurt me. Remember your reward and your master's orders!" Drew cried in real fear now.

Droog ignored the human's protest and lashed the captive's exposed back with all his might. Over and over he swung the leather strap, raising welts across Drew's back and eventually drawing blood.

Whether his beating stopped because Droog came enough to his senses and feared killing him, or because his arm got too tired to continue, Drew did not know nor care. He was just grateful that the beating finally stopped. The experience was dreadful and alien to him. His parents had never so much as raised a hand to him no matter how much he acted out. They had never really done anything to create or enforce boundaries or discipline.

Drew lay face down on the rough stones weeping heavily. His back felt as though it were on fire. If he expected any sympathy from his captors, he was terribly disappointed. Within minutes, Droog kicked him until he stood back up, then ordered Drew to continue marching up the hill.

"I thought your master told you not to hurt me?" Drew gasped, hissing in pain.

"You still can talk, you live," came the goblin's simple reply.

Drew knew he would have to escape now. He had thought himself immune to the goblins' revenge, protected by their fear of angering their master. Drew had just gotten a painful lesson in how far that protection went. They could hurt him, beat him, starve him, and probably even break some of his bones so long as he could speak. For the first time since he was pulled through the portal, he felt real fear.

Overhead, a hawk circled twice before turning south and flying back in the direction from which it had come.

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The soft glow creeping over the eastern horizon heralded the start of a new day and their last day of training before striking out into the

wild on their own in search of Drew. The young trainees were pleased to find that they were not nearly as sore today as they had been after the first couple of days of training. They broke their fast with bowls of oatmeal and fruit before following their tutors to their respective training sites.

The rangers took Josh and Chuck to their usual training ground and outfitted them in their practice armor and weapons.

"All right, boys," Bronk addressed the two young men. "Today, you are going to spar with your teachers, and I don't mean some light-hitting instruction training. You will fight as if your life depended on it, and you will not pull any of your strikes. You will be given the full effect of a real fight in all its glory and horror. Hopefully without the bleeding, but I make no promises."

The two young men were nervous at such a prospect, but they hid it well as they squared off against the much more experienced fighting men. Josh faced the big ranger Bronk, who also favored a large two-handed sword. Without preamble, the large warrior launched into a swift and powerful attack, bashing at the younger, smaller man's sword so hard it nearly numbed Josh's hands.

Josh was pushed farther and farther back onto his heels in a retreating defense, frantically trying to dodge and parry the vicious onslaught. After several minutes of desperate parrying, Josh detected a slight decrease in the speed and power of his opponent's attacks and noticed the repeating pattern into which the sword swings had fallen. The younger fighter jumped back out of range of the expected swing then darted inside of the larger man's attack a split second after the blade whistled harmlessly past his stomach.

Josh let loose a series of attacks and put the ranger on the defensive for the first time since the bout started. Although the ranger was slightly more winded than the younger man, his greater skill showed in the ease with which he defended himself from Josh's attacks. The pair exchanged attacks, parries, and feints with equal measure. Josh deflected one of Bronk's attacks by forcing the weapon up high then swung swiftly down to land a strike onto the thigh of the ranger's leading leg.

The weapons instructor let out a grunt of surprise at the minor wound and smiled his approval at his student before launching back into another vicious attack routine. The outcome of the bout was never in question. Within minutes of Josh landing his strike, Bronk's furious assault battered through the young man's defenses; his far greater experience never really left any hope in any of the fighters' minds as to who would win the bout.

"You fought real well, lad," Bronk congratulated his pupil. "I've never seen anyone take to the sword as quickly as you. You have a real natural instinct."

"I guess, but I still lost," Josh complained with a smile on his face.

"You make it sound like a bad thing. It is a good thing to lose during practice. You learn more from your defeats and failures than you do from your successes. Just never lose in a real fight!" the big ranger advised with a hearty laugh.

"You ready, Chuck?" Jeffery asked the big lad.

"Ready as I'm going to be." Chuck raised his sword and shield and assumed a battle stance.

The pair traded blows for several minutes with neither one gaining a clear advantage. The sharp sound of steel ringing against steel, and the more hollow sound of sword striking shield filled the air of the training ground. Chuck was larger and stronger than his friend, and his fighting style reflected it. Josh used more finesse and planned battle strategies, whereas Chuck's method was to simply batter away at his foes in a near berserker-type rage with seemingly inexhaustible strength and energy.

That is not to say that Chuck lacked any kind of cunning in his fighting. Jeffery swung for the big lad's head, fully expecting Chuck to block the blow with his shield as he had several times already. However, instead of interposing his shield between his vitally important head and the potentially dangerous training sword, he pivoted his upper body and intercepted the blow with his sword. He used his own blade to push the ranger's sword down and shifted him off balance, then brought his shield hard across his body to slam into his opponent's shoulder and head.

The shield slam staggered the ranger and sent him to the ground, but before Chuck could press his advantage, the nimble fighter rolled with the blow and sprang back onto his feet, ready to meet the next attack. Chuck and Josh both stared for a brief second and marveled at the incredible display of fortitude and agility Jeffery displayed in shaking off the brain-rattling attack and regaining his feet so quickly.

This bout also ended as expected with Chuck on the ground yielding to his more experienced foe. After a short rest, some water, and further instructions, the fighters swapped opponents and started all over again.

Chase happily resumed his training with the lovely and devious Samone. She went over several lectures again to ensure her pupil had not forgotten anything she had already taught him, which she was pleasantly surprised to see he had not.

"Now, I want you to go off into the woods, try to sneak up on me, and land a successful attack," she instructed him.

Samone stood in the small clearing while Chase ran off into the trees. He waited about fifteen minutes before he began stalking his prey. Chase crept as silently and nimbly as a hunting cat back to the small clearing where Samone sat in a crouch doodling in the dirt with a small stick. The young thief picked up three small pinecones and threw them in rapid succession so they landed in quick sequence in the brush off to her right side.

He watched Samone's full pert lips curl up into a smile as she ever so slightly glanced toward the slight sound of artificial footfalls across the clearing. She pretended to not have noticed the sounds and continued scratching in the dirt just as Chase figured she would, but he saw that she kept looking with her eyes without turning her head toward his distraction.

Chase slowly crept toward his target from nearly the exact opposite and downwind direction. He had his long dagger in his hand as he slowly and silently slinked toward the young woman's back. He gently lobbed a tiny acorn near the area where he had tossed the pinecones and saw the nearly imperceptible glance at the sound once again.

Just as he was about to tap his teacher on her slender shoulder, she spun like a cat, grabbed his wrist, and twisted it until the blade fell to the ground. She continued to twist until he was forced to follow the path of the knife and found himself on the ground as well, looking up into the ranger's sharp, blue eyes.

"It was a nice attempt; your distraction would be believable to most people. But I am not most people," she said smiling down at her charge haughtily.

"You are definitely not most people," Chase agreed as he stared up at her. "Most people don't stand on their head."

Chase watched the look of confusion spread across her face before he reached behind him and grasped a slender cord that lay buried beneath the loose soil and fallen pine needles. He tugged once on the cord and released a heavy log he had spent half the night setting up. Gravity pulled the log down, which pulled the hidden rope taut. The rope snapped around Samone's ankles and hoisted her up into the air, her head swinging just two feet above the forest floor.

"Oh, very well done, handsome. It looks like I have taught you something after all," she congratulated him.

Chase's heart swelled at the compliment and, for the first time in his young life, he was proud to have worked so hard to gain the approval of another. After he cut Samone down, he continued to practice all of the skills she had taught him in the last couple of days. Though only four days had passed, he had learned so much that it seemed almost a lifetime.

Lucas and Brody led their charges about a mile from the camp before explaining the day's training schedule.

"Being a ranger is more about stealth and woodlore than fighting, which is not to say that a ranger isn't more than capable of holding his own against nearly any opponent. Soldiers fight in huge pitched battles, standing side by side with their fellow soldiers, bashing away at the enemy until one side or the other wins. A ranger is more apt to be alone, or in a small group where surprise and ambush is the key to survival. Brody and I are going to set off in that direction. You two are going to

practice your swordsmanship until the sun reaches that point in the sky," the ranger said, directing their eyes to a spot above the horizon.

"At that point, you will track us to our makeshift camp and put arrows into the targets we will set up before you arrive. You must kill every target in the area without alerting any others in the camp."

Without waiting for questions, the rangers ran off and disappeared into the woods. The twins squared off and fenced for about an hour then took turns quizzing each other on the native plant life. As the sun reached the appointed hour, they followed the trail the rangers had left them. The so-called trail was little more than a scuffed rock or broken twig on a bush. The twins were pleased that the rangers had left them that much to follow. If they had wanted to, the rangers could have moved through the forest without leaving even those meager signs.

The brother and sister used all their knowledge and training to follow the hints their instructors had left them, and even then they lost the trail several times and had to search an area from several minutes to nearly an hour before picking it back up again. On the occasions that they completely lost the trail, the pair would walk in an ever-expanding circle until they found the clue. The sign may be as obvious as the bark scraped on a tree or as subtle as a single overturned rock that looked out of place.

It took over three hours to find the rangers' hideout. The twins' first indication was a straw dummy propped up against a tree acting as a sentry. Phil quietly drew his bow and nocked an arrow to the string. His sister laid a restraining hand on his arm and pointed at the effigy. Phil could now see that small bells attached to the target would have alerted the rangers if he had simply put an arrow in it.

As they crept closer, they found several trip wires crisscrossing the ground in front of the dummy. The wires were also attached to bells hidden in the brush to alert the camp to intruders. They took the hint that they had to treat the dummy as if it were a living and seeing person that had to be neutralized silently.

Felicia crept around to the side and just slightly to the rear of the target, carefully avoiding several alarm devices. She slipped to the rear of

the dummy, placed a hand over its bell-rigged mouth, and drew her dagger across its throat without making a sound.

She made her way silently back to her brother. The siblings then cautiously walked a large circle around the area, disabling three more straw guards. Once they neutralized all of the sentries, the twins made their way toward the enemy camp, moving with all of the stealth they could muster. It took them over half an hour to creep and crawl the one hundred and fifty yards to the camp. They heard Brody and Lucas talking quietly before they were finally able to peer through the foliage and see the rangers and their constructed targets.

Three tents ringed a small campfire. The two rangers sat on logs sharpening their swords and conversing quietly. The young infiltrators scanned the camp and saw three more "men" in the clearing. One stuffed figure stood just outside a tent while two others sat on logs near the extinguished firepit. Phil motioned that he would circle around to the far side to ensure the tents were not hiding any more targets before they engaged the ones they could see.

Several minutes later, Felicia saw a hand emerge from the woods on the far side of the camp holding up two fingers. Phil had found two more targets beyond the tents hidden from view from her position.

With another concealed hand gesture, they were ready to attack the camp. Felicia fitted two arrows to her bow and drew the string to her cheek, whistled a very good imitation of a wren thrush, then shot at her targets. Phil loosed a double shot at the two dummies on his side at nearly the same time. Both attackers had another arrow fitted and drawn as four of the five targets fell to the ground. The two rangers sharpening their swords sprang into action. Lucas reached down, grabbed a rope lying unseen at his feet, and began pulling furiously. A thin cord snapped taut a dozen feet over their heads and was rapidly pulled through a pulley hidden somewhere in the trees.

Two arrows thudded into the last remaining straw man as the purpose of the rope system was revealed. Instead of a trap, as the twins

had feared, the rope pulled another stuffed target across the camp, simulating a man fleeing toward the woods.

"Don't let him get away!" Brody shouted.

The rangers need not have been concerned. Before Brody had time to finish his warning shout, two arrows sprouted from the swift-moving target's back. Lucas stopped pulling the rope propelling the target as soon as they declared it dead, and called their two students to them. The siblings jogged into the camp, bows in hand, and grinned widely.

"How many targets did you neutralize outside the camp, and how did you go about it?" Lucas asked the pair.

"Four; two by hand, two by arrows to the throat," Felicia answered gleefully.

Her infectious smile spread to the rangers at the answer.

"Excellent, we had hoped to get you with the runner, but we really didn't think he'd get away, and you certainly did not disappoint," Brody praised the siblings. "Let us return to camp before it gets dark. You will all need your rest before you set out tomorrow."

The rangers and their students trekked back to camp, the two men relentlessly quizzing Phil and Felicia the entire way, not letting a minute pass that could be used to teach something new or practice a previous lesson.

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After a full day of study and practice, Elderin took the young wizard and cleric out to their usual training area. They saw that a small, round lodge made of skins and oiled canvas had been erected a short distance from the bank of the river.

The druid held open the flap of deer hide serving as the door and motioned them inside. Once inside, the young men noticed there was a round hole in the top of the yurt to allow the smoke of a fire to escape. An unlit firepit lay directly below the smoke hole. Elderin lit the fire with a word of magic and bade them sit down on the bare earthen floor.

"At the close of today's lesson, I want you both to look deep within yourselves. I want you to truly know the heart of your power and of yourselves," the druid intoned as he threw aromatic shavings of some unknown plant or bark onto the fire. "Close your eyes and breathe in the smoke. It will help you concentrate and to look deep within your heart, mind, and soul."

The two boys closed their eyes and inhaled; the smell of spices, fresh soil, and flowers filled their noses. Someone threw open the door flap of the yurt, and a frantic voice called inside, interrupting their meditation.

"Elderin, goblins are raiding the camp!" a ranger cried before darting away.

Elderin stood and made for the door. "It looks as though we will have to do this another time, lads. Come, we must defend the camp," the druid declared, then stepped out, his students close on his heels. Elderin grabbed the first ranger he found. "How many are there, and how did they get past our sentries?"

"There are scores of them, Elderin, and with ogres. I know not how they slipped past the sentries, unless they managed to slay them or were aided by magic," the ranger informed the druid as best he could.

"It may be time to put your training to the test, boys. Are you ready?"

"Yes, Elderin, we're ready," Ted answered, and Gabe nodded in agreement.

"Very well, prepare yourselves as best you can then follow me."

Ted cast spells that would make him harder to hit and armor him against weapons should a blow land. Gabe was already wearing a chain shirt and plate-armor greaves, and carried his mace. Fortunately, Elderin had reinforced the importance of training as you would fight. That included dressing and arming themselves as they would when they were to leave on the morrow.

"We're ready, Elderin," Ted informed the druid.

"Let us be off then, and be wary, lads."

They could hear the sounds of battle, the clanging of swords on metal, and the shouts of men and beasts as they moved away from the roar of the waterfall and closer to the besieged camp.

Through the trees, they could make out dozens of forms darting about and striking at other shadowed forms. As they neared the camp, the forms became more distinct. Rangers engaged groups of goblins, sometimes at odds of three and four to one.

Even those numbers would not have been a great cause for concern, but the rangers had been caught completely by surprise. Many had rolled out of their tents wearing little more than their underclothes, since they had been resting after pulling the guard shift last night.

An even greater threat appeared as a huge ogre plodded into view, shoved past a group of goblins, and swung a massive club at any human within reach. When the club caught an unarmored ranger hard in the ribs, Ted could hear the sound of the impact from where he stood.

Gabe let out a cry as the limp form of the ranger flew back from the force of the blow and lay still. Ted raised his hands, waved them in a complex pattern, and chanted the strange words of magic. A great forked bolt of lightning shot through the goblins and ogre. The goblins instantly dropped to the ground with blackened scorch marks etched across their red and yellow skin.

Letting out a bellow of agony and rage, the ogre turned its huge head toward the source of its pain, fixed its beady red eyes on the youth, and charged at Ted with astonishing speed and ferocity. The young mage began another incantation, but his hands were shaking and fear clouded his concentration. The ogre raised his massive club to squash the puny human, and just as Ted thought his adventure was going to come to an early end, the ogre's look of rage turned to confusion. The club dropped from the creature's fingers as it toppled forward, two arrows protruding from the back of its neck.

"Heads up, Ted, look alive!" Phil shouted from across the camp.

Ted watched in astonishment as the twins appeared out of the distant woodline. Brody and Lucas, some distance to the right side of the camp, fired a hail of arrows into the invading force of goblins and ogres.

Ted came back to his senses, shook his head for focus, and began another casting. Several thick, ropey tree roots erupted from the ground, and wrapped themselves around the ankles of multiple attacking goblins, compliments of Elderin's casting.

Several of the tendrils found the thick muscular calves of another ogre, but the beast showed only slight surprise and tore them from the ground as he strode forward, intent on getting to the four rangers relentlessly harrying his beastly allies with their deadly arrows.

Josh and Chuck ran into the camp wearing their training armor and wielding their lethal weapons and engaged the ogre and goblins. Josh waded into a group of goblins, some of them nearly helpless thanks to Elderin's entangling spell, and hewed into them with his huge sword.

Chuck caught the attention of the ogre by cutting deep into its thick, warty flesh just above its right hip. The twins and their ranger instructors continued to pepper groups of goblins with their arrows and aided other hard-pressed rangers.

The ogre spun with a fleetness that belied its huge size and swung the massive club in a swift backhanded blow, aimed at the warrior who had just cut it. Chuck spun with nearly equal speed, only just able to get his shield up in time to block the blow that would surely have caved his head in. Although he blocked the club, the force of it sent him reeling onto the hard ground, his shield arm bent at an unnatural angle.

Gabe shouted in horror and ran to the large boy's aid. He dodged past any goblins he could avoid and lashed out with his mace at ones he could not, sending more than one rolling into the dirt.

Josh spun around and emptied the huge creature's abdomen with a single slash as it raised its club to finish off the badly wounded human it had knocked to the ground. Gabe slid to his knees next to Chuck, who was looking pale and in intense pain.

"Can you help him?" Josh cried out.

Gabe looked at the badly damaged arm then up at Josh, tears in his eyes. "I think so," he replied, then bent to his task.

As Gabe prayed to God to help his suffering companion, Josh charged off to engage a group of goblins advancing on them. Chuck cried out as his arm began to straighten and the bones knitted together under the compulsion of Gabe's prayers. As the cleric came to the end of his entreaties, he watched the color return to Chuck's face. A goblin reared up behind him, poised to jab its short spear into his fleshy back, just as an arrow took it in the heart.

Gabe looked over at Felicia who gave him a thumbs up. He returned the gesture with a smile that abruptly melted to horror as a dark shape loomed over the twins. Gabe tried to cry out, but the huge club came down too swiftly. A sickening crunch echoed through the clearing as the girl's body crumpled lifelessly to the ground. Phil, standing by her side, dropped his bow, pulled his sword, and hacked at the ogre that had just struck down his beloved sister.

Phil plunged his sword deep into the ogre's stomach. On a normal man, such a wound would have proved fatal. The huge ogre's face merely twisted in pain and rage, and it reached out with one huge hand and grasped the bereaved sibling by the throat.

Gabe jumped to his feet, not quite knowing what to do but knowing he must do something as Phil clawed helplessly at the hand threatening to choke the very life from him. Gabe started forward, gripping his mace, which now seemed so small and insignificant. A much smaller shape sprang up from behind the huge monster that had killed Felicia and was now bent on doing the same to Phil.

Chase plunged his long dirk into the creature's side clear up to the hilt. The ogre ignored another blow that would surely have disrupted a man's assault, and with a bestial howl, gave one final squeeze, and sent Phil to be with his sister.

Chase plunged a second dagger into the ogre's other side, piercing the huge kidney. The beast fell to the ground at nearly the same time as Phil, all lying on the hard earth where they had died. Gabe dropped to his knees next to the twins and began to pray through great sobbing gasps.

"Gabe," Chase called to him, "they're gone. Gabe, we have to help the others."

"No! I can help them! It's what I'm here for. It is all I can do!" Gabe prayed fervently for his friends' lives. He promised everything he had to God if only he would bring them back. He looked up at the sky and beseeched his lord's intervention. "Please!" Only the sounds of battle answered.

"Gabe, others need our help. Now let's go!" Chase commanded. Then in a softer voice, he said, "Come on, Gabe. We can grieve later. We don't have the time right now."

The grief-stricken cleric pulled himself to his feet, wiped his hands across his eyes, and nodded. Chase ducked back into the shadows, creeping his way through the edge of the clearing in search of other targets. Gabe saw a ranger hard-pressed by several goblins. As he chanted, the shortsword of one of the goblins began heating up until it glowed orange. The sword's owner dropped the blistering metal to the ground and cradled its burned hand.

The ranger took advantage of the opportunity by plunging his blade deep into the injured creature and going on the offensive against the other goblins. Gabe then set his sights on the many injured allies that littered the area and went to tend their wounds in hopes of preventing more death.

Ted sent a stream of missiles made of pure energy into a group of goblins attacking two rangers near the east side of the camp, felling one and injuring two others. The assault distracted the creatures enough for the rangers to finish them off, as well as two others that had been engaging them. The young wizard then sent a magical, acid-dripping arrow into a charging goblin. The initial bolt failed to kill the creature but, within a few steps, the acid pumping from it reached the goblin's heart, killing it instantly.

He scanned the battlefield and watched Josh charge one of the few remaining ogres. This ogre was unusual in that it wore a heavy robe of spun wool instead of simpler animal hides. The usual savage, bestial look

in the eyes of an ogre was not present. In its place lay a cold glare that spoke of an evil cunning not known to its primitive cousins.

The ogre raised its huge hands. In one was a long staff adorned with feathers and small bones. A guttural chanting issued from its tusked mouth as it swept its arms down in a swift motion. A huge ball of flame engulfed the charging young warrior, two rangers, and several goblins near the center of the camp.

Ted watched in shock as the charred bodies of everyone within the inferno's radius were blasted off their feet. The goblins and one of the rangers lay motionless, smoke coiling off their scorched and blistered remains. Josh and the other ranger writhed and moaned in agony, defeated and helpless from the horrific burns.

The young wizard let loose another barrage of missiles, all four slamming into the ogre shaman. The shaman, certainly injured by the assault, seemed unfazed by the pain and sent a salvo of magic missiles back at him.

Ted tried to duck the attack despite knowing full well such an effort was futile. The magical orbs slammed into his small frame with the force of a major league fastball. He gritted his teeth at the pain as the first missile struck him and braced himself against the other three that followed in rapid succession. He blinked through the tears of agony and forced himself to prepare his own counterattack.

As Ted regained his feet, he watched Chuck rush the shaman to avenge his fallen friend. A hail of arrows flew out from behind the spellcasting ogre, and half a dozen goblin archers emerged, previously hidden in the forest's thick brush.

The charging fighter raised his shield, deflecting most but not all of the arrows that hurtled his way. The first arrow caught him high in the leg, causing him to lower his shield for just a moment. That moment was all it took as the last arrow found his vulnerable throat.

The big young man plowed headlong into the earth, his life force leaking out of the awful wound in his neck. Ted saw Gabe rushing across the camp, trying to reach his fallen friends and render aid.

So you like to play with fire? Ted thought furiously. I'll give you some fire to play with!

Ted summoned the eldritch energies of this world into himself, shaping the power to his will. At the climax of his casting, he thrust out his hand and released the stored-up energy. A small ball of flame shot across the clearing, ready to unleash its pent-up energy in an inferno similar to the one the shaman had used, a blast that would easily engulf the ogre and goblins in one massive conflagration.

Just as Ted released his spell, he saw Chase spring up out of nowhere directly behind the shaman, right in the area that would soon be turned into a fiery hell. The wizard tried to shout a warning to his friend, but it was too late. As Chase plunged his knife into the ogre's back, the area he, the shaman, and the goblin archers occupied exploded into an unforgiving firestorm that did not discern friend or foe. Ted was horrified that the fire he created had just taken the life of his friend.

It was almost more than he could bear. He stood in mute shock as more goblins and ogres crashed through the woods into the camp and cut down the few remaining rangers. At some point during the battle, Elderin had left his side and was now on the west side of the camp, punishing the onslaught of evil creatures with a storm of hail, each icy orb the size of both his fists or bigger.

One of the ogres hurled its massive club at the druid. The giant shillelagh tumbled end over end, struck the druid in the forehead with a meaty smack, and dropped him to the ground. The horde overran Gabe, simply trampling him underfoot as the creatures charged at the helpless young wizard standing mutely at the edge of the camp.

Ted and Gabe opened their eyes with a shout and blinked at the gloomy interior of the yurt lodge. Tears streamed down the faces of both young men as Elderin spoke to them softly.

"Now you know the true horror of the quest upon which you are about to embark. Now you know the consequences of failure and carelessness. What did you learn during your sojourn?"

It took the boys a full minute to comprehend what had happened to them. The sweet fragrance of the herbs that had been thrown on the fire was gone, leaving only the faint smell of regular woodsmoke inside the hut. Gabe was the first to answer the druid.

"I learned there is a great chance that one or more of us could die, that this is real, and not a game. I learned I may not be able to heal every injury we suffer, and I must be able to put my grief on hold so I can continue to help those that need my aid. I cannot let fear or sorrow cloud my ability to do my duty."

"Very good, Gabriel. Take heart, you acquitted yourself well for your first battle. And you, Theodore, what did you learn?"

"I learned that without coordination, we can be as big a threat to each other as the enemy. I must act quickly but think my actions through, and be aware of what is going on and where my friends are on the battlefield. Above all, I must choose my spells wisely," he answered.

The old druid smiled as he stood. "You have both done very well. Learn from this experience, but do not allow the fear it may have invoked to cause you to hesitate. Let us return to camp. I and my rangers wish to feast you properly on your last night with us."

Elderin and his two students exited the lodge and walked back to camp. As they stepped into the clearing, the twins made their appearance, approaching from the other side of the camp. Ted and Gabe ran across the encampment, yelling excitedly.

"Felicia, Phil, I'm so glad you're all right," Gabe cried out, tears glistening in both boys' eyes.

"Of course we are. Why wouldn't we be?" Felicia asked.

"Sorry, it's a long story," Ted answered.

"Look, there's Josh and Chuck!" Gabe shouted, pointing at the exhausted-looking pair entering the camp.

"I wonder where Chase is," Ted inquired, looking around the clearing.

"Right here, spell-boy!" came the answer from behind him. Ted spun around and saw his friend's grinning face. "Got your dagger. Better hold onto it," he warned playfully as he handed over the blade.

They all took a seat near the fire. The rangers had enlarged the firepit, and roasted a huge boar carcass on a spit set over the low flames. As they waited for the boar to cook, they talked about each of their lessons and tests.

The twins talked about their attack on the rangers' camp. Chase told them all of how he had tricked Samone into his trap, which gave everyone a good laugh. The mood became somber as Ted and Gabe recounted the illusory battle they had fought.

"This is real, guys, and I don't think any of us truly took it seriously. We cannot afford to go after Drew with a flippant attitude," Ted told the group. "We watched all of you die today, and it looked and felt real. When we leave here, the danger is real."

Josh affirmed Ted's assessment. "You're right, Ted. I don't think any of us fully appreciated the depth of the danger we face. From here on out, we act like men and a woman on a lifesaving mission, not a bunch of kids playing at some adventure game."

"Maybe you guys felt that way. Try getting an arrow stuck in your leg. I know darn well how dangerous it is," Chuck replied while rubbing his calf where the arrow had pierced his leg.

"At least you didn't get burned up by Ted's fireball! Thanks for the light, Ted, but I don't smoke. Well, I guess I did after that," Chase snorted at his own joke.

His laughter was infectious and the others joined in. A high-pitched screech split the air from above the camp. The young adventurers looked up at the darkening sky and saw the dark silhouette of a hawk as it dove down from the treetops and settled on a low branch near Elderin.

The druid walked over and gazed into the raptor's sharp eyes for several moments. Elderin cut a piece of flesh from the boar and offered it to the powerful raptor in appreciation for whatever message it appeared to have conveyed. The bird bolted the morsel down and took to the air, disappearing into the gaining night. Elderin walked over to the party and took a seat on a log next to Gabe.

"Is it about Drew?" Josh asked, the concern for his brother evident in his voice.

"Indeed it is. It would appear that the tolerance for your brother's antics has reached the goblin leader's limits. He was beaten harshly with a strap, but he has suffered no debilitating injuries," the druid relayed solemnly.

"I'll skin that scrawny little creep alive!" Felicia shouted, surprising everyone at her vehemence.

"Poor Drew," Josh said forlornly. "Mom and Dad have never so much as lifted a hand to either of us before. I can't imagine how he must feel."

Elderin smiled broadly. "Let me tell you what he did to earn such enmity. It should lift your spirits a bit."

The druid explained how Drew had dropped the snake onto the goblin and his subsequent tumble down the steep rocky slope. Gales of laughter filled the camp as Elderin described the extent of Droog's injuries.

"It's nice to know that not even being sucked into a magical portal, transported to an alien world, and captured by mythological creatures can change Drew's approach to authority," Josh said, laughing along with the others.

Rangers passed around wooden plates heaped with roasted boar, potatoes, and greens. Clay and wooden mugs were distributed and toasts made to the success of their mission and health.

"Hey, this is beer! Chuck cried gleefully. "Good beer too, not like the cheap crap we had after prom."

The evening was festive, the food plentiful, and the company excellent. They were encouraged to eat to the point of bursting but cautioned against excessive beer and wine. Everyone took the advice, eating heartily but sipping their beverages—everyone except Chuck.

The large, college-bound lad got carried away in the revelry and drank a toast with every ranger in the camp—many of them more than once. By the time the group of young adventurers got ushered to their tents to get a good night's rest before departing in the morning, Chuck

was dancing and singing around the fire to the music of fiddles, lutes, and pipes.

When dawn broke, the troop crawled out of their tents feeling refreshed—except Chuck. Chuck had to be physically dragged out of his bed. Once he was out of his tent, he simply sat on a log and held his aching head.

"Oh, my head," he groaned pitifully.

"They told you to slow down, Chuck, many times," Felicia responded without a hint of sympathy.

"What are we going to do? Chuck can't move like this. If he does, we'll never hear the end of his whining," Chase pointed out.

"Maybe Gabe can heal him," Phil offered.

Chuck lifted his head, sprang to his feet, and grabbed Gabe's collar in his big hands.

"Yes! Gabe, you must heal me! Please, I will do anything. I will go to church as soon as we get back. I'll pray every night, I swear!" He pressed his palms against his temples, groaning at the pain his own movement and shouting caused.

"I guess I could try," Gabe offered, unsure if the Lord's blessings would be given to cure a hangover.

Gabe pressed his hands together and prayed silently, beseeching the Lord to remove the foolish young man's affliction. He laid his hand gently atop Chuck's head. Chuck, who had been praying along quietly with Gabe, felt much better.

"Gabe, you are a miracle worker! You can party with me anytime!" he promised.

"I am glad to see you are all up and feeling well," Elderin hailed them as he walked up to the group. "Strike your tents and pack your gear. My rangers and I wish to provide you with a few gifts before you depart."

The group did as they were bade, packing the dome tents into their prospective carrying sacks and stuffing them into the hiking packs with their spare clothing, rain gear, and the other equipment they had brought

with them. By the time they were finished packing, the entire camp had gathered to see them leave.

Elderin and each of the rangers who had contributed to their training approached bearing various items. Brody and Lucas stepped forward to present the twins with their gifts.

"Lucas and I want to give you these bucklers and two full sheaves of arrows that Elderin has magically strengthened to work reliably with your bows," Brody said as he handed over the well-crafted arrows. "They may not be as fantastic as your own, but they'll work fine and fly true."

Lucas stepped forward, two small shields in his hands. The bucklers were beautiful. Each was the size of a small dinner plate, made of hardwood, and rimmed in metal with a steel disk the size of a saucer set in the center. The wood was inlaid with a carving of a forest scene. A large stag was etched on the one he handed to Phil, and a magnificent unicorn on Felicia's.

"We wanted you to have bucklers worthy of your status as rangers," he said, giving them the shields as well as the titles.

"Thank you Lucas, Brody. It makes us both proud to have you call us rangers. We will not disappoint you," Phil answered, grateful for the honor the rangers bestowed on them.

Bronk stepped forward to present his gifts next. "I told you the first day that your weapons were crap and I'd find you suitable replacements," the big ranger said in his usual brusque manner. "After having seen how quickly you both learned and how hard you worked, I realized that it was going to be harder to find weapons worthy of you and your mission, but I think I prevailed."

Bronk unwrapped the canvas from around the large bundle he carried and revealed two swords in scabbards. One was a longsword in a plain but expertly crafted sheath that hung on a thick leather belt. This he handed to Chuck who drew the blade and stared in amazement.

Light reflected off the blade and revealed the many folds beaten into the steel to provide strength and maintain a keen edge. The folding pattern of the blade rippled like water along its length. The hilt was brass, formed in the shape of a lion, with the pommel being the large head

wreathed in a thick mane, its mouth open in a roar. The crosspiece was made of polished steel and protected the gold wire-wrapped grip.

"This is amazing, Bronk, thank you," Chuck said gratefully.

"You are quite welcome, lad. You are a fine fighter and deserve a fine blade." He turned to Josh. "Another fine blade for a fine warrior. I would be proud to have you fight by my side anytime, son. Mayhap that day grows near."

Bronk presented Josh with a two-handed sword of amazing splendor. The steel was forged in the same manner as the blade gifted to Chuck. Ripples in the metal made it look as though water had somehow been tempered and honed into a deadly weapon. The blade was just over four feet in length. The hilt added almost another foot with a large counterbalancing pommel. The long grip was worked brass in the form of a dragon in flight. The wings of the dragon were of forged steel and created the cross guard; the great neck snaked beyond the cross guard along each side of the razor-sharp blade. The head of the dragon clutched the long blade in its huge jaws while the tail wrapped around a large sphere representing a gem, egg, or possibly the world itself. The vividly cast scales of the dragon's body provided exceptional grip for the wielder.

Josh took the sword reverently, grasped the ornate but incredibly functional weapon, and marveled at the balance. "Ranger Bronk, I don't know what to say. It is magnificent."

"Wield it well and complete your quest if you truly wish to thank me. That is all I ask in return."

"I will, sir. We all will," Josh promised.

Ranger Jeffery took Bronk's place at the fore of the assemblage. "Most of your armor is equal to the poor craftsmanship of your weapons. We have all gathered and forged what we felt would suit you best. The ringing of anvils you have heard since the day you arrived was largely for your benefit. We have put together enough armor to provide each of you with what we feel is the best protection we can."

The ranger waved several of his companions forward, each bearing various pieces of armor. Unlike the swords endowed to the two warriors, the armor was plain and functional. Chuck, Gabe, and Josh were each given breastplates, vambraces, leather gauntlets backed with small steel plates, greaves, thigh guards, and thick-soled, steel-reinforced leather boots.

"We decided that the individual pieces would afford you decent protection while allowing you to move reasonably quietly and with more swiftness than a much heavier set would permit," Jeffery explained as each of the young men was given their armor.

Chase and the twins were each presented with strong leather armor in which metal plates had been sewn into vital areas for additional protection. Samone walked out of the crowd and approached her former student.

"Chase, you have been a most adept student. I asked Brody to make you a special sword best-suited for your particular skills and method of fighting. It is not nearly as attractive as those your two friends received. Swords like theirs would take weeks to forge, but it is strong and balanced just for you," she explained, then brought the blade out from behind her back.

The sword was truly unique if unadorned. It was a few inches longer than a shortsword, but significantly wider, closer in resemblance to a gladius. Unlike a gladius, the tip tapered to a needle-sharp point that would punch through the toughest armor. The handle was made of wood carved into a very good likeness of Samone herself.

"I wanted you to have something to remember me by," she said, smiling coyly.

Chase actually blushed as he took the sword. "I could never forget you," he replied with all sincerity.

"I also found a crossbow in the weapons cache that Chuck and Josh's swords were in. I thought you might like it. You can't always get close enough to use your blade."

She produced a light crossbow of extraordinary beauty. The entire stock was carved into the shape of a wood nymph. The nymph's legs

were carved into the stock where her feet would brace against the shoulder of the shooter. The bolt rested on her back, her arms spread wide forming the bow. Her head reached out in front of the bow, her delicate face turned up to stare at the target.

"Wow, it's beautiful," Chase said as he ran his hands along the magnificently carved wood, tracing out the relief of the naked sprite. "Something else to remind me of you?" he asked as he caressed the breast of the nymph.

Samone punched him hard in the arm and laughed. "You wish, you scoundrel!"

Elderin called for Gabe and Ted to stand forward. "I too have something to present you with in hopes of advancing your cause. As I said before, you are not the first from your world to come visiting. These items were crafted in your world and gifted to our forefathers."

He passed a long staff of polished dark wood to Ted. Sigils and elaborate designs were carved into the shaft, which towered a foot over his head. A crystal sphere was clutched in the talons of some bird of prey made of polished silver and extended from the top, while bronze capped the base.

To Gabriel, he reverently passed over a mace of a truly majestic design. It was a full two feet in length. The shaft appeared to be made entirely of silver, yet was light and strong. Surrounding the top were three angels made of the same gleaming metal and affixed in a way to make the entire thing appear as one solid piece. Their arms extended above their heads, each holding hands with the other, and supported a large faceted clear gem. The angels' wings formed the flanges of the exquisite weapon.

Both young men were astonished with their gifts and rendered nearly speechless. They cleared their throats and gave their thanks to the druid and rangers for all of their help, guidance, training, and the wonderful gifts.

"Each of your weapons carries a blessing of its own and will aid you in your journey. I only pray it is sufficient," Elderin said solemnly.

The rangers also supplied three horses to help carry their gear so they could move more swiftly. They offered them each a mount, but none had ever ridden horses before, so they felt it best to walk. Brody produced a map of surprising detail.

"Your friend was taken here, through Storm Peak's Pass. You can gain two days on them by taking this route here, through Titan's Gap. It is narrow and rough, but since you are not on horseback, it should be passable. You will likely have to release your horses once you reach the gap. That is not a problem. They will find their way back to us. Be ever vigilant. There are hostile creatures that roam that pass this time of year. Good luck and swift speed."

"Elderin, do you think we really have a chance? Even with the training and weapons you have given us, can we pull this off?" Josh asked the wise druid.

"I do. I do not believe you came here by accident. I believe fate put you on this path, and it is your destiny to help our world by preventing Lord Darkrell from achieving his goal," he said, speaking to the entire group. "As much as I believe in you, it is fate that will decide your success in the end. Were it only up to your brief training, then I would have grave reservations as to your success. However, I feel the weight of destiny resting upon you all. Do not mistake this for invincibility. Free will can always change fate, so proceed with the utmost care."

The small troop looked silently at each other, processing Elderin's words before they made their final farewells, thanked everyone once again for everything they had done, and marched purposefully toward the mountains.

CHAPTER 7

Drew was miserable. His back was aflame from the whippings he had taken from the angry Droog. He had to sleep the entire night on his side or stomach. Even when he avoided touching his back to the ground, he could not prevent the agony. Drew knew he could not escape right now, not in the condition he was in. He would have to bide his time and be careful not to do anything that would set off the temperamental goblin. Once he felt strong enough, he would flee the creatures' evil clutches. He had a plan prepared, but for now, it would have to wait.

They were through the foothills and were now traversing a pass through the tall mountains. A light dusting of snow covered the ground when he awoke the next morning. As they marched onward, the snow became steadily deeper as they gained elevation. Droog spoke not a word unless it was to chastise one of his warriors for being too slow or for just being close enough for him to vent his frustration on.

The higher they climbed, the colder it got. Drew walked with his blanket draped over him and covered his head with one end. His feet were wet and freezing; his shoes were not designed for this type of weather. When they stopped for the night, high in the pass, he took off his sneakers and set them near the fire to dry and warm away the numbness that had set in. The skin on his aching feet was taking on a waxy appearance, and he knew from health class that this was a strong indicator of impending frostbite.

Droog also must have realized the boy's condition, and to Drew's surprise, provided him with two large rabbit furs. The leather hides had been rubbed deeply with oil to waterproof them, and the fur would help

keep his feet warm even in this cold environment. The goblin showed the human how to tie them around his shoes with leather thongs. Drew realized it was not an act of kindness the surly goblin showed him, but simple practicality. Frostbite would make it impossible for him to walk, and Droog was not about to carry him.

He slept with the furs on his feet while his shoes and socks dried next to the fire. In the morning, he donned his dry shoes and socks and wrapped the fur-lined hides around his feet and lower legs just as Droog had shown him. After a breakfast of boiled oats and dried meat, they began marching once again. They reached the summit about midday and began their descent after a short rest and quick meal.

About an hour after they began their downward trek, Droog abruptly stopped in his tracks and looked around the steep-sided pass. Stones, boulders, and small, snow-covered pine trees littered the slopes. He called out a command to his goblins, and they went on alert, looking warily along the slopes just as Droog had. Drew wondered what had prompted the sudden change in the goblins.

Stones and flint-headed spears began raining down from the heights above. Shaggy white-haired creatures appeared from behind the snow-covered trees and boulders, their fur blending in perfectly with the snow. Bestial howls rose up from both sides: deep and menacing from the snowmen, high-pitched, alarmed, and angry from the goblins.

Droog looked more furious at the thought of losing his prize than frightened at the possibility of losing his life. Three goblins fell during the initial ambush, one with a flint-tipped spear through his skinny body and two others with their heads crushed by fist-sized stones.

"Run, stupid human. Snow demons!" Droog ordered his charge, pointing with his spear in the direction they were traveling.

He then shouted for his goblins to do the same. Drew did not hesitate. He broke into a sprint, passing the short-legged goblins within moments and swiftly increasing that distance as he ran for his life. He saw the pass they were in opened up to a small valley ahead. The floor of the vale could not have been more than a mile wide, but it was filled

with snow-covered evergreens. Drew thought he might be able to lose himself in the confusion if he could get far enough ahead of the goblins.

As Drew gained the vale, he saw that the goblins had picked up speed and were just behind him with several snow demons not much farther off. Several more of the shaggy, ape-like creatures burst from the trees and into the clearing without warning. The teen skidded to a halt and desperately searched for a way out.

The goblins behind him never broke stride. At a shout from Droog, they threw themselves at the snow demons with a fury and stabbed with their short spears with a viciousness that surprised him.

Drew took advantage of the battle and sprinted between two of the white-haired brutes under assault by five of the small goblins. He raced for what he hoped was the safety of a denser stand of trees in an attempt to lose all of his pursuers who were now engaged in the battle raging behind him. Drew hoped they were distracted long enough for him to make it out of the snowy pass before they knew he was gone. Once below the snow line, the goblins would have a much harder time tracking him down.

After several long minutes of running, Drew spied the end of the dale and the way out of the mountain pass. His lungs burned, but he continued to push himself on, desperate to get away from the goblins and out of the mountains.

The snow-blanketed trees ahead of him abruptly burst in a spray of white as another of the snow demons erupted from its hiding place. Drew fell and slid to a stop at the feet of the large, hairy beast. He rolled to the side a split second before the monster buried its club in the snow where he had just been lying. He sprang to his feet with surprising speed, despite his hands being bound, and darted away from the hairy creature.

He was near the steep walls of the vale and began scrambling up the side, panic clouding his judgment. The snow demon had no problem gaining on him on the steep, snow-covered slope. Drew tripped over a log concealed beneath the thick blanket of snow and fell face first into the snowy ground. He rolled to his back and raised his hands over his

face in a futile gesture of defense as the snow demon raised its club to crush the life out of him.

Drew's life played out before his eyes just as a small shape flashed in from behind the snow demon. Droog propelled his small body up the hairy creature's back and grabbed a fistful of the coarse white fur. He got one skinny arm wrapped tightly around the creature's head, his sharp nails scratching at its eyes while his other arm pumped up and down, repeatedly driving his dagger into the side of the monster's throat. The creature's fur and the snow all around was spattered red in a rain of blood.

Droog sprang from the snow demon's back as it toppled forward, its lifeblood rapidly fleeing its body, melting the snow around its corpse. The young human slowly lowered his hands and stared up at the raging, blood-covered goblin. Droog spoke not a word, just grunted and pointed with his gore-shrouded knife before stalking off through the snow to rejoin the remnants of his band.

Drew got shakily to his feet and mutely followed at a distance. Once the goblin troop reformed, he realized the extent of the losses they had suffered from the ambush. Barely a dozen goblins remained, counting Droog, from the nearly thirty he had originally set out with. They scavenged blankets, food, and the powerful whiskey from their fallen comrades before exiting the tiny valley.

On they marched, putting as much distance as they could between themselves and the vale, before exhaustion forced them to stop and camp for the night. Drew contemplated his earlier plan of escape and discarded it for the moment. As long as he was in these mountains, he decided to stick with the goblins. *Safety in numbers,* he reasoned. His headlong flight had also reopened some of the wounds on his back. He could feel them weeping blood as it cooled against his skin. The night was cold, but he slept warmer thanks to the additional blankets he had due to some post-battle salvaging.

The beating of wings overhead interrupted Drew's sleep just before sunrise. He opened his eyes and watched a snow owl light upon a low branch in a nearby tree. It gave him a short, high-pitched shriek from its

hooked beak. Drew propped himself up on an elbow and watched the beautiful bird spread its long wings and take flight.

As the bird passed overhead, it appeared to drop something from its talons near his bedroll before disappearing into the waning night. He felt around until he found the small, cylindrical object. It was a slender wooden tube with a small sheet of rough paper rolled inside of it. His face split in a large grin as he read the message it contained by the soft glow of the dwindling fire.

Drew, we are coming after you. Don't worry, we'll find you.

Drew felt a surge of relief knowing his friends were coming for him. He was so tired he could not even ponder the potential danger they were facing just to save him. He rolled over onto his back and closed his eyes. Sleep came much more easily for him this time, his dreams less haunting.

He awoke, stiff and sore as usual, and his back still stung from his beating. At least the wounds had scabbed over and were no longer weeping. He found the tiny missive still clutched in his hand. He tossed the paper into the fire and watched the corners curl and blacken, before they were consumed by the low flames. After another cold and bland breakfast, they trudged on. The passage sloped ever downward, and it gave Drew hope that they would soon be departing the mountain range.

The woods became decidedly thicker while the snow became thinner, until it covered only the shaded areas under the thick boughs of the evergreens and the occasional boulder, before the slush finally disappeared altogether. Despite the slow yet constant increase in temperature, Drew kept his blankets wrapped around him. The land below the mountain heights was considerably warmer. He decided this would be the night he put his escape plan into action.

After a day of blissfully uneventful marching, the goblins stopped a few miles from the base of the mountains. The forest provided an abundance of wood, so the fire was larger than usual. Several goblins went out on a foraging party and returned highly successful.

A few rabbits and a small deer made for a well-deserved bounty that evening. Even Droog's dour spirit seemed to have lifted a bit, and he

joined his fellows in their revelry instead of sitting apart and drinking himself into a stupor. The goblin leader even laughed uproariously every time he kicked over the pinecones Drew was collecting and stacking into piles to pass the time.

The goblins danced and carried on around the fire long after Drew fell asleep. He woke sometime during the night to the raucous snores of the disgusting dozen—as Drew had taken to calling the filthy goblin band.

A slight chill ran through him as the fire burned low, a situation he would soon remedy. He listened intently but heard no sound beyond the sleeping goblins. The boy stared out into the darkness of the trees, but he could see no sentries in the wan light provided by the half-moon.

Drew reached into his pocket and pulled out the pocketknife he still possessed, thanks to the goblins not bothering to search him, and cut the cords binding his hands together. He stood and slowly crept around the perimeter of the small camp, yet still found no sign of anyone alert or keeping vigil. He counted the sleeping goblins and saw that three were missing. Drew figured they must be farther out than usual due to the moonlight and warmer climate.

The young human returned to his bedroll and secured it for travel. He took a blanket lying near the unconscious form of one of the goblins and piled all the pinecones he had collected into the center of it before tying the corners together. He then went about and collected every jug of the potent drink that remained. He poured the caustic liquid over the goblins and equipment that lay near the fire.

Drew threw the satchel of pinecones and the one remaining jug of spirits onto the fire, sprinted to a large fallen log near the edge of the camp, and hid. Within seconds of reaching his hiding place, the pinecones started to pop, sending flaming embers leaping out at the alcohol-soaked goblins and their gear. The cracking of burning pinecones and sudden increase in flames woke the inebriated goblins.

Any goblin managing to sleep through the popping pinecones was brought out of his slumber by the screams of a goblin whose alcohol-wetted blanket was ignited by a flying cinder. The three sentries

appeared, drawn from their posts by the ruckus back at the camp. One came so near the hiding human that Drew could have reached out and touched him. As soon as the goblin ran past, Drew crept out from beside the log and jogged into the darkness of the early morning.

Droog spied the bundle of pinecones on top of the low fire and shouted for one of the goblins to knock it away. A yellow-skinned goblin grabbed a branch and reached in to fling the bundle away just as the jug of flammable swill exploded, sending a wash of flame and fiery missiles into the ranks of goblins. Several blankets and two of the goblins were set alight the instant the burning pinecones struck them. The goblin attempting to separate the pinecone bundle from the fire was completely engulfed in flames and ran about the camp like a crazed, screaming fire elemental.

Droog cast his furious eyes around the camp in search of his prisoner while the others tried to smother the flames of their two comrades.

"The human has escaped! Find him! He must not get away," Droog screamed, then kicked at the two goblins smoldering in the dirt until they gained their feet and set off with the rest.

It did not take long for the goblins to pick up the trail of the fleeing prisoner and chase after him. Drew sprinted through the trees, using his hands to ward his face from the branches that tried to gouge his eyes out as he ran. He could hear the shouts of the goblins far in the distance, and was determined to gain an even larger lead as long as he could keep his legs moving. His side ached and his lungs felt as if they were on fire.

After what seemed an eternity of running, he slowed to a walk and listened for the sounds of pursuit over his own heavy breathing but heard nothing. Either he had gained enough of a lead that he could not hear them, they followed in silence, or he had lost them. Only time would tell. He just hoped his friends would find him soon.

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The first two days and nights of travel passed without incident—almost. They had stopped for a rest and some water, when Chase approached Chuck with a pear-shaped piece of armor sporting leather straps to affix it in place.

"Hey Chuck, I thought you may want this."

"What is it?" Chuck asked, staring at the device.

"It's a face guard. I noticed that you have an open-faced helmet so I thought you may want this so no goblin club messes up your pretty face," the mischievous rogue replied with a smile.

"Very funny, Chase, but thanks; I appreciate it. Hmm, not much airflow," Chuck commented as he put it to his face and buckled the straps around his helmeted head.

"Any holes would allow an arrow or weapon a chance to slip through, and that wouldn't be a good thing," Chase assured him. "Besides, now you look like Shredder from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*."

"Really? Cool. Hey, guys, check this out," he called out to the rest of the party as he walked over to them to show off his steel mask. "I look like Shredder! Pretty cool, huh?"

Fits of laughter forced their way between pressed lips that failed to hold back the tide of mirth.

"Um, Chuck, what do you have on your face?" Phil asked, biting his lower lip to keep from bursting out laughing.

"It's a face shield. Chase gave it to me because my helmet doesn't have one," the large youth explained.

"It looks rather used," Ted observed, then pressed his hand over his mouth tightly, trying to control the laughter that wanted desperately to escape.

Chuck looked at his friends, confused as to what they found so hilarious. "Yeah, I think the last guy that owned it must have liked to eat that really smelly cheese; he left his breath all in this thing."

His friends could no longer contain themselves. Chuck's declaration of the smell coupled with his own obliviousness had them rolling and pounding on the ground in uncontrollable laughter.

"What's so damn funny?" Chuck demanded, angry at being the butt of some joke he did not understand.

Felicia stood up and finally came to his rescue. "Chuck, that is a codpiece, not a face shield," she explained carefully.

"So what's a codpiece for, fishing?" he asked, still not getting it.

"No, not fishing, Chuck, definitely not fishing," she replied.

"Not unless you're fishing for trouser trout!" Gabe belted out in a rare show of lowbrow humor.

Chuck tore at the buckles, pulled the codpiece off his face, and stared at it. "Are you telling me this is a nut cup?"

"Um, yeah, but look on the bright side. You were really close with that cheese remark," Phil said helpfully.

"Chase, I'll kill you!" Chuck roared, searching for the practical joker without luck.

The party let Chuck burn off his anger for another fifteen minutes then decided it was time to start moving again.

"Think we should wait for Chase?" Gabe asked.

"I'm sure he's watching the whole thing right now and will follow us when we go," Felicia assured him.

"Chuck, let's go. You can kill him later," Josh called to his friend.

Chase reappeared as they set up that first night's camp. Chuck had calmed down enough that Chase's life was no longer in danger, but he swore he would get his revenge eventually. They pitched their tents and slept soundly. Each of them pulled a guard shift until morning came, then they headed out once again.

Phil and Felicia walked about a hundred yards ahead of the others while Chase brought up the rear as was usual. The day was clear, the air brisk, and frost still dusted the leaves of some of the plants that hid from the sun within the shadows of the trees. The late morning sun filtered through the thick boughs of the evergreen trees.

"You think Drew is all right?" Gabe asked, worried for his friend.

Ted assured his portly friend. "I'm sure he is; he has a way of getting himself into trouble without actually suffering the consequences of it."

"What do you think this Darkrell guy is going to do to him once he gets hold of him?"

"Try and make him open another gate, I suppose, but he'll need the book most likely, so he'll have to wait for us. Regardless, he can't take a chance on hurting Drew, or it might ruin his plans."

"I hope so," Gabe replied, wiping sweat from his brow.

Even though the day was cool, the group was dressed warmly and their muscles were working hard traveling with their armor on, so it was impossible not to work up a sweat.

"Do you think we have to wear all this armor the entire time? Couldn't we just put it on before we get in a fight?" Gabe complained.

"You never know when you might come under attack. Remember, the first fight we were in was an ambush. We would not have had time to put it on in that vision, dream, or whatever you want to call it either," Ted said.

"Easy for you to say, you don't have to wear the stuff. Do you think we will be attacked again?"

"Orcs ahead and chasing us!" the twins shouted in unison, answering Gabe's question.

Phil broke left as Felicia darted to the right, both finding cover off to the sides of the trail. Chuck and Josh pulled their weapons and set themselves to prepare for the charge.

"Gabe, grab the horses and tie them up off the path," Josh shouted back to him.

The chunky cleric snatched up all three sets of reins and jogged into the woods while the horses eagerly plodded after him, as if they could sense that danger was approaching. The party could hear the orcs crashing through the woods, rushing after the two humans they had espied.

Ted began an incantation, and a thick, green fog sprang up along the path ahead of Josh and Chuck. A second quick spell produced a shimmering transparent screen that hovered a foot in front of him, shielding the wizard from head to toe.

The first orcs charged headlong into the noxious cloud, fell to their hands and knees, and retched uncontrollably. The orcs were hideous-looking creatures, every bit as ugly as the goblins but without the goblins' gremlin-like charm. They looked like huge pigs shaped into the form of a man. Their noses were large and upturned, with tusks jutting from their jaws and curling over their upper lip. Their arms were thick with corded muscles and wielded a vicious assortment of weapons. Beady eyes filled with rage and hate promised a cruel and painful death.

The trailing orcs bolted to the side after seeing their comrade's fall to the toxic vapors. Several of the bestial men split to the left, while others broke to the right of the path and their incapacitated kin.

Phil let fly a stream of arrows, firing one after another as quickly as he could nock and pull, barely taking the time to aim. Felicia sent a trio of orcs to the ground with lethal shots of her own. She was given a reprieve when the wind blew the foul cloud into the path of several orcs attempting to bear down on her, causing them to stumble and become violently sick.

Josh struck at the orcs charging Phil's position hard in the flank and drew their attention to him. Three of the creatures stopped their charge and turned as the newest threat cut down two of them with an equal number of swings from his lethal blade.

The three creatures, each as big as Chuck, put Josh on the defensive. What they lacked in fighting style, they easily made up for in brutality. Josh dodged and parried the clumsy but powerful blows of one orc wielding a spiked, iron-headed morning star, and another slashing viciously with a notched and rusted falchion. The third was trying to get past its brethren and onto the human's flank, but Josh kept moving in order to keep the two orcs he was battling between him and the third.

Chuck interposed his sword and shield between Felicia and the orcs that managed to get past the debilitating cloud, hacking into the hog-faced creatures with a frenzy that matched their own. The brutality of his attack caught the orcs off balance, and the human was able to cut three of them down before the creatures formed a cohesive defense and

engaged the large human with more caution. Chuck's inertia was dampened, but with Felicia still sending her lethal arrows into any orc that gave her a clear shot, she and Chuck continued to devastate their enemy's ranks.

Gabe had just secured the horses when the first orcs burst out onto the trail ahead of his friends. He ran back as fast as his legs could carry his heavy body and drew his mace from his belt as he ran. He watched the slowly dissipating green fog drift to the right of the battlefield. He saw that Chuck and Felicia were doing a good job of defending that side. He looked left and watched Phil sling his bow over his shoulder and engage a pair of orcs with his broadsword, while two other monsters pressed Josh back, with a third jockeying for a position at his flank.

Gabe added his support to the defense of the hard-pressed left flank, calling upon divine energy to heat the sword of the orc attacking Josh. The metal began to glow a dull orange and rapidly heated to white-hot so fast that the smell of burnt pork was the first indication that something was amiss before the searing heat forced the orc to drop the weapon.

Instead of retreating, the beast lashed out with its uninjured fist. Josh intercepted the swing with his blade and sheared clean through the thick flesh and hard bone. This significantly more grievous injury caused the creature to back away, clutching its critically injured stump to its chest with its burned hand in an effort to slow the blood spurting from the severed stump. The wounded orc's retreat allowed the third orc to bring its spiked club into range and smash it hard against the steel pauldron protecting Josh's right shoulder.

Gabe knew he must provide more direct help to his beleaguered friends as more orcs burst through the woods. He called upon his lord to aid his friends and felt courage and a sense of wellness fill his body; he knew his friends also felt the blessing upon them. He then prayed for strength and charged into the fray, swinging his mace with an enhanced strength that rivaled even Chuck's impressive might. Gabe brushed aside the attack of an orc with such force, the creature's weapon went spinning out of its hand and landed several yards away in the thick ferns

blanketing the forest. His return swing caught the surprised orc in the side of its large, piggish head, dropping it to the ground.

"Nice job, Gabe!" Josh shouted, congratulating the timid boy while blocking another attack before driving his sword through the gut of the orc attacking him.

Gabe just nodded as he focused on the battle and tried to work through the fear coursing through his body. Another of the foul beasts leapt out at him, swinging a heavy-bladed axe in an overhead chop intent on splitting his skull in twain. The cherubic young cleric brought his mace over his head and blocked the vicious cut. His magically enhanced strength kept the blade from striking a mortal blow, but he was still borne to the ground by the force of the powerful creature's attack.

Gabe, lying flat on his back, brought his mace across his body, hoping to block the next swing as the huge orc brought his axe over his head in preparation for his next strike. The axe never fell as a fletched bolt sprouted from the side of the orc's thick neck. The orc slapped at the shaft with one free hand as if a bee had just stung it before toppling over onto its side.

Gabe looked in the direction his salvation had come from and saw a glimpse of Chase's dark motley cloak before he disappeared into the shadowy woods once again. The cleric got to his feet and saw two more orcs charging at Phil. Phil was already engaged with one orc; a second lay dead nearby. He shouted at the two orcs bearing down on his friend's left flank with a simple but spiritually bolstered command.

"Stop!" Gabe cried out, and the two orcs froze in their tracks, unable to move.

Ted sent several magical bolts into the body of an orc that had gotten around Chuck and was bearing down on Felicia. The orc staggered against the magical assault, fell to its knees, and gasped for breath. Ted conjured a second salvo and split the four orbs between the injured orc and a second orc that had Chuck on the defensive. The second magical attack finished off the wounded orc and staggered the other creature enough to give Chuck an opening. Chuck did not hesitate

to seize his advantage and thrust his blade through the distracted orc's heart while bashing his shield into the face of another.

Chase crept around to the rear of the battle, slung his crossbow, and pulled out the short sword he called Biter and a long dagger from their sheaths. He darted from behind a thick pine tree and thrust Biter deep into the back of an orc double-teaming Phil and followed up with a thrust of his dagger into the kidney of the second. The first orc fell straight to the ground as the second faltered due to the excruciating pain in its lower back. Phil ended the creature's agony by opening its throat with a slash from his broadsword.

Chase, not waiting around to acknowledge his friend's quick thanks, darted back into the woods to circle around toward Chuck and Felicia while Phil jumped to bolster Josh's position.

The thief moved quickly but silently through the vegetation to get behind the orcs Chuck and Felicia had engaged. But before he could reach them, the creatures that had been felled by the now dispersed noxious cloud were regaining their feet. Discarding any sense of chivalry, he stabbed at the vulnerable backs of the creatures before they could add their numbers to the fight.

He struck two of the orcs down in rapid succession, but the remaining two stood and turned to fight him as their two companions fell. Chase blocked the swing of the first orc with his dagger and sent Biter whistling around in an arc, cutting deeply into the sword arm of his attacker. He saw the incoming blow of the second orc out of the corner of his eye and tumbled nimbly away, sprang to his feet, spun back around, and thrust Biter into the belly of the wounded orc that thought to try to catch him on the ground.

The first orc charged him in hopes of catching him in a vulnerable position, but an arrow through its throat brought it down. Chase looked to his right and saw Chuck and Felicia running toward him, leaving nothing but bodies behind them. He looked over to the left flank and watched Phil and Josh finish off the two Gabe had immobilized.

"Come on! I think that was just a scouting party. We need to get out of here!" Felicia warned the group.

As if in answer to her warning, a horn sounded, long and low, in the distance to the northwest. Phil and his sister retrieved as many of their spent arrows as they could before dashing after the rest of their small party.

Without comment, the group retrieved their horses, which thankfully had not spooked during the battle, and made haste toward the nearby mountains to the northeast. Unfortunately, the trail they followed turned due north before turning slightly west in the direction of the enemy force, which required them to take a slower, cross-country route.

"Is everyone all right? Any injuries?" Gabe inquired as he pushed through the ferns and brush.

"I took one in the shoulder. Hurts like hell, but it's not bleeding," Josh answered, wincing at the pain his arm movements caused.

"I got cut kind of deep just above my thigh guard, but I tied a rag around it for now," Chuck replied, his adrenaline masking any pain for the moment.

"Let's stop for a second so I can take care of the injuries," Gabe said, breathing hard.

Chuck shook his head. "I'm fine; we gotta put some distance between us and those orcs."

"You bleeding out until you weaken will slow us down even more. Let me do something about it. It will only take a second," Gabe insisted.

"He's right," Phil said. "We'll make better time if you're not injured, and if they do catch us, we'll need our full strength."

"All right, let's be quick though."

Gabe looked at Chuck's wound first. It was a deep wound and was bleeding profusely.

"Whoa, I didn't think it was that bad," Chuck said as Gabe uncovered his wound.

The cleric prayed softly, his hand taking on an ethereal glow as the wound stopped bleeding and closed, leaving a faint red scar where the deep gash had just been.

"OK, Josh, you next," Gabe called out.

"It's OK, I can run just fine."

"But can you fight at a hundred percent? C'mon, let me see it."

Josh reluctantly did as he was told, but pressed Gabe to hurry. Gabe placed his hand over Josh's wounded shoulder and repeated his healing prayer. The deep bruise and pain that lay unseen under the pauldron dissipated and Josh was able to move his arm without pain once again.

"OK, now let's go," he ordered as he rolled his shoulder about.

The group set out at a brisk jog, trying to put some distance between them and their pursuers. Exhaustion began to set in and forced them to a fast walk, but even that pace became torturous to maintain for long. Only the blaring of the horns behind them kept them moving, their clarion calls slowly but surely gaining ground as they neared the base of the lofty mountain range.

The grey granite walls of the towering mountain range loomed before them, tall and imposing. Only the hard, nearly sheer barrier of stone lay before them, with no sign of a way through. They followed the cliff face east for over a mile before a narrow passage opened into the impassable rock wall.

"I think this may be the gap Brody marked on the map," Phil pointed out.

"This is the gap? This thing is so narrow I can stand against one wall and pee on the other," Chase said.

Felicia took charge and directed her friends. "Grab your packs. We'll release the horses here and head through on foot. Brody said it gets even worse farther on."

They strapped on their backpacks, removed the horses' bridles, and gave them a hard slap on the rump. The horses, glad to be free and rid of their burden, galloped off into the woods away from the humans and the oncoming orc horde.

The blast of a horn not far behind them spurred the group on through the narrow breach. The fissure was so constricting, they could reach out and touch both walls at times. The shouts and presumed curses of the orcs reverberated through the gap and were getting closer while the pass got narrower and the ground rockier. The fear of the fissure

closing off completely, trapping them in its confines with the murderous creatures behind them was uppermost in everyone's mind. Just around the next bend, the passage ended in a tumble of rock rising high above them.

Josh scanned the jumbled wall of stone. "We'll have to climb!"

Phil, the more experienced climber, took the lead while his sister brought up the rear. The narrow gap looked to have suffered a major rockslide sometime in the recent past. Although it was not a cliff, the way was steep, long, and precipitous. The shifting stones made the ascent quite treacherous. Within minutes of beginning their climb, they saw the first orcs charge toward the base of the landslide and start climbing up after them.

Felicia turned her back to the wall, drew her bow, and selected a few of the wooden arrows. She sent a shaft streaking into the lead orc, causing it to fall into the one just behind it and knock them both away from the rock face. Both creatures fell several feet before rolling to the bottom. She sent two more arrows into the remaining orcs and turned about to resume her climb, but a stone shifted under her feet and she began to slide back down the mountain.

"No!" her brother cried, as he looked below him, watching as his sister slid rapidly down the scree-covered face and into the waiting arms of orcs filling the gap below.

The orcs shouted in anticipation of getting their clutches on the human about to drop into their midst, as if the gods themselves were presenting them with a gift from the sky. Felicia dug her fingers deeply into the stones, scrabbled for purchase, and arrested her descent just yards above the shouting orcs. Several orcs started to climb up in hopes of pulling the human girl down to them. The first one up caught an arrow in the face for his trouble. Phil screamed in rage and released arrows at any monster that tried to go near his sister. Chase added his crossbow to the fray, further discouraging any attempt to reach Felicia as she slowly began to climb back up to her friends.

Ted and Gabe knew that the archers could not hold the tide of monsters back for long and conspired to devise a plan. "Hold your arrows, guys. Gabe and I will slow them down!"

Gabe was already casting, and a wall of spinning blades appeared, cutting right across the path of the orcs trying to climb up. The whirling wall of blades cut down several orcs as they tried to climb the slope after the fleeing humans and dissuaded any others from following.

Ted launched a sphere of flame that expanded into a massive ball of fire as it reached the horde of orcs below. The sudden conflagration reduced a dozen or more of the foul creatures to cinders due to them packing themselves so thoroughly in the rocky cleft.

Scores of others broke and ran from the passage that promised nothing but horrible death should they continue to press their assault. Chase climbed down to help Felicia the rest of the way up to where they were waiting. She paused to look back and saw that the orcs had not been completely routed. They hung back around a bend in the large fissure, waiting for the humans to press on before following.

"Gabe, can you make another one of those blade walls?" Ted asked.

Gabe shook his head and breathed deeply. His pale face showed the toll that the powerful spell had taken on him. "No, I don't think so. Not without rest."

"Do what you can for Felicia, and then get everyone moving again. I'll hide and slow them down when they try to follow," Ted offered bravely.

Phil insisted, "I'll stay too. You're not an experienced climber and might need my help. Plus, I can hold them off with my bow. Felicia, once you get to the top throw us down a rope so we can climb back up faster."

Felicia promised she would and dug out the rope Phil carried in his pack so she could add it to her own once they gained the top. Gabe applied his healing touch, easing the many bruises, scrapes, and sprains she had suffered in her rough slide down the slope. All save Phil and Ted began ascending the mountain face once again.

Ted and Phil hid behind a large boulder and watched as the orcs started filtering out from behind their cover soon after Gabe's wall of blades wore off. Ted sent several crimson missiles into the first few orcs attempting to venture back toward the slope. The magical assault sent them running back behind the concealing bend in the passage.

"Save your arrows for any that get past my spells. I'll tell you when," Ted advised as a huge number of orcs piled into the gap down below.

Phil trusted his friend's judgment and saved his arrows for when they were most needed. There were far more orcs than he had arrows anyway. The orcs decided a full frontal assault was required, trusting their superior numbers to overwhelm the wizard's magical offensive.

Ted unleashed another ball of fire into the mob of orcs, devastating their numbers as they tried to gain the slope. Even before the burning sphere reached its target, he started another incantation. Several seconds after the fireball erupted into the mass of orcs, a wall of flames erupted from the ground directly beneath the lead orcs and sent their burning bodies rolling back into the arms of those behind them.

"Let's go, those flames won't burn for long," Ted said, urging Phil to climb.

Phil slung his bow, and both young men climbed upwards as fast as they could. A couple of hundred feet ahead and above them, they could see the rest of the group nearing the precipice. Ted chanced a glance down below and saw that his wall of fire was rapidly diminishing and would be out in the next few seconds, allowing the orcs to pursue them once again.

He paused in his climbing and began casting another spell, already feeling the exhaustion from so many castings in such a short amount of time. A hundred yards below him, thick strands of web blanketed a huge swath of the steep slope.

"That should slow them down considerably, and last a lot longer than the flame wall did," he told Phil, who had also paused once he noticed his friend had stopped climbing.

The pair started climbing again as a rope dropped down within their reach. They thankfully grabbed the rope, stood upright, and used their legs to brace against the loose, rocky slope. They walked up the last two hundred feet of the steep gradient, pulling themselves hand over hand up the rope. Phil and Ted dropped in exhaustion just on the other side of the peak as Josh, Chuck, and Chase hurled large stones over the edge at the orcs stubbornly trying to advance up the craggy face.

Gabe and Felicia helped the pair up and over the summit before hurling their own missiles down the rock face. Their progress thwarted by the blockading sticky webs and ceaseless barrage of hurled stones, the orcs finally decided that their quarry was not worth the effort and further cost in lives. They fled back down the slope and out of the narrow gap to renew their harassment of human towns and villages as their master had commanded them to. The significant reduction in their numbers would make their choices of targets much slimmer, however.

The party rested at the summit of the avalanche under the granite, sheer-sided walls looming imposingly hundreds of feet over their heads. They watched the pass for another hour until deciding the orcs had given up and would not be returning anytime soon. The party struggled to keep their footing on the uneven ground, the path being no more than a mass of fallen stone some two hundred feet deep and a half-mile long. It took nearly an hour to traverse that relatively short distance before they were able to climb down the far side where the gap resumed its upward climb, higher into the forbidding mountains.

Scouting ahead, Phil found a deep draw hidden behind an outcropping of rock that would make a good place to set up camp for the night and get some much-needed rest. The narrow draw opened up into a cul-de-sac where the tall rock walls provided protection from the cold, biting wind continuously blowing through the gap.

They crowded into one tent to eat the dried meat and fruit the rangers had provided, and made tea over a can of camping fuel gel the twins had packed. The small, hot flame and the press of bodies made for a warm respite despite the rapidly dropping temperature.

Once they finished eating, they split up into two tents, shed their armor, and crawled into their sleeping bags. Ted stayed up and studied his book of spells for a time by candlelight before drifting off to sleep himself. Phil let the wizard sleep and pulled both his and Ted's watch shift, knowing he was exhausted and needed sleep more than he did.

CHAPTER 8

By the time the sun peeked over the mountains, Drew was thoroughly exhausted. He wanted nothing more than to stop and sleep, but he knew he had to press on.

There must be a human village or town somewhere. All I need to do is find one, and I'll be safe. I can stay there until Chase and the guys find me, he thought to himself.

So he kept walking, forcing himself to put one foot in front of the other long after fatigue demanded he stop and rest. The forest rose high above his head, the scent of pine filled the air, birds chirped, and insects buzzed around him. At any other time, this would be a peaceful paradise, if it were not for the bloodthirsty snow demons and evil, kidnapping goblins.

His ears detected a new sound up ahead. The sudden syncopation put him instantly on alert, but he calmed down as he identified the noise as nothing more than the flowing water of a stream or small river. The anticipation of fresh water drew him forward but he remained wary as he approached the waterway. A deer was drinking from the stream as he emerged from the trees, but it bolted as he neared.

He watched the animal bound away into the woods before kneeling down and scooping handfuls of fresh water into his mouth. He emptied the stale water from the skin he had taken from the goblin camp and refilled it from the brook. His body welcomed even this short respite, so he decided to sit on the bank with his back propped against a fallen log and rest a moment.

When he next opened his eyes, grey clouds had moved in and blotted out the sun. He could just discern the faint glowing disc of the sun and saw it had moved considerably westward since he sat down.

Drew's body vehemently protested at the prospect of moving once again, but he forced it to comply. He decided his best chance of finding the nearest thing resembling civilization would lie next to a waterway. The stream he was following was rather small. The widest he had seen it so far was no more than fifteen feet across, but he hoped it might grow larger or act as a tributary to a major river.

He knew from geography and history class that earlier civilizations built the majority of their towns and cities along waterways. The rivers provided fish and transportation for people and trade goods. His education proved its value as the sun was beginning to set and he saw the outline of what appeared to be buildings in the distance. The exhausted boy approached the small town, first with eagerness, then trepidation as the wind shifted and brought the smell of smoke to his nostrils. It was not the clean smell of stove or oven smoke, but the stale scent of burned timber. The smell brought back the memory of a house that had burned down last year just a block from his home. He could smell it for days after the fire had been put out. He soon saw that his fears had been correct as he neared the former logging town. Drew hid behind a tree and scanned the remains of the small village for a time, but the setting sun made it too dark to see. He listened a while longer, but heard nothing beyond the rippling current of the stream and the chirping of crickets.

By the light of the nearly full moon, he probed through the buildings' charred remains. He wondered where all the people had gone. There were no bodies, thankfully, and he wondered if they had fled before the destroyers had come. Drew did pass the carcasses of a few animals, dogs mostly, but those of goats and sheep as well. They gave off a strong odor of death, but did not show significant signs of decomposition.

Drew finally discovered what had happened to at least some of the former residents. On the far side of the village, a large mound of earth

was piled several feet high. He figured it was likely a mass grave. The thought chilled him before he realized this may actually be a good sign. It was unlikely that whoever sacked this town would have bothered to bury their victims. It stood to reason that a group of people had come by, or maybe those who escaped had returned, and buried the dead before moving on, possibly to a larger settlement downriver.

He found a set of doors leading down into a cellar. The floor of the house that once stood above it had also survived the fire. Drew decided this was the best chance of finding shelter for the night and crept down the steps into the cool earth. Again, he was grateful for his Swiss army knife. It was a pretty big one and even had a tiny LED flashlight on it. It did not send out a large or strong beam, but it allowed him to survey the subterranean abode a few feet at a time.

The walls had once been lined with shelves upon which had rested jars of canned fruits, vegetables, and fish. Most of the jars now lay shattered upon the earthen ground, their contents consumed by the attackers. Drew plucked at the broken pieces and smelled fish, apples, beets, and potatoes. Under the broken shelves and shards of pottery, he found a couple of jars intact.

He opened the clay lids sealed with wax and gratefully devoured the contents. The first jar contained smoked fish that was salty and quite nourishing. The second was packed with sliced peaches, and the third was full of nuts. He slipped this jar into the leather bag he had taken from the goblins that still carried a few strips of dried meat.

Drew found a clear area on the floor, kicked away a few pieces of shelving and clay shards, and laid out his bedroll before falling asleep. He awoke several times during the night, once from the screech of an owl on the hunt, another from a nightmare in which Droog was beating him with his heavy leather belt. He started awake, his heart racing, and his bladder full. The sounds of the night made him loath to leave his small sanctuary, so he simply felt along the wall and relieved himself in the corner, a decision he regretted as the smell of his own urine filled the chamber.

Drew accepted the fouling of the air with a resigned shrug and fell back to sleep. His dreams were of a happier sort this time around. He dreamt of waking to the calls of his friends, who had triumphed over all sorts of dangers to rescue him. They had the irascible Droog in tow, leading him with his hands bound and a rope around his neck. The goblin pleaded for mercy and begged forgiveness when Drew showed his friends the welts and lashings Droog had given him. As he awoke, he thought his dream had actually come true.

He heard noises above and in the distance and Droog's unmistakably coarse and angry voice floating through the decimated village. Drew crept up the stairs, lifted one of the cellar doors, and peered out into the morning light.

Droog and his band of goblins were following the stream right toward him. A pair of goblins in the lead pointed at the ruins and shouted back to those behind them. Drew knew they would easily find the cellar and search it.

He gently lifted the door higher and crawled out, grabbing nothing more than his waterskin and bag of food. Drew quietly laid the door back down and crept in the opposite direction of the goblins, trying to keep the few walls still remaining erect between him and the goblins.

His attempt at stealth failed as one of the goblins let out a howl and broke into a run straight for him. Drew sprinted away as fast as he could with the goblins howling and yipping after him. Branches slapped at his face as he dodged between trees, cutting through the woods instead of trying to run along the rock-covered shore of the stream.

Impossibly, the short, bandy-legged goblins gained on him, and the guttural growls and curses seemed to be coming from right behind him. His side began aching, and he realized he would not be able to outrun the swift and determined goblins. Drew scanned the area ahead of him, seeking a place to hide or some egress that would provide an escape. Nothing promising a means of getting away presented itself, but he did spy something that may provide him with a distraction.

A large hornets' nest hung from an overhanging tree limb ahead of him. As Drew ran under the basketball-sized nest, he hurled his bag

of food up at it and caught it squarely as he passed beneath. The nest and sack of food crashed to the ground behind him. The furious hornets buzzed angrily in the path of the pursuing goblins. In the seconds that it took the majority of the hornets to scramble, Drew had run well past the fallen nest, and the first goblin ran straight into the swarm of vengeful, stinging creatures.

The goblins following behind the lead chaser briefly wondered what kind of seizure their brother had fallen into as he thrashed about in some strange parody of dance, his arms flailing and slapping at himself. They understood his dilemma when they also plunged into the hornet swarm and found themselves under attack from hundreds of tiny warriors. Drew heard the screams of the goblins grow fainter as he put more and more distance between himself and his pursuers. He grinned in triumph as he imagined the evil goblins' plight.

His legs were starting to give out on him, and his side ached with a stitch from all the running. Drew could no longer hear the shouts of goblins behind him, so he slowed to a fast walk to catch his breath. The thought of not having food, a bedroll, or even a blanket concerned him, but the need for escape pressed much harder on his mind.

Drew headed in the direction he hoped would lead him back to the river. He listened intently, but he was apparently too far away to hear it. Drew knew he had veered to the right, away from the waterway, so he turned slightly to the left hoping that the river had not made a major course change. He felt a sense of relief a short time later when he heard running water ahead of him and to his left. The exhausted young man walked along the edge of a steep embankment, looking for an easier path down to the riverbank. A high-pitched keening rang in his right ear just as a heavy object struck him hard and low, pitching him over the embankment.

He looked into the raging, insane eyes of Droog as they both tumbled down the steep slope. Drew threw the lighter goblin off him and jumped to his feet. The goblin rolled onto his own large feet, dagger in hand and murder in his eyes. Drew could hardly recognize the goblin.

His face was grossly misshapen from dozens of stings that had raised huge, angry welts all over the goblin's body.

Drew frantically searched the ground for something with which to defend himself. There was no doubt in his mind that Droog would find his death a far greater reward than any amount of gold now. He picked up a large stone as the goblin slowly advanced then stopped and stared at something behind him. Drew cautiously risked a quick glance over his shoulder. The rock slid from his grasp as he looked in astonishment at what lay behind him.

Goblins, orcs, and ogres stood en masse not more than fifty yards away. There had to be hundreds of the evil creatures, and more were filtering in through the woods. A hooded and robed figure strode between them without a hint of fear or trepidation. Although the robe and hood masked most of his features, Drew was certain that the man was human, or at least he appeared to be human. He stood no taller than Drew and probably weighed no more than the youth as well. Physically, the man was completely unimposing, yet he exuded power to such an extent that Drew's blood ran cold.

The man next to him was the opposite. Although Drew had no fighting skills whatsoever, he could tell the man was absolutely lethal with the sword sheathed on his hip. The way he held himself, moved, and seemed to study everything around him as if it were a potential battlefield spoke of a professional warrior and killing machine.

"I certainly hope you were not planning to use that blade on my prize, goblin." Lord Darkrell's voice was soft but threatened severe reprisal should the goblin attempt to harm his captive.

"Put the blade away, goblin," Lucien warned, his voice full of malice.

Lord Darkrell glided forward almost as if he were walking on air, his footsteps making not a sound as he strode toward the enraged goblin. "What is your name, goblin?"

"Droog, master, pack leader Droog," the goblin replied sullenly, falling to his knees before his master.

"You have done well bringing the boy to me, pack leader Droog. Although, you look to have had a bit of trouble fulfilling your duty."

Droog simply knelt, quivering before his master, whether from fear or rage at not being allowed to exact his revenge on the human, Drew could not tell.

"It is of no consequence. You shall be well rewarded for your pain and diligence, Droog. Bring the lad along, Lucien."

"Yes, My Lord. Come along, boy. Don't make me bind and drag you," Lucien ordered brusquely.

Drew had little choice but to follow along as the captain took him by the elbow and guided him after the imposing lord. He glanced back at Droog, who just knelt in the dirt shaking. Drew did not know what lay in store for him in the hands of the dark, enigmatic lord, but he was certain it would not be pleasant.

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The last two watch shifts of the evening were performed from inside the tent. Snow had started to fall partway through Felicia's shift, and by the time Josh and Gabe came on to finish out the night, the snowfall was so heavy their eyes could not penetrate the flurries beyond a few feet. Now the watch shift had turned into a listen shift, but the sound of the wind howling through the gap even hampered that sense.

The party awoke to two feet of powdery white snow. The thought of traversing the narrow pass through this new impediment caused much grumbling as they ate a cold breakfast and drank lukewarm tea heated over a can of camp fuel. The snow was still falling, albeit with far less intensity, so they unpacked their waterproof jackets and donned them under whatever armor they wore before packing up the tents.

The party trudged through the snowy pass with Chuck in the lead acting as a two-legged snowplow breaking a path for the rest to follow. The passage was little more than a narrow, twisting fissure surrounded by steep-sided, snow-covered slopes rising hundreds of feet over their

heads. Beyond the steep slopes, hidden behind the veil of falling snow, mountains rose up thousands of feet, piercing the cloud layer like boulders jutting up from a river parting the flowing water.

"Man, this metal nut cup is freezing!" Chuck complained, puffing like a blacksmith's bellows as he forged a path through the snow.

"Chuck, you're not supposed to wear the codpiece against your skin," Felicia informed him, stifling a laugh.

Chase decided to forego such decorum. "Hey, at least you have something other than steroids to blame your undersized junk on now."

"I do not have undersized junk!"

"That's not what I heard."

"Where'd you hear that? Did Susan say something? We were at the lake, and the water was cold!" Chuck said, stopping in his tracks to defend himself.

Chase kept walking and smiling but said not a word. Chuck soon gave up his protests and resumed his trail-cutting duties. As the morning wore on, Chuck traded his point position with Josh.

"We'll walk for another hour before taking a break," Josh told the group.

It was a rough estimate of time based on fatigue since they could not see the sun through the grey clouds and falling snow. His proclamation was punctuated by the crash of a large boulder nearby.

"What the hell?" Josh exclaimed, scanning the sides of the slope just as another boulder came tumbling down, missing Phil by only a couple of feet.

Movement midway up the sides of the slopes on each side of the pass drew their attention. A dozen or more huge man-like creatures, each twelve to fifteen feet tall, stood upon the slopes with large stones held over their heads in preparation of throwing them.

"Giants! Run!" Gabe cried out.

Ted chanted a quick incantation before sprinting after his friends. His spell produced a thick fog two hundred yards long and floating a few feet over their heads to provide some concealment from their ambushers.

Basketball-sized stones rained down the slopes and crashed into the gap before, after, and occasionally between the fleeing humans. Felicia shrieked loudly as one stone narrowly missed her and sent up a spray of snow. A deeper, more ominous rumbling soon replaced the crashing sound of falling boulders. The sound of a hundred freight trains filled the gap. The earth vibrated as snow began cascading off the slopes and into the pass.

"Avalanche!" Phil yelled.

"I see an overhang behind these rocks. Let's go!" Josh called from up ahead.

The party ran after Josh as he led them to the overhang he had identified.

"Hey, it's a cave! Quick, everybody inside!" he screamed, trying to make himself heard over the roaring slide of snow, stones, and falling giants.

Seconds after the last in line made their way into the cave, thousands of tons of snow and rock crashed into the gorge, sealed the entrance, and threw their world into utter blackness. Ted and Gabe chanted a few words, and the crystal on Ted's staff and the gem on Gabe's mace illuminated the cave with a bright white light.

"At least we have light," Chase said.

Josh examined the former entrance to the cave, now completely blocked by tons of snow and rubble. "Well, we're definitely not getting out this way."

"So what do we do now?" Chuck asked, trying to sound calmer than he felt.

Josh looked around the cave briefly in the radiant light thrown off by Ted and Gabe. "We follow the tunnel and hope like hell it has a back door."

"Don't worry, Chuck, if there is a back door, I have complete faith that you'll be the one to find it," Chase assured him as he clapped him on the shoulder.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded as everyone started giggling, more at Chuck's inability to grasp the insinuation than the joke itself. "C'mon, what's that supposed to mean?"

The entrance to the cave was little more than a crack in the rocky face of the mountain. The area they now stood in was just high enough for them to stand upright and walk two abreast. The darkness beyond the radius of the magical light suggested that the cave continued deeper into the mountain. The twins dug into their backpacks and pulled out flashlights that cut into the gloom and combated the thick shadows created by Ted and Gabe's magical lamps.

"I need to rest a bit first and refresh my memory on my spells," Ted said, his exhaustion evident in his voice.

Josh looked around the cave. "All right, I guess this is as good a place as any to rest up. We'll set up a watch shift like we did outside."

"Watch for what? Bats?" Chase complained bitterly. "There's no one in here but us! Oh, and my echo. Josh is a weenie!" he shouted into the darkness where his insult repeated several times, growing fainter with each repetition. "See, even the cave agrees with me."

"We're setting a watch, and you *will* pull your shift—awake," Josh insisted.

"Just let me catch you sleeping on duty, twerp," Chuck chimed in with an evil grin. "You know what the army does to people caught sleeping on guard duty?" he asked, then drew a finger across his throat.

"Fine, I'll stand a stupid watch."

Ted studied his spell book for a couple of hours before exhaustion finally forced his eyes shut after several failed attempts at coercing the rest of him to go to sleep. The others rested against their packs and slept as comfortably as they could. Although they probably could have lain in a bed of broken bottles and still fallen asleep.

Chase paced about the cavern, muttering complaints about the pointlessness of keeping a guard when several tons of snow, ice, and stone blocked anyone who he would have to guard against. Unknown to him, something was watching his restless grumbling as it shielded its sensitive eyes from the light given off by the two casters' weapons. It

crawled back deeper into the darkness, its grey skin making it blend in with the stone walls of the cavern, rendering it nearly invisible.

Chase hit the light on his watch and saw it was time to wake up his relief. He gently tapped Chuck on the shoulder twice before giving the large sleeping form a hard kick in the backside.

"Huh, what?" Chuck half-shouted, half-mumbled as he sat bolt upright from his rude awakening.

"It's your watch, meathead," Chase informed him.

"Why does my butt cheek hurt?" he asked, rubbing his bruised posterior.

"You probably slept on a rock. Good luck guarding us from the scary nothing monster. Watch out that the boogeyman doesn't get you," Chase said as he sank down into sleep.

Ted pulled the last ninety-minute shift and woke everyone up at the end of it. They ate a cold meal before those who wore armor suited up and strapped on their packs.

"I'll lead, followed by Gabe. Ted and Phil will guard the rear with Josh and Chuck in the middle," Felicia instructed the group.

The party proceeded down the cavernous maw. Several yards in, the cave opened up into a larger chamber that would easily allow the entire group to walk side by side with room to spare. The ceiling disappeared into darkness, extending beyond the reach of their lights. Shortly after exiting the spacious chamber, the cave narrowed to the point that they had to doff their packs and crawl through, pushing their gear ahead of them for almost fifty yards before the passage opened up once again to allow them to walk upright.

"What do we do if there is no way out?" Gabe asked fearfully.

"I'm sure we'll find a way out and rescue Drew," Felicia assured him.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because we're the heroes of the story. It would be a pretty lousy adventure if the heroes got trapped in a cave and starved to death," she said matter-of-factly.

Her argument seemed plausible to the group until their trek through the cavern halted at a dead end.

"Oh crap, we are going to starve to death! I knew I was no hero, and this is no story. It's real life and now it's going to be real death, and this really sucks!" Gabe cried hysterically.

"Calm down, Gabe." Felicia sighed as she aimed her flashlight up the sheer wall.

"So, are we trapped?" Josh asked, walking up behind her.

"I don't think so. See how it's still dark up there where I shine my flashlight? I think there's a ledge, and the cave might continue near the top of this wall. I think I can free climb this and let a rope down."

Felicia pulled a rope out of her pack, slung it over her shoulder, and began inching up the rough cavern wall. She found small handholds, wedged her hands into narrow crevices in the rock face, and slowly pulled herself up the wall. She finally reached the ledge and heaved herself over. The group watched her light flash around before her face peered over the ledge.

"It goes on. I'll throw a rope down."

She hammered a piton into a crack in the wall and secured her end of the rope to it before throwing the trailing end over. Her friends took their packs off and climbed up the wall.

After several failed attempts at climbing, Gabe simply tied the rope around his waist and allowed those up top to pull him up. Phil decided to go last and tied the packs to the rope, where the others hauled them up as they did Gabe, one by one, before he climbed up himself.

They all wanted to rest longer, but the urge to escape the dark confines of the cavern drove them onward. Without their watches, the adventurers would have had absolutely no sense of time. Minutes seemed like hours, and hours sometimes seemed like minutes. After another hour of walking, they were faced with yet another obstacle.

"Great, a fork in the road," Gabe exclaimed. "Now what?"

"A fork?" Chuck called from the middle of the group. "What the hell's a fork doing this far in a cave? Someone have a picnic in here?"

"Not that kind of fork, Chuck," Felicia replied, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, that kind of fork. I knew that," he mumbled embarrassedly.

"We'll mark the intersection with chalk and keep on with the wider passage," Felicia instructed, pulling a large piece of white chalk from her pack.

She scrawled a large, white arrow on the grey cavern wall and proceeded down the indicated path. Over an hour later, they turned back and took the alternate path since a cave-in had filled that one with an impenetrable barrier of rubble.

The party finally surrendered to their fatigue and aching muscles and decided to rest. Cave climbing and exploring was far more exhausting than simple trail hiking. The ground was far from even, often climbing and descending rather steeply in areas. The party posted another watch despite Chase's renewed protests. There was absolutely nothing to use as fuel other than the small cans of camp fuel, so they used one to make some oatmeal but used their sleeping bags to stay warm instead of relying on the small flame for heat.

From deep within the concealing darkness, several pairs of hungry eyes watched the humans bundled up in their strange bedrolls. Soon, their kin would join them and they could strike. The humans, with their weak eyesight, would never see them until it was too late.

CHAPTER 9

Chase grumbled bitterly. "Another hour of my life I'll never get back."

"Quit complaining, Chase. It's better to lose an hour of sleep than the rest of your life because you got lax," Josh scolded.

"But there's nothing here but us!"

"Remember Murphy's Law," Ted piped up. "The moment we don't watch out, that's when the creepy crawlies come out of the cracks and suck the juice out of your eyeballs."

"Stupid Murphy probably doesn't practice law in this world," the young thief mumbled to himself.

The party traveled on through the expansive cave system, always marking areas of multiple passages. More than once, they were forced to backtrack as one of the passages became impassable.

The large eyes of the cave dwellers kept their prey in sight, but they always remained concealed from the humans they pursued. The foolish humans should have known better than to enter their lightless realm. For generations, the humans had passed down frightful tales, warning of certain death for anyone who braved the caverns beneath the mountains. Perhaps the light-dwellers had forgotten; they would need to be reminded.

Felicia called the group to a halt as their light revealed a large chasm cutting directly across their path. The wall continued on their left, but the cave floor, ceiling, and the wall to their right disappeared into the darkness of empty space.

"Crap, we have to go back again! And we went so far this time," Chuck complained bitterly.

Felicia shone her flashlight across the deep rift and made out a black patch surrounded by the dark grey of stone. "I think the passage continues just on the other side of this gap. I'll take a rope over and you all can cross just like you did before."

"There wasn't a thousand feet of nothing below us before!" Gabe squeaked fearfully.

"We'll be fine, Gabe. I promise," Felicia assured him tiredly.

The athletic young woman set down her pack, threw her rope over her shoulder, and clipped several cams, carabiners, and pitons onto her belt. Phil hammered a piton into the wall near his feet and another at shoulder-height on their end then fed one end of the rope through them both before handing it back to his sister. Felicia clung to the wall, using her slender but strong fingers to find purchase along the rough wall. After several tense minutes, she managed to traverse the forty-foot-wide chasm and gain the far side.

Once safely grounded again, she selected a cam from her belt and wedged the spring-loaded device into a small fissure in the cave wall at the relative heights of the rings on the other side. She then clamped a carabiner to each of the cams and fed the rope through, making a sort of rope bridge.

She could clearly see her friends on the other side of the chasm, but their magical lights barely illuminated her form. If it were not for her flashlight, she would have been little more than a shadow herself. As soon as she had secured the rope, she waved her flashlight and called them to come over.

"How do we cross this?" Josh asked, feeling a bit nervous himself just now.

"Just hold onto the top rope, put your feet on the bottom one, and sidestep until you're on the other side," Phil instructed him.

Josh stepped out onto the bottom rope and tightly gripped the top rope as his feet swayed precariously on the makeshift bridge.

"That's it, Josh. Just hang on and take small steps," Felicia called out encouragingly.

Her piercing scream cut short her shout of encouragement when a grey-skinned humanoid leapt from the dark shadows above her. The creature sank its hard, black claws into the rigid leather armor and tried to sink its teeth into the soft flesh of her neck. Felicia grabbed the creature by one arm, pivoted with her hips, ducked her head, and flung it over her back to land hard on the ground.

"Felicia!" Phil screamed as he saw the creature attack his sister.

Josh, still hanging from the rope, looked away from the wall to where Felicia was fighting for her life and was barely able to see the grey-skinned creature as it tumbled across the stone and sprang back to its feet with remarkable agility. He tried to hurry across the shaky, swaying ropes to help her as she swiftly drew her rapier.

Phil cried out another warning as a second creature dropped down from the darkness overhead. Felicia whirled around at his warning and nimbly dodged to the side as the creature landed gracefully on all fours on the spot she had just vacated.

Phil drew back his bow and launched an arrow into the first shape, which was little more than a moving shadow. Before the creature could fully recover and spring back at his sister, the steel-tipped shaft pierced its grey flesh. The creature flailed about with a high-pitched shriek of pain, its blood spattering the rocks in its spasm.

Felicia was forced to dodge as she spun to face the newest attacker while several more dropped from above and scrambled toward her from the passage beyond. She found herself surrounded by the evil creatures with no place to go other than the seemingly bottomless crevasse behind her.

The creatures were dark grey, nearly the same color as the surrounding stone, with black mottling to camouflage them even further. They looked human except for overly large eyes and bodies that were virtually hairless. Long fingers and toes sported hard, sharp claws nearly an inch long. They were not large, perhaps four feet tall and very thin, but wiry corded muscles showed clearly through their dull skin. Tall, bat-like ears protruded from the sides of their nearly hairless heads.

She lashed out at one, but it swiftly dodged the sharp steel of her sword. The other continued its charge until she shone her bright flashlight into its oversized, sensitive eyes. The creature balked for just a second and shielded its eyes with its skeletal-looking hand. That second was all she needed, and she promptly thrust her needle-sharp sword through the creature's heart.

Chase carefully aimed his crossbow at another of the fleet, shadowy shapes and fired. A loud screech rewarded his shot when his quarrel pierced the thigh of one of the creatures.

Several brilliant darts of power erupted from Ted's outstretched hand and slammed into the creature that had dodged Felicia's initial strike, throwing it back toward its brethren with a howl of pain.

The creatures hissed in disgruntled fury. Their dinner was proving to be harder to catch than they had anticipated. No matter; there were many of them, and life was hard under the surface. The weak often perished so that the strongest lived on.

Phil sent another arrow streaking into one of the creatures his sister illuminated with her flashlight. The cave-dwelling monsters advanced en masse as they overcame their fear and sensitivity to the humans' hated light.

Felicia swung her slender rapier back and forth to keep the creatures wary and away from her as she backed slowly toward the ledge. When she ran out of room to retreat, she had no idea what to do other than fight as hard as she could. She chanced a brief glimpse over to Josh and saw he was only about ten feet from gaining the ledge.

"Josh, watch out!" she cried as three of the creatures came crawling down the wall above him like huge, grey spiders.

Josh looked up and swore, feeling extremely vulnerable while hanging from his precarious platform. He drew a long dagger from his belt with one hand and swiped at one of the creatures when it came too close. A second cave creature released its grip and dropped onto his back, trying to find the soft flesh under the steel armor.

Another salvo of bright bolts lit into the creature's torso, causing it to release its hold on its erstwhile prey and fall screeching for several long seconds into the gloomy abyss before cutting off with a soft thump.

"What the heck are those things?" Chuck demanded, feeling useless on his side of the chasm.

"They look like a bunch of mutant Sméagols!" Ted shouted back.

"What the heck is a Sméagol?"

"Sméagol, you know, Gollum from the *Lord of the Rings* movie."

"That little, ugly, creepy guy with the ring fetish?"

"Yeah, that one."

"I would have snapped that little creep's neck in the first part of the movie!" Chuck exclaimed loudly.

"Not really the time to discuss movie plots, Chuck," Ted insisted.

Another of the creatures trying to dislodge Josh from the rope tumbled from the wall with an arrow in its spine, striking the shoulder of the human clinging tightly to the rope as it fell.

"Guys, I really need some help here!" Felicia cried out as she ducked a leaping Sméagol, which went plunging over the edge, before driving her blade into the neck of a second one.

"Help is on the way!" Gabe shouted, conjuring a wall of spinning blades that hacked brutally at several of the creatures and slung gore across the cavern, effectively blocking the advance of the others.

Josh twisted to the side and hung from the top rope by one arm as the remaining creature clawed at his face, narrowly missing with its sharp claws. He swung back and drove his dagger deep into the creature's shoulder blade, reached up with his gauntleted hand, pulled it from the wall, and sent it screaming into the deep crevasse. Free of his attacker, he crossed the makeshift suspension bridge, dropped his pack, and stood next to Felicia with his lethal sword in his hands.

Chuck scrambled onto the rope and started to cross as Ted sent a huge fireball exploding into the rear ranks of Sméagols crowded behind the barrier of spinning blades, waiting for the spell to expire to resume their attack.

Gabe chanted another prayer, and a brilliant ball of light like a miniature sun erupted over the deep gorge and floated lazily toward the far side. As Chuck reached his two companions, he could see the creatures pulling back from the bright orb filling the entire cavern with a dazzling white light.

Gabe's blade spell wore off, but still the creatures retreated, turning their eyes away from the hated light and fleeing down the passageway to the safety and comfort of the darkness beyond.

"How long will that light last, Gabe?" Phil asked the young cleric.

"I'm not sure, but a while I think."

"You guys hurry across. I'll follow with Felicia's backpack," Phil instructed the two spellcasters.

Ted scurried across, his slight frame making the perilous traverse look relatively easy. Gabe thought a moment, cast another spell on himself to increase his strength, and made it across without incident. Phil tied his sister's pack onto his own. Although it made his load cumbersome, his skill allowed him to cross the rope bridge without falling.

"They obviously don't like the light, but I don't think Gabe and Ted's light will be enough to keep them off us for long," Josh said. "Let's move on before they get too much courage built back up and decide to press their attack again." He waved a hand toward a tunnel. "It looked like most of them ran down this right-hand passage, so we'll have to take the left one and pray it doesn't come to a dead end."

The party moved out at a quick pace, hoping to put as much distance between them and the cave creatures as possible. Within minutes, the light disappeared from behind them, and a shrill cry reverberated through the cave.

"I think they'll be coming again real soon," Phil warned needlessly.

Soon after his prediction, the sound of dozens, maybe even scores, of hard claws scratching and scrambling against the stone could be heard even over the sounds of their own flight.

"Gabe, can you cast another of those bright lights?" Josh asked, breathing hard.

Gabe nodded. He was so out of breath, he could barely gasp out a response. The party stopped and drew their weapons as Gabe chanted hurriedly but quietly. The intensely glowing orb filled the cavern with light for a hundred yards in both directions. Only forty yards away, the bright light revealed dozens of the vicious cave creatures.

The creatures threw their hands over their eyes, turned, and fled back down the passage, scrambling over dozens more of their kin running behind them before they too turned and fled the dreaded light.

"That will stop them for a few more minutes, but I can't keep running like this," Gabe huffed, trying desperately to catch his breath.

"All right, Gabe leads, we'll follow at his pace. Ted and I will bring up the rear," Josh told the group.

The party set off at a slow, shuffling jog. It was the fastest Gabe could move, although all of them were exhausted from their flight. They lost the bright glow of the light after several twists and turns. They knew it would not be long before the light holding the creatures at bay would extinguish and the hunt would resume.

Josh did not know what they would do once they expended their magic, other than sell their lives as dearly as they could. He prayed something would happen before then to give them a reprieve from their seemingly tireless pursuers. He knew that their only salvation would be if the tunnel finally ended and they found themselves outside soon. He just prayed it was daylight.

"Ted, you do have a few tricks up your sleeve, I hope?" Phil puffed as the sounds of pursuit filled the cavern once again.

"Yeah, here goes," he panted.

The party halted once more, and Ted sealed the passage with a curtain of flame just in time. Several of the creatures, unable to stop their momentum, were incinerated as they ran into the wall of flames and lay thrashing for several seconds before falling still in a burnt heap. The flames brought scores of others up short and forced them to flee back down the passage and into the darkness beyond the light of the fiery barrier.

The gang of young humans ran again as soon as Ted secured their retreat with his magic. The invocation was not as long-lasting as even Gabe's light spell, and the creatures soon resumed their pursuit.

"We need something more durable, Ted. Please tell me you have something," Josh pleaded.

"Yeah, I have something that should buy us some time," he puffed, "but it won't kill any of them."

"I'm more worried about escape at this moment."

The ranger twins fired arrows down the dark and narrow tunnel. Howls of pain echoed up the passage as their arrows easily found targets in the packed mob of monsters.

Ted chanted a complex incantation and the temperature in the tunnel rapidly dropped. Hoarfrost began forming on the cave walls, and the heavy breathing of the companions was clearly visible as it was expelled in a great billowy fog.

"Hurry, Ted," Gabe urged, gripping his mace tightly. "They are almost on us!"

Chuck and Josh stood side by side in front of the wizard as he cast his spell while Phil and his sister loosed arrows past them and into the charging horde. Another flight of arrows dropped a pair of cave creatures, which tripped several of their kin in their blood rage-fueled rush.

The creatures were so close now they were visible in the soft light given off by Ted and Gabe's weapons. Thick ropey strands of drool ran from their wide, tooth-filled maws as they hurtled toward their prey, scrambling on all fours like charging gorillas.

The foremost rank of creatures hurled into the two warriors with a ferocity that belied their small stature. Josh cut two of the grey-skinned creatures down in mid-flight with his great sword. Chuck smashed one aside with his shield and pierced the other with his longsword, the creature's momentum so great the blade ran clean through it and impaled one of its kin behind it.

Ted finally ended his chant with a loud crescendo, and a thick wall of ice sprang up just before them and crushed several of the vile

creatures against the rocky ceiling of the cave. One creature was trapped within the thick ice in midleap, its ugly head exposed on their side of the ice wall and unable to breathe due to the constriction of the ice that trapped its body. Josh and Chuck cut down the few creatures that managed to reach them before the wall of ice formed and blocked off the charging monsters.

Blood ran down Josh's face where one creature's claws had gouged furrows in his right cheek but fortunately missed the eye. Chuck had a similar wound across his thigh where the sharp claws had torn through his thick leggings between the steel plates protecting his legs.

"How long will that hold them?" Josh asked Ted as he wiped his hand across his face and saw that it came away bloody.

"I believe the spell will last about half an hour in this cold climate," Ted answered with his best guess.

"All right then, let's put some distance between us before they claw their way through or it disappears."

The group could see the creatures clawing frantically at the two-foot-thick wall of ice and that they were managing to make rather deep gouges in its near rock-hard surface.

They trudged down the rocky corridor once more, too exhausted to run. They prayed fervently that the ice wall would hold the creatures at bay long enough for them to find an exit. The possibility of losing their pursuers in the twisting caverns was remote. The creatures seemed to have extraordinary hearing, and possibly a keen sense of smell with which to track them down. These caves were also their home, and they knew them intimately. Their only hope of survival was to find an exit, and soon.

"They're probably through the wall now," Ted informed them.

"Do you think maybe they have given up?" Gabe asked.

Phil shook his head. "I doubt it. Those things were pretty darn fanatical about catching us."

"Maybe if we left some of our food behind, they would eat that and leave us alone?" Gabe offered hopefully.

"Hmm, some dried-out beef and fruit, or a nice, plump and juicy, slow-moving fat kid. Let me think," Chase teased.

"Hey, I'm keeping up, and I have lost weight since this started!"

Chase snickered as he said, "You better hope those things don't catch us, or you're going to lose a lot more weight real fast."

"Don't worry, Gabe, we wouldn't leave you behind," Felicia assured him.

"It might slow them down a bit while they pick his bones clean," Chase joked.

Chuck came to Gabe's defense. "If you're the next one with an arrow in your butt, you're going to wish you had someone to take care of it. Of course, I'd be glad to yank it out."

"Hurry up, Gabe," Chase told him.

The sound of scores of claws scrabbling on the hard stone cut their banter short. High-pitched squeaks resounded down the tunnel as the creatures used their sensitive ears to navigate through the darkness.

"Time to run again," Josh needlessly informed the group.

"Hold on one second." Ted said a quick incantation, and a hundred yards of the passageway filled with thick, sticky strands of cobwebs. "That should slow them down for a few minutes, I hope."

The party began hustling down the tunnel as fast as their legs would carry them. Ted stopped after several minutes and filled the passage with more webs before they ran for their lives again. Once they heard the sounds of pursuit, Ted released a noxious cloud behind them, and soon they heard the creatures gagging and choking on the toxic fumes.

"That's all I've got to slow them down. I have a few offensive spells left and that's it," Ted told the group.

"Then we run as long as we can and fight for our lives," Josh informed them grimly.

Far too soon, the sounds of their pursuers reached their ears once more. It was only a matter of moments before they would be forced to fight relentless and far more numerous opponents.

"I think this is it. This is about as far as we are going to make it. Get ready to fight," Josh warned his friends.

The passageway was steadily getting wider, the ceiling sloping upwards.

"Let's make our stand here before the tunnel gets any bigger and allows them to bring more of their numbers against us at once," Phil advised.

Josh agreed with Phil, slid to a halt, and spun about with his sword in his hands next to Chuck and Phil. The vile creatures became visible as they ran within the radius of light. The party tightened their grips on their weapons and prepared to meet the charge of the merciless monsters.

The adventurers looked on in surprise as the creatures slid to a halt several yards away as if they had hit an invisible wall. Ted launched his last fireball into the group, burning scores of them to death. The tunnel filled with smoke and the smell of charred flesh even as more of the creatures piled forward to take the place of their fallen kin. However, none dared pass beyond whatever invisible boundary had been established.

"Let's just back away slowly. I don't know why they stopped, but I don't want to encourage them by running or turning our backs to them," Phil recommended.

The small troop retreated as the cave creatures hissed and threw small stones, not daring to move toward them. The cave slowly expanded around them as they withdrew, its walls and ceiling growing higher and farther apart with each step. Only when they came around a bend in the cave did they dare turn around and jog away at a quicker pace.

"Why do you think they stopped chasing us?" Chuck asked.

"Maybe they got a whiff of your breath," Chase responded.

"Shut up, dweeb, I'm serious!"

"Who cares as long as they don't change their mind?"

"Chuck actually has a good point," Felicia replied. "Animals rarely give up the hunt unless their prey has eluded them, and they had us dead to rights. The only other reason I see for them to stop is if we entered

the territory of a creature they were afraid of. Any creature that puts fear into those things so completely, I don't want to meet."

"Let's just hope that whatever eats those things doesn't eat people too," Gabe muttered to himself.

The cave continued to grow until they found themselves in an enormous cavern that went on far beyond the range of their light. A huge, scaly head the size of a small car appeared out of the darkness. It dropped down out of the black gloom and hovered perhaps twenty feet above the ground, supported by a long neck that disappeared beyond the range of their light.

"Well, well. What do we have here? It would appear some tiny yet tasty little humans have wandered into my home," the huge head rumbled in a deep baritone.

The group froze in terror for several seconds until Josh's shout broke the spell of fear. "Run! Run back toward the cavern!"

The humans turned and ran back the way they had come.

"It's gone! The cave we came in is gone!" Phil shouted fearfully.

"That's impossible! Caves don't just disappear without some sort of cave-in!" Ted shouted back, nearly hysterical with fear.

The group ran along the cave wall, but they found nothing except solid stone where there had been a large passageway just moments before.

"I am afraid there is no way out that direction any longer," the dragon said slyly as it stretched its huge head toward the humans, fixing them with its gaze.

The dragon was massive. It was so large, their light only revealed the front half of it. The creature was mostly a dark green while its underside was a deep blue. Twin spiny fins ran from just behind the heavy brow ridges, down the long neck, and presumably along the back. Large scales as hard as steel covered its entire enormous body.

In a moment of panic, Ted launched a spell at the huge form without even thinking. Four magical bolts struck the dragon right on the end of its massive snout. The dragon drew its head back and went into

a sneezing fit, blowing large balls of fire out of its nose with each violent expulsion.

"Now stop that!" the dragon roared irritably with a large sniff. "If you cannot behave properly, then I'll simply give you back to those nasty little lithonites."

"Are you going to eat us?" Gabe stammered out.

"No, it would take too much time and effort to scrub you clean first. You are filthy and smell terrible," the dragon replied with a deep rumble that may have been a chuckle.

"So, you must be why those cave creatures, lithonites, didn't keep chasing us. We were in your territory," Phil said.

"Quite right. The nasty little beasts are stringy and taste terrible," the dragon sighed. "But one must keep up pretenses lest they overrun my home like the roaches they are."

"So are you a good dragon then?" Felicia asked.

"Good and bad are such relative terms, and far too vague to even begin to characterize a being of my magnitude. Do you consider yourselves good or evil?" the dragon asked, bringing its huge head down even closer to the still frightened humans huddled against the cavern wall.

"Good, I suppose," Felicia answered. "We don't hurt or mistreat people unless they try to hurt us."

The dragon looked at her with a sly glint in its huge eye. "Yet I am sure you have swatted bugs or swept down the webs of spiders in your home before. Would you not be seen as bad, or even evil, by those creatures if they had the intelligence to understand such a concept?"

Felicia hesitated and digested the idea for a moment before answering. "I suppose we would seem bad to them."

"So you see, such simple labels or descriptors cannot be so easily applied," the dragon said triumphantly. "You could refer to me as enormous, powerful, beautiful, awe-inspiring, or even godlike, but nothing so vague as good or evil."

"Don't forget modest," Chase quipped under his breath.

"What was that? Oh yes, quite," the dragon said, missing Chase's sarcasm.

The humans started to relax enough to start thinking clearly. They were still unsure as to the dragon's intent, but thought that they may be able to coax the dragon into letting them go without a fight; a fight in which they were certain they had no chance of prevailing.

"We thank you very much for saving us from those creatures. May we pass through your home? We only wish to get out of this mountain and back into the outdoors," Felicia beseeched the giant creature.

The dragon looked pensive for a moment before answering. "I would offer you a trade. In exchange for saving your insignificant little lives and passage through my home, you will entertain me for a time."

"What would you like from us? How can we entertain you?" Felicia asked, hoping they could appease the huge dragon.

"First, I would like a song or music. Then you may tell me why you are here and where you are going. Regale me with your tales and you may enjoy my hospitality before you depart."

Felicia combed her memory for a song but her nervousness caused her to come up blank. She never had been much into singing or music. She could not think of a single song she knew all the words to other than a few children's songs she remembered from when she was little, and she doubted the dragon would be very impressed with those.

Just as the silence was becoming awkward, a sharp, clear alto singing "Oh Holy Night" filled the vast chamber. All eyes turned toward Gabe, who had his eyes closed and was singing the song in such a pure voice that everyone was shocked into total silence. Even the dragon seemed enraptured by the haunting melody, not even blinking until the song ended.

"Wow, Gabe, I never knew you could sing like that," Chase said to his friend.

"Yeah, nothing drives the bullies away like a clumsy fat kid singing C-sharp," Gabe remarked, feeling a bit uncomfortable with the sudden attention.

"Your song was…sufficient. Come sit down, and tell me your tale. I will warm the chamber for your comfort," the dragon invited them.

The party walked deeper into the enormous cavern, found several large stones to sit on or against, and made themselves as comfortable as they could. As they pulled out some trail rations, the dragon placed a huge, scaly, talon-tipped hand against the wall and hissed strange words. The stone all around them began to emit a strong but comfortable heat, warming them enough to allow them to take off their armor and heavy winter clothing.

"I am called Cillandril in your tongue. I am one of the most ancient of my kind. The few of us who are left, that is. Make yourselves comfortable, and tell me what brings you to cross under the mountains and into my lair," the dragon urged, eager to hear a tale or two to break its boredom.

Phil started telling the story of their adventure to their gargantuan host. "Our friend, Drew, found an old book and a place he said was once a place of power. The book told him how to create a rune on the floor and open a portal from our world to this one. None of us really took it seriously or thought it would work until it opened up and pulled him through."

"So you have traveled from another world. I am very glad I did not eat you now," Cillandril rumbled approvingly. "It would have been a terrible waste of a good story. Please, continue."

"We went after him, but more time had passed here for him than for us back on our side of the portal, and he was taken by goblins to be given to someone by the name of Darkrell."

"I have heard this name. He sent envoys to request some sort of alliance in hopes that I would assist him in taking over the human lands," Cillandril told his guests.

"What did you do?" Ted asked.

"I chewed it over for a while and declined his invitation," the dragon responded slyly.

"So you didn't care for his offer then?"

"On the contrary, I thought they were delicious."

The humans gave the joke a laugh more out of courtesy than finding any real humor in the macabre jest. Phil continued to relate their story to the dragon.

"When we came through, we were attacked by goblins but beat them with the help of a druid and some rangers. That was when Ted and Gabe found they could use magic in this world. We trained with the rangers and the druid for a few days to better prepare ourselves in our quest to rescue Drew." The dragon looked pensive, but he allowed the human to continue talking without interruption. "Elderin, the druid, told us that only Drew could open the way back to our world, and that he needed the book to do it. So once we find him, he can open the gate again and we can all go home."

Cillandril snorted. "Of course, the portal is linked to his blood, and only he can open the way to the same energy node. You do realize that you are providing Darkrell with the one thing he lacks to open the portal himself? He will exploit your world and bring things back here in order to conquer this one," the dragon mused.

"We know, but we have to find Drew. We can't just leave him here."

"It is a noble concept, one that, quite honestly, is rather lost on me. Tell me of your adventures since coming to this world."

The group told him of their battles with orcs, giants, and cave dwellers and how they managed to escape. Cillandril was impressed with their fighting prowess and Ted's use of wizardry.

"And there is no magic in your world you say? Yet you are most proficient with it. You must have quite a powerful mind for one so young and racially challenged."

Ted looked up sharply at the dragon's comment. "What do you mean, racially challenged? A black kid can't be a wizard? I guess all wizards have to be white with long grey beards and pointy hats!" Ted exclaimed angrily.

"I meant human," the dragon explained, confused by the small dark-skinned boy's outburst.

"Oh, sorry," Ted apologized sheepishly.

"What did I say?"

"Nothing," Felicia assured the dragon, "Ted's just a little sensitive sometimes, and we're all tired and more than a bit out of our element."

The humans took turns telling their host about their world. They told him about cars, airplanes, and the Internet as well as the different cultures and their history. The discussion went on for hours until exhaustion finally claimed the humans and they fell asleep, thankful not to have to post a guard, and for having a warm place to sleep for once.

The party awoke to the smell of food cooking over an open fire. Cillandril sat with the haunch of a large animal skewered on one of his long, sharp claws, roasting it over a fire made of logs he must have fetched while they slept. The humans were amazed that a creature so large could move so quietly as to do all that without waking them.

"Ah, you are all awake. I was fortunate to find a herd of elk grazing and was able to grab two of the beasts in one pass," the dragon said, quite proud of his catch. "I thought you may like something fresh for a change before you depart."

"That smells wonderful, thank you." Felicia smiled appreciatively at the offer.

As the humans dined on chunks of freshly cooked elk, Cillandril told them of the land beyond. "To the southwest, perhaps two days by foot, you will find a large human town. You should be able to find food and lodging, as well as whatever else you might require within. Be careful. Much of this land lies under the power of Darkrell. He may have agents looking for you if he knows you seek your friend. Especially if he thinks you carry the book."

The party finished their meal and began packing up their equipment. The dragon pointed the way out as each of the humans thanked him for his hospitality.

"I thought dragons had huge hoards of gold, gems, and stuff," Chase asked bluntly, looking around the huge chamber.

"A myth, nothing more. What need have I of man-made trinkets and the like? To fixate on such shiny baubles would put me at the level

of some common crow, collecting anything shiny that catches my eye. I am far above such trifling compulsions."

Cillandril bid his guests farewell and watched them leave his chamber and disappear around a bend in the large passage leading to the outside. He then walked over to the far corner of his lair and hissed words of magic in his draconian language.

An entire section of wall disappeared to reveal a second huge chamber. The dragon stepped into the room and curled his vast bulk around an enormous pile of treasure nearly as large as he was. Another quick spell and the pile of gold and silver grew warm to the touch, his touch anyhow. The soft flesh of a human or lesser creature would likely have been severely burned. Cillandril let out a large sigh of contentment as he settled into the warm bed of riches. *This was the most interesting thing to happen in a very long time,* he thought to himself as he drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 10

Drew marched in a large procession of goblins, orcs, ogres, and coarse-looking humans. Captain Lucien rode his horse beside him in silence, occasionally hurrying him along with a tug from a tether tied to his bound wrists. Lord Darkrell rode in an opulent carriage the size of Drew's bedroom back home, pulled by ten large draft horses.

"What are you going to do to me?" Drew asked his quiet human guard.

Captain Lucien did not answer nor acknowledge the question in any way. Drew let it go for a while, but after a time, he became bored with the monotonous marching and decided he would try to get his guard to talk.

"So, how long have you been Darkrell's lackey?" Once again, only silence answered Drew's question. "Do you choose not to talk, or did you get your tongue cut out? Are you some kind of monk? Did you take a vow of silence? You don't look like a monk. I hear that it can get pretty lonely in those monasteries, and sometimes things happen that young boys don't want to talk about," he rambled on.

He watched for some kind of reaction and was rewarded with a glance that bordered on a scowl. A small smile crept onto Drew's face as he saw that his taunting was breaking the man's resolve.

"Is that what happened to you? Were you raised in a monastery and abused as a young boy, you know, sexually? It's all right to talk about it. It's not your fault, you know. You don't have to be shamed into silence. Many men from where I come from have spoken out about such abuse. It does not make you less of a man. Is that why you fight and hurt people

for a living? Do you see the faces of the monks who violated you in the faces of the men you kill?"

"Damn it! I was never in a monastery, nor have I ever been sexually violated!" he snapped.

Several orcs and mercenaries glanced back at his outburst and began snickering. Lucien jerked Drew's tether, pulling him forward hard enough that he stumbled and almost fell forward, but he managed to keep his balance.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to bring up a *sore* subject. I guess you were walking funny because you had been riding your horse so long."

The orcs and mercenaries looked at the captain again and began talking amongst themselves and laughing openly. Lucien gritted his teeth and gripped the hilt of his sword until his knuckles turned white, but otherwise returned to his silence.

The small army marched until the sun began to set, stopping only twice for a short rest and food. At the end of the day, the company pitched dozens of tents and built several campfires. Each fire sported an iron tripod with a kettle suspended over it, cooking some sort of stew.

Several servants erected a massive round tent near the center of the camp. A bed, table, several large pillows, carpets, padded chairs, and two enormous trunks were unloaded from wagons and brought into the tent.

Lucien shoved Drew through the entrance of the pavilion shortly after it was set up. Thick carpets covered the floor, a small table with four simple chairs sat to one side, and two cots with blankets were placed near the tent wall opposite the table. A heavy curtain partitioned the tent several feet back from the entrance.

Lord Darkrell's number two man shoved the young traveler through the dividing wall. The next chamber comprised at least two thirds of the total volume of the tent, by Drew's best estimate. The carpets were piled two deep, and elaborate silk hangings covered the inner walls and ceiling.

A canopied four-poster bed sat at the back wall of the tent. A long, polished hardwood table occupied the center of the decorative chamber surrounded by six red felt-padded chairs. Two silver candelabras, each holding six scented candles, adorned the table. Lord Darkrell himself

sprawled luxuriously on a massive pile of silken pillows. He wore a heavy robe of blood red; a large cowl covered his head and obscured his face in deep shadow.

"Untie him, Lucien. I am certain he will cause me no harm. Isn't that right, boy?" the sinister lord said in a voice as silken as his surroundings.

Lucien pulled out a blade and cut Drew's bindings without hesitation or comment. Drew rubbed his wrists to get the circulation flowing to his hands and to soothe the red rope burns that encircled them.

As the dark lord lowered his hood, Drew was surprised by the appearance of the face that was revealed. He was an older man with grey hair shorn close, and a hairline receding well back to the top of his head. He was not tall, perhaps five-foot-six and slightly built. All in all, he was a seemingly unimposing figure, until one looked into his eyes. Those dark orbs held fire, malice, and a silent promise of death to any who opposed his indomitable will.

"What do you want with me?" Drew demanded, trying his best not to be intimidated.

His answer came from Captain Lucien in the form of a backhand across his face. Drew felt the angry red mark rising on his cheek as he was knocked to the ground by the force of the leather-gauntleted blow. He felt the coppery taste of blood and spit a great wad of it onto the finely woven carpets as much out of spite as to clear his mouth.

"Now, Lucien, let us not resort to such heavy-handed tactics. We do not want our guest to think we are brutes or savages," Lord Darkrell admonished with an exaggerated frown.

He raised himself up from his reclined position with an ease that belied his apparent age, walked to the elegant table, and took a seat at the end facing the tent entrance.

Darkrell beckoned his guest forward. "Come join me and my good captain for supper. I promise you, it is a much finer fare than you will find with the soldiers."

Drew pulled himself to his feet and took a chair at the center of the table to Lord Darkrell's right. Captain Lucien sat across from Drew on his master's left, keeping one eye on their guest and one on the entrance.

With a wave of his hand, Lord Darkrell lit the many candles adorning the table. At some silent command, several servants entered bearing wine, glasses, freshly baked bread, and silver trays with silver domes covering the dishes.

They set the table with a quick, fluid motion. The entire setup took less than a minute before they disappeared back out of the tent. Only one young female servant remained to pour the wine. It was a sweet yellow wine even Drew's uninitiated palate was able to appreciate.

The servants removed the silver domes covering their meal and carried them away when they left. A large porcelain plate was nearly covered with a roasted game bird, baby boiled potatoes, green beans in a white sauce, and several slices of various fruits. Drew's mouth instantly began to water when the rich aroma hit his nose. It took all of his resolve not to tear into the feast like a starving dog, but his hunger and excitement must have shown.

"Please, enjoy your meal. We will have plenty of time to discuss—things—at a later time," his ominous host cordially invited him.

Following the captain's lead, Drew grabbed a small loaf of dark bread from the wicker basket and spread a heavy layer of rich butter on it from a small clay crock near his plate. He chewed as slowly as he could, relishing the magnificent food before him.

He set the bread down half-finished and pulled a long strip of white meat off the roasted fowl. It was juicy and well-spiced; the taste was unique but fabulous on his tongue. It was definitely not chicken, but that was as close as he could come to identifying it.

He ate in silence, neither asking any questions nor volunteering any conversation. Drew half-listened to the enigmatic lord and his captain while they discussed their continued raids of several towns and cities. Lord Darkrell asked Drew how his meal was, but otherwise left him to eat in peace.

Drew ate until he thought he would burst. His head spun a bit from the sweet but potent wine. He was certain his interrogation was to begin soon but was surprised once again by his host's courtesy.

"Lucien, I fear our guest is quite fatigued. Why don't you have a servant show him to the bath before retiring for the evening? He seems like a civilized young man who would appreciate such an indulgence," Lord Darkrell said.

Another servant entered after his invitation and took Drew to a small area curtained off from the lord's chamber. A huge copper bathtub sat in the center of the chamber, wisps of steam rising from the scented water already filling it. Drew noticed the floor was raised several inches off the ground on some sort of grate so the water did not flood and soak the carpets.

He stripped down as soon as the servant left. As tired as he was, a bath was the only thing he desired at this time more than sleep. It took a moment to get used to the heat of the water, but he soon submerged himself up to his neck. Salts in the water penetrated his pores, lifting out not only the sweat and dirt but seemingly his many bruises as well.

He must have dozed off for, when he next opened his eyes, the water had cooled considerably. He scrubbed himself and his hair with a bar of scented soap before getting out and drying off with a thick, soft towel folded over a chair next to the tub. Under the towel was a new set of clean clothing; his own clothing was nowhere to be found.

He put on the new garments that included knit stockings as well as soft leather boots. As soon as Drew was dressed, the servant who had brought him to the tub entered and took him through Lord Darkrell's chambers and into the smaller room lying just before the palatial tent's exit. Lord Darkrell's opulent chambers had been unoccupied, but Captain Lucien stood waiting in the foyer.

"This is my chamber. You will sleep here on that cot," he instructed with a gesture to one of the small beds. "I will sleep in the other, but be warned that I am an extremely light sleeper. Even the change in your

breathing will awake me. You will not leave the tent nor will you enter My Lord's chambers uninvited. Do I make myself clear?"

Drew nodded his understanding and looked longingly at the warm bed.

"Make no mistake," the captain warned, "I am not Droog, and I will not tolerate any of your previous exploits. I will be watching you very closely."

Drew nodded again and walked over to the small bed. He stripped off his shoes and socks and crawled under the blankets. He tried to think about what was happening and what was going to happen next, but sleep took him into its comforting embrace.

He grudgingly awoke the next morning as the camp was packing up. Drew slipped on his new socks and shoes and was escorted once again back into Lord Darkrell's chambers. The table was already set with several dishes, and he took the same seat he had occupied the previous night. Lord Darkrell seemed to have been waiting for him and greeted him as he entered.

"Ah, my young guest has arrived just in time for us all to break our fast. Please, be seated and help yourself," he said graciously.

The servants removed the silver domes and departed as quietly as they had the previous night. Another young woman filled his glass with some sort of fruit juice he could not quite identify, but it tasted good and he drained his glass, which she refilled. Three fried eggs, cheese, sausage, and some sort of porridge in a bowl sat before him. He was surprised to find himself hungry, considering the size of the dinner he had eaten the night before.

"You must forgive me, young man, but in my efforts to see to your needs I completely neglected to inquire as to your name," the lord said, looking up from his plate.

"Drew," he responded quietly, still feeling uncomfortable sitting next to this intimidating figure.

Drew did not think it was an accident. The lord was probably not accustomed to even considering someone else's name, writing it off as

unimportant when a simple point and snap of the fingers would normally suffice.

Captain Lucien looked up from his own meal and glared balefully across the table. "You will address him as My Lord, boy!"

"Please calm yourself, Lucien. I am sure our guest intended no disrespect. I would imagine his culture is quite different from ours. However, my good captain is correct. Here we must adhere to certain protocols, particularly when in the presence of the common rabble lest they start to adopt a certain familiarity when dealing with their betters. Such a thing can lead to disrespect and disobedience, and that simply cannot be tolerated."

Drew nodded, taking another bite of food and hiding his face in his meal. He finished his breakfast without any further interruption and was ushered from the tent. A score of servants, obviously well-practiced in such an endeavor, took down the large tent with great efficiency. Drew assumed the dark lord must have had an exit of his own, since he never saw him leave through the front.

Drew was startled by the sound of Lucien's voice coming from behind him. "Can you ride a horse, boy?"

"I don't know. I never tried," Drew replied.

"It does not matter. You just have to sit on it and not fall off. If you do, try not to land on your head. That is the only part of you that is of any importance to my master," he responded coldly.

Captain Lucien took Drew over to a line of horses and told him to mount a grey mare tethered there. Drew looked from Lucien to the horse and then at the saddle that was strapped to the large animal's broad back. It took him several attempts before he was finally able to mount and seat himself in the saddle. Captain Lucien led Drew's horse by its tether and mounted his own gelding.

The camp was packed and the company resumed their march. Lord Darkrell's massive carriage traveled just behind Drew and his personal guard. The army marched in columns four abreast and at least a hundred yards to the fore and aft of Drew's central position, with two score of

cavalry at each end. Drew and Lucien rode to the left side of the column to avoid much of the dust kicked up by the vanguard.

By the time the company stopped for their first rest break and lunch, Drew's legs were stiff and chafed from riding. He fell when he dismounted, his wobbly legs refusing to respond to his brain's command to stand and walk. With great effort, he forced himself to his feet and waddled over to a log to eat some dry trail food and rest.

Drew got up and strolled about the camp, trying to walk the kinks out of his legs. Captain Lucien watched him like a hawk as he loosened up, but he never tried to stop him or follow him with anything more than his eyes. Drew walked behind a group of the human mercenaries, feeling slightly more comfortable around them than the goblins or orcs. He would definitely not approach the ogres under any circumstances. To him, the ogres were little more than vicious dogs barely under the control of their master.

As soldiers often do, the mercenaries were voicing the complaints to their comrades they would not dare say to their superiors.

"I tell you, I don't like fighting with these goblins and their ilk. It's bad enough we ain't had a good fight in two weeks, now we gotta march back to the castle. You know what that means. Garrison duty. Boring, damn-all garrison duty," one of the large mercenaries complained.

"And we gotta fight next to those stinking orcs and goblins, but having to sit around in garrison with them is too much. I'd rather gut one of them goblins than share a guard shift with one," another swore in agreement.

Drew found the animosity very interesting. He felt more like himself now that he was away from Lord Darkrell and his lackey. He began to formulate a plan to sow even more discontent between the races if he could. He wandered back toward his horse, knowing it was about time to start the march once again. Shortly after he reached the tethered horses, the order was given to mount back up and resume marching.

They traveled until the sun was low on the horizon and set up camp again. The tents were pitched, fires lit, and kettles set to cooking. Drew walked over to his babysitter, as he liked to think of the captain.

"Captain Lucien, I'm going to stretch my legs out a bit while there is still some daylight left."

The ever-scowling man stared at his charge for several moments before apparently coming to a decision. "Fine, just don't run off. You have no chance of escaping, and the punishment for any attempt will be severe."

"Don't worry, I couldn't run if I wanted to," Drew replied rubbing his thighs. "Besides, I'm looking forward to dinner too much."

Drew walked around for a few minutes while Captain Lucien watched over him. Satisfied he was not going to escape, Lucien went into the tent to see to his master's needs. As soon as he saw his overseer leave, Drew walked over to the supply wagons. An older, heavyset man was handing over food supplies to waiting servants and soldiers.

"Whatcha want, boy?" the man growled.

"Captain Lucien sent me to get a couple bottles of spirits for some of the men. I guess Lord Darkrell wanted to reward them for some service they provided," Drew responded without pause.

The big quartermaster thought about the request for only a second before pulling out two dark bottles and handing them over. He figured no one would dare falsely use the name of the powerful lord and his deadly captain. He certainly was not going to risk his neck second-guessing his messenger over something so trivial.

Drew carried the two bottles of strong alcoholic beverages back toward the soldiers gathered around their campfires. It took only a short while for him to find the same group of mercenaries he overheard earlier. The sun was nearly down by the time he confidently strode up to the men as they talked and laughed amongst themselves.

"Gentlemen, Captain Lucien wanted me to present you with a token of his appreciation and an apology of sorts for having fine fighting men work with goblin scum and their ilk."

"What do you have there, boy?" one of the grizzled veterans asked, not unkindly.

"Just a couple bottles of the finest spirits one could find on this dusty road in the middle of nowhere," Drew replied grandly.

"Hey now, that's what I like to hear! Bring them bottles over here, lad, and have a seat with real men."

Drew walked into the middle of the group and handed out both bottles of liquor. The corks were pulled and the bottles raised to lips and passed around. The conversation soon turned to the old complaints of having to fight next to nonhumans, thanks in part to Drew deftly steering the topic in that direction. The mercenaries complained of how savage they were, how much they smelled, their stupidity, and their inability to fight like real soldiers.

"They're a bunch of thieves too," Drew added. "They'll steal the clothes right off your back if you're not watching. Have you ever seen how they watch you? Especially how they eye your weapons when they think you aren't looking. I've watched them looking at our weapons. Probably because their own are so lousy."

"What do you know about goblins, boy? You don't look like no fighter yourself. No offense," the mercenary added as he tilted the bottle back and took another swig.

Drew told the group of his capture and everything he had done to hurt the goblins that had taken him. The group of dirty warriors howled in laughter at his exploits, clapped him hard on the back, and offered him a drink from the bottle. Drew obliged and took a small sip, the fiery liquid burning a trail all the way down to his stomach.

"Yer right, boy. Damn creatures are nothing but thieves and liars," another agreed.

The mercenaries continued their complaining and drinking and bad-mouthing of the nonhumans. Drew excused himself, claiming need of the latrine pit. He stalked across the camp and stole into the goblin quarter. He hid behind one of the crude, filthy tents and spied on a group of goblins on the outer edge of their territory. They stared into the fire while chewing the bones of some undercooked meat, snapping and growling to each other in their crude language.

Seeing they were preoccupied and not paying attention to anything around them, Drew pulled out the dagger that he lifted from the big mercenary and tossed it into their tent. He was no great thief like Chase, but he thought even his light-fingered friend would have been proud. He paused for a moment, making sure none of the goblins had seen him, and made his way back to the mercenaries. The men welcomed him back as he took his seat amongst them.

The conversation had turned to the women they would get once they were paid and given leave to go to one of the towns. They good-naturedly teased their new young friend about the ways of women and his youthful inexperience. Drew tried to steer the conversation back toward their mutual dislike of goblins.

"I just wish I had had a blade so I could have stabbed that pack leader, Droog. Then again, I probably wouldn't even know how to use one if I did," Drew said laughing at his own lack of fighting prowess.

Just as he had hoped, the large mercenary he sat next to was willing to show him how easy it was to deal with their kind. In his drunken bravado, he reached for the dagger that should have been safely in its sheath on his hip.

"Where the bloody hell is my blade?" he cursed as he fumbled around his belt and the ground around him.

"I thought I saw a goblin earlier with a dagger that looked far too nice to belong to him. That was one reason why I said I thought they were a bunch of thieves. Do you think it might have been yours?" Drew asked innocently.

"Do ya remember where you saw it, boy? If I find the ratty little scum that took my blade, I'll feed it to him point first!"

"Yeah, I think so. I saw it right after I got the liquor from the guy at the wagons," Drew answered excitedly as he jumped to his feet.

The group of mercenaries followed Drew across the camp, their numbers swelling to over a score by the time they crossed from the human camp over to the goblin side.

"One of them had it. It was about a foot long with some kind of engraving on the handle. I think it looked like a person of some kind," Drew said, describing the dagger he had planted.

"That's it! That's my blade Greta!" The mercenary stormed into the goblin camp. "Which one of you rotten little bastards took my blade? Hand it over, and I'll kill ya quick!"

"We no have no stupid human stuff. You drunk, go away," one of the goblins growled.

"I don't see it on none of them, Manx," one of the mercenaries said.

"They probably hid it. Check the tent," Drew suggested helpfully.

Manx stormed over to the tent, tore it from the ground, and tossed it aside. Lying on a filthy bedroll was the big mercenary's dagger. The look in Manx's eyes was pure murder. He lunged forward, scooped up the dagger, and spun to face the goblins. Goblins were not terribly intelligent creatures, but they knew the humans would never believe they were innocent of the theft. They stood as a group and drew weapons in preparation to defend themselves.

Manx sprang toward the goblins with the intent of throttling and slapping around the one who had spoken for the group, thinking he was most likely the guilty party. Goblins, being smaller than humans and most other races, relied on their numbers to defend themselves. When the human grabbed one of their pack, the rest jumped to his defense. Seeing one of their own outnumbered, several of the human mercenaries joined the melee. It did not register, or at least did not matter, to the other humans that Manx probably still outweighed the five goblins clinging to him by a large margin.

Goblins from nearby fires heard the commotion and threw their own numbers into the fray. A domino effect took place within the goblin camp. When dozens of goblins jumped the score of humans, word made its way to the human camp. More humans ran to help out their own kind. Their increased numbers precipitated an escalation in the goblin response, which in turn brought more humans to lend their support in an evergrowing battle.

Within minutes, the simple conflict over a stolen dagger turned into a chaotic riot of hundreds of humans and goblins, which eventually spilled over into the orc camp. The orcs, no friends of goblins and often their competitors for territory, still took the side of their rivals since humans regarded any race not their own as inferior and rarely hesitated to display their idea of superiority. The battle started to turn against the humans until the mayhem crossed over into the ogre camp.

The ogres, not wanting to be left out of such obvious fun, plowed their greatly fewer numbers but significantly greater bulk into the flanks of both sides and began flinging bodies across the camp regardless of race. The orcs and goblins fared the worst from the sudden inclusion of the massive ogres. The ogres attacked the orcs because they were the closest to them and were old racial enemies. They attacked the goblins because they were smaller and flew farther with the added bonus that an ogre could grab two and three goblins at a time in their massive fists.

Deciding his work was done, Drew melted back into the shadows before he got absorbed into the uproar. He crept back to the large, circular tent, keeping to the shadows and avoiding those who ran to either break up or join the brawl. Captain Lucien nearly ran him over as he reached for the tent flap. The captain paused to glare at him for a moment.

"Get yourself inside and stay there!" he ordered.

Drew walked inside and sat down on his cot, smiling at his accomplishment. Outside, Captain Lucien mounted his horse and called to his cavalry. He ordered them all to mount up and arm themselves with truncheons. He and his mounted men rode into the mob, clubbing fighters without prejudice and ordering them to disperse to their own camps.

The mounted, impromptu riot police broke up the brawl into smaller groups and then harried those groups back to their camps. Captain Lucien and his men finally fought their way to the ogres while nearly being unhorsed by flying goblins. Even though the humans were mounted, the ogres stood at eye level with the riders. The army

commander rode up to an ogre holding an orc over its head, ready to toss it out into the darkness.

"Put that orc down this instant!" he commanded the ogre, which was grinning with glee at all the fun it was having. "All of you, drop those men!" he commanded loudly.

With a shrug, the ogre dropped the orc at his feet. The other ogres followed his example and the sound of falling bodies thudded dully like huge drops of rain striking the earth. The massive creatures realized the fun was over and trudged back to their camp, whooping and laughing in their deep, guttural voices.

Captain Lucien handed his mount off to one of his men and stormed back to his tent. He threw back the tent flap and glared at the young man sitting on the cot, trying his best to look innocent of any wrongdoing.

"I know you had something to do with this. I know you think there is no way to prove you were involved, and that you will get away with it. But rest assured, nothing happens in this camp without Lord Darkrell's knowledge."

Drew was about to profess his innocence when Lord Darkrell called from beyond the partition. Lucien took him by the elbow, pulled him up from the cot, and propelled him into the opulent chamber. Lord Darkrell reclined on his pile of plush pillows with a less than warm expression on his lined face.

"You have greatly disappointed me. I offered you my hospitality, and how do you repay me? By throwing my troops into chaos," he said smoothly but coldly as he stood.

Drew saw the anger smoldering behind the controlled, impassive visage as the enigmatic lord glided toward him. Drew felt more fear than he ever had since this adventure began.

The dark lord stopped a little over an arm's length before him. "Such impudence cannot be allowed to continue. I had hoped you would be reasonable, but your cooperation is not required. I cannot allow this type of conduct to happen again."

With that chilling pronouncement, the sinister leader raised his arm and stretched out his boney index finger. He hissed one word, and Drew's world fell into darkness and he knew no more.

CHAPTER 11

The group trudged down the dark tunnel without fear of attack for the first time in days. The corridor was immense, the walls almost glassy smooth from years or decades of steel-hard scales rubbing against the stone. They walked for nearly half an hour before they noticed the tunnel had become brighter. As they turned a bend, they saw the opening and felt a breeze of fresh air hit their faces. They all glanced at each other for a brief moment before sprinting toward the bright light shining ahead.

The small band of young humans emerged about a thousand feet up the rocky mountainside. Below them, a wide path cut a zigzag between large, jutting rocks. The party inhaled deeply, relishing the sweet fresh air before starting to make their way down. The path narrowed just beyond the entrance before disappearing altogether. They then had to pick their way down the rock-strewn slope and over huge boulders. When they looked behind them, jutting pillars of granite concealed the massive cave entrance from view.

It took close to three hours to navigate their way down the rugged and treacherous slope, and they were quite exhausted by the time they reached the foothills. Small pine trees dotted the upper slopes and grew larger and denser as they made their way farther down. Near the base of the hills, the party decided to stop to rest and eat. Trees towered over them as the wind whispered through the thick boughs. The day was overcast, but thankfully, it wasn't raining yet.

"I am so glad to be out of those caves," Chase said as he chewed on a strip of jerky.

"Yeah, but there are more things to attack us out here," Phil said. "There are orcs, goblins, ogres, and who knows what other aggressive wildlife."

"But there are also more directions to run away," Gabe said brightly.

"You can't run away from everything, Gabe," Felicia told him resignedly.

"I don't know, we've done pretty well with it so far."

"I for one am tired of running. It seems like I've been chased by people all my life," Chase put in bitterly. "I've been chased by cops, mall security, and my mom with a switch because I sold her beer to some high-school kids when I was twelve. I even got chased by a really, really fat woman wearing a Hawaiian-print muumuu when I was nine."

Gabe gave Chase a quizzical look. "Why was she chasing you?"

"I stole one of her muumuus off her clothesline," he confessed.

"She must have not been too hard to outrun though," Felicia reasoned, trying not to laugh at the image that she conjured in her mind.

"You would think so, but when we hit a downhill stretch she really picked up speed and gained on me quick."

"How did you get away?" Josh asked.

"I stopped. She couldn't, too much inertia. Newton's law of motion, you know," Chase said offhandedly.

"What law is that?" Chuck asked.

"You know, an object in motion stays in motion until acted upon by another force," Chase explained patiently.

"What force acted on her?"

"A car."

"Oh my God, she got hit by a car?" Felicia cried, her hand going to her mouth in surprise and sympathy for the woman.

"No, she hit a car backing out of a driveway. Crushed the whole rear quarter panel and spun the back end around about three feet. Then she rolled for about another fifteen feet," Chase smirked.

"Was she OK? Was she able to get up?" Gabe asked, also feeling sorry for the woman.

"Eventually. A truck driver living nearby had one of those little forklifts strapped to the back of his big rig and he used that to get her back on her feet," Chase snickered.

"So what did you do with the muumuu?" Phil asked, wiping tears from his eyes.

"You, me, and Drew used it as a parachute while jumping off the top of that apartment complex they were building," Chase reminded him.

A look of recognition dawned on the young ranger's face. "Oh yeah, I remember that! So that's what that was? That thing worked really well. Good thing, too, since the roof was three stories high. Whatever happened to it?"

"My mom found it and used it to cover her Harley."

"You shouldn't steal, Chase," Gabe chided.

"Yeah, well, your waist shouldn't exceed your inseam!" Chase fired back.

"I can go on a diet!"

"No you can't," Chase chortled. "I bet I can keep from stealing longer than you can keep from eating sweets."

"Oh yeah? Bet then!"

They slung their packs back on and headed in the direction the dragon told them they would find a human settlement. They walked until well after sundown before pitching their tents for the night. As Chase rummaged through his pack, he called out to Gabe.

"Hey, Gabe, I found a Jolly Rancher in the bottom of my pack. Do you want it?"

"Yeah, thanks!" Gabe shouted happily.

"Ha, I win. You make it so easy," Chase gloated.

"Damn it! I mean darn it!" Gabe yelled, taking back his curse word. He blushed brightly in embarrassment at his slip.

"I knew you would fall at the first sign of temptation," Chase needled his friend mercilessly.

Gabe fumed for a moment then looked up at Chase. "Did you really find a Jolly Rancher?"

"No, I made that up."

"Damn it, I mean darn it! Darn it!" Gabe shouted as he sulked back into the tent.

They wisely maintained a guard but made it through the night without being disturbed. After a quick breakfast of leftover roast elk and dried fruit, the party packed up and trekked on through the woods. By noon, they were counting their good fortune that they had not run into anything other than some harmless local wildlife. However, they were running dangerously low on water. Even in this, their luck held when Phil called back from his point position that he could hear the sounds of running water up ahead. They approached the waterway with caution, but it seemed that having a dragon living in the area kept away most large creatures. The river was narrow, but it looked deep and fast.

Felicia looked up and down the river. "We need to find a place we can cross."

"How about Gabe and I go downstream and you all go upstream?" Chase suggested.

"Why not split up evenly? It's safer that way," Josh replied.

"Fine, we'll take Phil then."

"All right. If you find something just yell."

The group split up and looked for a bridge or a place that would allow them to ford the river. Each party walked along the riverbank for half an hour before turning back to report what they had found. As Josh's group returned to their meeting point, they heard Chase call out to them. They followed the river downstream and saw Chase jogging toward them waving his arm.

"We found a bridge a little ways down," he told them excitedly.

Chase led them around the bend where Phil and Gabe stood at the foot of a weathered wooden bridge spanning a narrower portion of the river. The wood was cracked and grey from age, but it seemed stable. It was an arch about three feet wide and lacked handrails.

"Do you think it's safe?" Josh asked dubiously.

"It wobbles a bit, but it seems sturdy enough," Chase replied. "I suggest Chuck goes first since he is the heaviest."

"Why do I have to go first?"

"Because if we go across, but it breaks on you, you'll be stuck on this side by yourself," Chase reasoned.

"All right," Chuck sighed, "but get a rope ready just in case I fall through."

Felicia dug a rope out of her pack and made ready to rescue Chuck in case the bridge failed to hold. Chuck stepped out onto the bridge, which sagged slightly, but it did not creak or crack at all. He walked out farther, feeling confident of the bridge's stability.

Four steps out, his foot landed on open air and he fell through the structure and hit the water with a great plash. Chuck thrashed frantically in a moment of panic before his feet touched the riverbed. The water reached just under his neck as he stood up and looked at the bridge.

"What happened?" he gasped.

The bridge was no longer there. In its place was nothing more than a thick log jutting out of the riverbank about ten feet. The illusory span had disappeared. Chase and Ted stood on the bank laughing hysterically. Phil covered his smile with his hand while the others looked on in bewilderment.

"That's not funny! I could have drowned, you idiots!" Chuck yelled as he waded back to shore.

"You're not going to drown in five feet of water, Chuck," Ted assured him.

The soaking wet teen clomped out of the river. "I expect this kind of moronic behavior out of Chase, but you two?" He glared at Chase's two accomplices.

"Sorry, Chuck, I had to see if it would actually work. It was a really good trick," Phil said only slightly apologetically.

"I have to admit, that was pretty good, but we still need to get across the river," Josh reminded the pranksters.

"We found a place to cross around the next bend."

They all followed the river, which steadily got shallower the farther they traveled downstream. The water rippled roughly over the pebble-laden riverbed and dwindled to little more than two feet deep.

Phil warned everyone to watch their footing. "It may be shallow, but the water is flowing swiftly."

Chuck groused for the remainder of the day about being wet, but he was in better spirits once they lit a fire and his clothes dried out. The night passed quietly once again. They awoke far more refreshed and rested than they had in days. Most of the aches and exhaustion finally left their bodies, due mostly to the two relatively peaceful nights' rest. The group took their time eating and packing up before setting off in the direction of the town.

By the time they stopped for a rest around noon, they started to encounter small farms and homes. It was dusk when they saw the outline of the town against the horizon. It was larger than they had expected. They spied the roofs of several buildings and a few towers jutting over the twenty-foot-tall stone wall that appeared to encircle the entire town.

"Finally, some type of civilization!" Felicia cried out as they approached the guarded gate.

"Remember what Cillandril told us about people possibly looking for us?" Phil cautioned. "No offense, Ted, but you don't exactly blend in. I think we should disguise you a bit before we go into town."

"Great, nice to know they're modern enough to have invented Jim Crow laws. Just kidding, I know what you mean," he griped good-naturedly.

"Here, put this cloak on, and keep the hood up," Phil told him as he handed him the dark green cloak the rangers had given him.

"I just thought of something. What are we going to do for money?" Gabe asked. "Chase can probably steal us some food, but I think a room is beyond even his ability."

"I have money," Chase replied, hefting a large pouch that clinked heavily with coins.

"Where did you get all that?" Gabe asked in surprise.

"I got it from that old druid guy."

"You stole it from Elderin? After everything he did for us?" Felicia shouted in disbelief.

"I didn't steal it! He gave it to me."

"Does he know he gave it to you?" she asked, knowing how Chase could twist the truth.

"Yes, he knows he gave it to me," he responded in a nasally, sarcastic tone then added under his breath, "by now."

"I can't believe you stole from the guy who trained us and saved us from those goblins. Without his and the rangers' training, we probably wouldn't have a chance of rescuing Drew!"

"And if I had not taken this, then we would probably starve to death and would be sleeping outside—again! We need it a lot more than he does right now. It's not as if there were a lot of convenience stores there in the middle of the woods for him to spend any of it."

Felicia gave up her argument. Even the ever-honest Gabe was siding with Chase and the chance to get real food to eat and maybe a soft bed to sleep in.

"Great, we can get a room, food, and maybe a hot bath. I think I'm starting to grow mushrooms in my shorts." Chuck tugged and scratched at his clothes.

They passed unmolested through the gates about an hour after sunset. The party found a large inn named, surprisingly enough, The Dancing Dragon. A wall of noise hit them as they walked through the door. It was a large common room with about two dozen tables, half of which were occupied by people eating, drinking, and talking. They walked straight to the man standing behind a long, polished bar wiping out glass mugs with a clean rag.

The barkeeper was a thin man sporting a thick black moustache with several silver streaks running through it. A long strip of wispy brown hair circled the back of his otherwise bald head. He greeted the approaching youths with a warm smile.

"Welcome to The Dancing Dragon. Name's Wilbur. What can I do for you young folk tonight?"

"We would like a room for the night and some warm food, sir," Josh told the man.

"Two rooms," Felicia interjected. "I would like a hot bath and a night not surrounded by smelly, burping, flatulent guys."

"I think it would be safer if we all shared a room," Josh recommended.

"I'm sure I'll be safe. Are there two rooms next to each other?" Felicia asked the innkeeper.

"Yes, miss. I have a large room with two big beds that'll accommodate the fellas, and a small private room right next to it."

"See, you'll be right next door. If there are any problems, you big tough guys can come save little old helpless me."

"At least let Gabe stay with you. It's not like he's a real guy, is it? He's totally safe," Chase assured her.

"I am too a real guy!" Gabe insisted.

"Yeah, right; Felicia, show Gabe your boobs," Chase ordered.

"NO!" both Felicia and Gabe shouted at the same time, while Gabe hurriedly covered his eyes.

"See, totally safe," Chase reiterated.

"Naked flesh is the playground of the devil," Gabe said piously.

"Then sign me up for an all-day pass, and put me at the front of the line for the roller coaster!" Chase crowed. "Besides, even if he did try something, you could kick his butt three ways from Sunday!"

Felicia cocked her head and glared at Chase. "I can kick *your* butt three ways from Sunday!"

"But I *want* to look at your boobs. That's the difference."

"Hey, that's my sister you're talking about!" Phil growled with a scowl.

Chase turned to Phil. "You two are so weirdly close, you would probably look at her boobs too!" he accused.

"I would not look at my sister's boobs!"

"I'm just saying that given the opportunity, as a guy, I would totally look at her boobs. Ted, wouldn't you look at her boobs if you had the chance?"

"Oh, I would definitely look at her boobs," Ted answered sincerely.

"Stop it! You see why I want a room to myself for one night?" She glared at the innkeeper. "A private room and a hot bath, please."

"Got yourself quite a handful there, eh missy?" Wilbur asked.

"See, even this guy agrees with me. We have a saying where I come from. More than a handful is wasteful," Chase quipped.

Felicia's face reddened, as her eyes filled with rage.

The innkeeper raised his hands, palms out in a placating gesture. "That's not what I meant, little missy, I swear."

"Still, given a chance, you wouldn't mind seeing her boobs either, am I right?" Chase asked.

Wilbur cleared his throat before answering. "Well, I guess I wouldn't say no," he answered a bit hesitantly.

"See, I'm right," Chase proclaimed triumphantly.

Felicia let out a shriek of rage and frustration and pulled out her razor-sharp rapier. "The next person who so much as mouths the word *boob* is going to leave here with fewer parts than he came in with!"

No one said a word until Chase broke the several seconds of awkward silence. "Does that include any reference to boobs like *breasts* or *sweater puppies*?" he asked with feigned innocence. "What if I said something like *watch out for that booby-trap*? Hey, I should come out with my own line of sports bras! Chase's booby-trap sports bra. Strap one on, and they'll never get away.

With an angry growl, she lashed out with her blade and deftly removed a button from the front of her tormentor's trousers. "Not one more word! Do. You. Understand. Me?" She emphasized each word with a slight twitch of her blade.

"I get the point," Chase replied as meekly as his acerbic character would allow.

"You," she said, shifting her rapier to point at the innkeeper, "my room, a bath, and food, now."

"Upstairs, last door at the end of the hall, ma'am. I'll have some of the girls bring up the tub and start filling it with hot water right away," Wilbur promised hurriedly.

"Thank you," the furious young woman replied before stalking up the stairs and finding her room.

"Man, what a grouch," Chase commented as Felicia stalked upstairs. "So, what should we do now?"

Josh looked around the room. "I say we get a table, something to eat and drink, then see if we can find anything out about Drew."

"I'm going to go upstairs and study my books for a while," Ted told them, then asked the innkeeper to send up a plate of food.

Wilbur called over two serving women, who put large pots of water on the stove in the kitchen to heat before going upstairs and pulling a large copper tub out of a closet and toting it to Felicia's room. It took several trips to fill the tub, but she was soon soaking in the luxurious water. The hot water pulled the aches and fatigue out of her muscles almost like magic.

The rest of the troop found a table against one wall as Ted disappeared up the stairs. A comely serving woman soon came to the table and offered them three different options for their meals along with a choice of drinks. Gabe finally settled on apple juice since it was the only non-alcoholic option.

"I think she likes me," Chase said to his friends as soon as the serving girl went to tell the kitchen their order.

"Who likes you?" Gabe asked.

"The serving wench."

"She's probably a prostitute as well. Back then, most serving wenches were, from what I heard," Chuck replied, taking the opportunity to finally be able to give Chase a hard time.

"So? Hookers can fall in love too—like in the movie *Pretty Woman*," he said defensively.

"The only thing she is in love with is the gold in your pants," Chuck continued to tease.

"She's in love with something in my pants, but it isn't coin," Chase replied, elbowing Gabe.

"You probably wouldn't even know what to do with what's in your pants," Gabe shot back, getting in on the ribbing.

Chase's face flushed as everyone started ganging up on him. "I do too know how, and I have!"

"That creepy aunt with boundary issues doesn't count."

"Oh, good one, Gabe!" Chuck applauded the normally quiet boy's comeback.

"It does too count!"

"Oh my God, you did your aunt? Was it that fat one with the wooden leg?" Gabe asked incredulously.

"Ew, no. That's my mom's sister. I'm from the Willamette Valley, not the Everglades! I'm talking about my dad's brother's wife. And that was only a common-law marriage with no blood relation."

"Is that the weird one who is into crystals and chanting?" Gabe asked.

"She wasn't *that* weird, and she has a nice body and eye," Chase said.

"Don't you mean eyes?" Josh asked.

"Technically, one was made of glass, so I don't count it."

They were all still laughing when the serving girl returned with mugs of beer and Gabe's glass of juice. Dinner soon followed, and they all ate like starving dogs, even ordering a second plate. They found that Chase's pilfered purse contained a rather large sum of money. The meals and rooms barely made a dent in the total.

"All right, I think it's time we tried to find out a little information about this place, and whether anyone has seen or heard anything about Drew," Josh suggested as they cleaned the last of the food off their plates.

"Good idea," agreed Chase. "I think we should use false names though, in case they made Drew tell them about us. Josh, you can go by the name Don Gawain. Chuck, you are Richard Enmouth, but you go by the name Dick."

"Why do I have to be named Dick?"

"Richard is a royal name, like Richard the Lionheart and Little Richard. These are simple people, Chuck, and Dick is a friendly name of familiarity used by people named Richard, like Dick Clark, Andy Dick, Moby Dick, and Dick Cheney. Dick Cheney, Chuck. The guy shot a man in the face! How cool is that?"

"I guess so," Chuck agreed.

"All right then, go find Drew for us. Gabe and I will watch out for any suspicious strangers and listen in on people's conversations.

The two warriors went to the bar and ordered drinks, striking up conversations with some of the patrons and buying rounds to make friends. Chuck approached a table of locals with a large pitcher of beer in one hand and his mug in another.

"Hey fellas, mind if my friend and I join you?" the large young man asked jovially, raising the pitcher of beer.

"As long as your friend is the generous sort, we don't mind at all," one of the men said, pointing at an empty chair. "Name's Jed, this is Toby, Amos, and Clyde. What's your name, friend, and what brings you to Martin's Vale?"

"My name's Richard Enmouth, but my friends call me Dick. We're just passing through while looking for a friend of ours," Chuck said as he filled the glasses of the men at the table from his pitcher.

A subdued chortling erupted from around the table at his pronouncement.

"What's so funny?"

"Um, nothing—Dick," Amos replied.

"Is there something wrong with my name? A lot of people go by the name Dick."

"Maybe you should go by the name Richard," Jed recommended, laughing into his cup along with his friends.

"Why, what's wrong with Dick Enmouth?" Chuck demanded, starting to get angry at being mocked.

"Well I guess that all depends on who you ask. Personally, it's just not to my *taste*!" Jed hollered out in a burst of laughter accompanied by his friends.

"You don't want to share a drink with me, then fine! I'm sure there are plenty of people in here that wouldn't mind sharing my beer!" Chuck shouted, then stood up from the table, taking his beer with him. "Who wants to drink a beer with Dick Enmouth?" he asked across the common room.

"Seems to me like it would be a bit hard to swallow that way!" an anonymous voice shouted across the room.

The entire tavern burst into raucous laughter at the big warrior's expense. Chuck's face was purple with rage as he tried to figure out what made him the butt of some unknown jest. As his head swiveled around, and his eyes locked onto the sight of Chase furiously pounding on the table with laughter, Chuck finally understood what the joke was.

"Chase, you son of a…!" Chuck bellowed as he threw his heavy clay mug across the room.

Chase narrowly ducked the projectile as it shattered against the wall just over his head. He continued his slide under the table as Chuck charged across the room and lunged across the table, reaching for his throat.

"I'll kill you, you little worm! When I get a hold of you, your name will be Chase Footinass!"

Chase slid under the table and out the other side as Chuck sprawled across the top of it. The enraged fighter spun about as Chase sprang onto another table, leapt up, grabbed the overhead rafters, and pulled himself up into the shadowy support beams. Chuck cursed and hurled several more mugs at him.

"My name is Chuck, not Dick!" he screamed, then stomped upstairs with his pitcher of beer in humiliation.

He demanded that another tub be brought to his room and filled as he stalked past the bar. Wilbur called for a couple of the kitchen staff to

fill his request. Chase climbed back down from his perch once the coast was clear and sat back at the table.

"Chase, can you be serious long enough for me to get some information?" Josh begged.

Chase gave him an innocent look and quietly sipped his beer. Josh went back to striking up conversations. No one paid any attention to the three men in a shadowy corner of the inn who were watching closely the antics of the young strangers.

As the evening grew late, Josh waved Chase and Gabe upstairs and asked the innkeeper to set up and fill a second bathtub in their room. They found Chuck asleep in the now cold water of his tub, an empty pitcher of beer next to him.

"Chuck, up and at 'em," Josh called to his friend.

Chuck opened his eyes a crack and looked at the white, wrinkled skin sheathing his fingertips. He mumbled a few incoherent words, stumbled out of the bath, and nearly spilled himself naked across the floor in the attempt.

Gabe threw him one of the towels from a stack that had been thoughtfully placed on the table. Chuck toweled himself off and crawled into one of the two big beds occupying the room.

"There is no way I'm sleeping in a bed with a naked Chuck!" Chase swore.

"Chuck, put on some clothes, man," Josh begged, then threw a pair of boxers and a T-shirt at him, which he pulled from his pack.

Chuck struggled with the clothes, and after being woken up three times partway through, he finally got himself dressed.

"Did you find anything out?" Gabe asked Josh.

Josh had started to answer when a man and a woman brought in the tub Felicia had vacated earlier in the night. They then took a hose and drained the water of Chuck's bath out of the room's window. The pair left after telling the young men they would start hauling up the hot water.

"I found out that most of this land is under the control of Lord Darkrell. This town or city, whatever you want to call it, is the free city of Martin's Vale. They pay taxes to Darkrell and he mostly leaves them

to their neutrality," he told them before the man and woman, carrying large buckets of hot water, interrupted him.

He continued once they left to refill their buckets. "A large force of goblins, orcs, ogres, and human mercenaries were camped outside the city several days ago. They think Lord Darkrell was in the camp, but he chose to sleep in a large pavilion-style tent instead of entering the city, which they thought was unusual."

He paused as the couple returned, dumped their buckets again, and departed. "They left the next morning heading northeast. No one I spoke to knew any more than that, but at least it's something. Tomorrow we'll buy supplies and a map if we can, but for now I'm taking a bath and getting some sleep."

The couple returned with more water and poured it into the copper tub. The woman offered to wash any clothes they piled outside the door and guaranteed they would be ready by morning.

Chase's eyes flicked between the two tubs. "Here's a quandary. Who gets to take a bath first, and who gets dirty seconds?"

"We can draw straws," Ted suggested, pulling several straws out of the thick, straw-stuffed mattress.

"Crap!" Chase swore as he drew a short straw.

Gabe drew the other short straw without complaint, happy to be able to be cleaner than he was, even if it meant bathing in used water. He figured he could bathe in a mud puddle and come out cleaner than he was now.

Josh jumped in the first bathtub as soon as it was filled, not bothering to wait for the second one to fill up. He ignored the couple as they finally filled the second tub and Phil got in. Both scrubbed themselves with washrags until their skin was red. They would have soaked until the water froze if Chase had not started to complain about them using all the hot water. The group separated into the two beds and fell asleep.

The three men from the common room crept up the stairs hours later. The innkeeper allowed people to sleep next to the hearth for a

silver piece, and the men had taken advantage of this. They waited until the early morning hour, ensuring their targets would be sound asleep.

Boris knew his men could probably not capture the entire group, but he could get the young woman and lure the others into a trap. He and his partners stopped outside Felicia's door and found the crossbar pulled shut, securing the door from the inside. That was no problem. He was prepared for that.

He took a small, slim knife and stuck the blade between the door and the jamb. He worked the small knifepoint back and forth, sliding the wooden crossbar back a quarter inch at a time.

The mercenaries crept silently into the dimly lit room. With luck, they would be able to subdue and silence the girl before she was able to shout for help. If that were not the case, they would take their captive out the window. Their horses were already saddled for their escape and waiting in the stable.

He hoped that would prove unnecessary. With luck, he could silence her before she even woke up, and they could carry their burden out the front door. However, luck was not with them as a loose floorboard squeaked under his heavy boot. Felicia awakened to see three shadowy figures approaching her bed. Boris watched her sit up in the bed and was not surprised when his ears were assaulted with her loud scream. He was prepared for that.

The target leapt from the bed and charged toward the door. That was fine; he was prepared for that too. He turned his head toward his men and motioned for one of them to draw the bolt shut on the door. About the only thing he was not prepared for was a girl who was an expert in a form of fighting he had never seen before.

Instead of trying to bolt past Boris and the two men behind him as he had expected her to do, Felicia took two steps forward and leapt into the air. She flew forward, her right leg cocked back and the left side of her body parallel with the floor. She kicked out with her right leg and caught Boris square in the nose with her heel just as he turned back toward her. Boris felt his nose spread across his face as bone and cartilage broke under the sudden impact. He felt himself toppling over

backward and met the floor with the back of his head hard enough for stars to fill his vision.

Phil and Chase woke up at the sound of Felicia's scream just before the loud thump of a body hitting the floor.

"Wake up! Felicia's in trouble!" Phil shouted.

Josh, Ted, Chase, and Phil jumped out of bed, grabbed their weapons, and burst out into the hallway.

"The door's locked!" Josh cried as he pushed against the door.

He threw his shoulder into it, but the door was solidly built, with a crossbar as thick as a two-by-four. Phil ran back into the room and tried to wake up Chuck.

"Chuck, wake up, Felicia's in trouble!" Phil shouted as he shook the unconscious lump.

Chuck groaned and let out a loud snort, but failed to rise. Phil grabbed a pitcher of water from the table and threw it into Chuck's sleeping face. His sudden shock caused him to inhale some of the water, and he went into a coughing fit as his lungs tried to expel it.

"What the hell was that for?" Chuck demanded between coughs.

Another loud crash and a yell came from Felicia's room.

"Come on, Chuck, Felicia's in trouble!" Josh cried again.

Chuck jumped out of bed without even bothering to grab his sword and rushed to Felicia's room.

"The door's locked; break it down!" Ted yelled.

Chuck hit the door hard with his shoulder, but it held. He backed up and continued driving his burly body against it, determined to get through.

The other man lunged at the girl who had just laid out their leader with a kick to the head. He tried to wrap an arm around her neck, but she dropped under it, curled her fingers down, and drove the heel of her palm into the man's sternum, blasting the air from his lungs. She grabbed his extended arm, twisted it down behind his back, and spun him about, hurling him into his partner.

The other man had just darted forward when his friend went flying at him. The two struck heads with a hollow thump and went down in a heap. Felicia grabbed a stout wooden chair just as the third man was getting to his feet and brought it across his face. He flopped back down to the floor and lay still.

She turned around to grab the rapier hanging on her bed, but a set of strong arms grabbed her from behind and pinned her arms to her sides before she could draw it. Felicia was not overly tall, and the man had to lean down to wrap his arms around her. She threw her head back and caught him hard in the jaw. She then stomped as hard as she could on the inside of his ankle. The girl heard the bone crack as the man loosened his iron grip. Felicia spun around and drove her knee into the man's groin. As he dropped to his knees, she swept up the brass water pitcher and brought it hard across his head.

Before she could reach her sword, Boris was back up, wrapping his hands around her soft throat and squeezing. He was no longer interested in a captive or a reward; his rage demanded revenge for the pain and humiliation this slip of a girl had inflicted on him and his men.

Felicia's mouth automatically sprang open, trying to gasp for air, but she did not panic. She brought her hands over the top of his elbows and thrust them down hard, breaking his grip. She slammed her cupped hands over his ears, causing the eardrums to burst and creating immense pain and disorientation. She then placed the knife edge of her left hand against his throat and hit it hard with her right palm. The force of the hit drove her left hand into his throat, breaking the delicate cartilage.

As Boris fell to the floor gagging and gasping for breath, the brackets holding the crossbar on the door tore loose from the wall and Chuck came half-falling into the room with the rest of the group close on his heels, weapons drawn. They looked at the damage to the room and the beaten and unconscious men lying on the floor.

"What happened?" Phil asked in shock.

"They must have said something about her boobs," Chase replied with a shrug.

CHAPTER 12

Phil ran to his sister. "Felicia, are you OK?"

"I'm fine. These goons tried to grab me," Felicia grumped.

Josh looked at the three men lying on the floor, then to the young woman. "What happened? Did they say anything, like what they wanted?"

She shook her head. "No, they didn't get the chance to say anything."

One of the men let out a groan and started to shift on the floor. Phil took three strides over to where the man lay and delivered a swift kick to his stomach. "Don't you ever put your filthy hands on my sister!"

Josh pulled him back before he could give the man another kick. "Easy, Phil, they didn't get to do anything. Felicia took good care of them herself. Let's tie them up before they come to, and we'll find out what they wanted."

Felicia pulled the rope out of her pack and they bound the three men securely while they waited for them to regain consciousness. Boris opened the eye not swollen shut, and tugged for a moment on his bindings.

"Wud happed?" he asked groggily, his words coming out of his destroyed nose as if he had a bad head cold. A loud whistling noise accompanied each exhalation.

"You tried to put your hands on my sister, and she tore you a new one, that's what happened, you sack of crap!" Phil shouted at the man.

"Why are you here, and what did you want with Felicia?" Josh asked more calmly.

"Go da hell, I ai'd tellin you nuddin," he said, then tried to spit at Josh, which only resulted in a glob of bloody phlegm running down his split lip.

Felicia stalked forward with a scowl on her face and cocked her fist back threateningly.

"OK, ow'll dell you, jud keeb dad crady wench away vrom me!" he cried out, trying to scoot away. "Lord Darkrell tode us dad there wud a reward for cadduring you or bringing him some book. So I decided do capdure her ad use her do lure you all indo a drap."

"How were you going to get away?"

"We have horses oudside," he replied.

Josh turned to his companions. "That's good. We're going to need horses, and I doubt that Chase has enough gold to buy a horse for each of us." He turned back toward the man bound and sitting on the floor. "Consider your horses forfeit for what you tried to do."

Boris could only glare through his one good eye at the young man who was robbing him and his men, but he knew he was helpless to prevent it. His two associates just hung their heads dejectedly at their loss and failure.

"Where were you supposed to take us if you had caught us?" Josh asked.

"Lord Darkrell had a caddle aboud dree days ride nordwed of here ad da ed of da valley," he informed them.

"He has a what?" Chase asked.

"A caddle, you know, a fordress or a keeb," Boris tried to clarify.

"Oh you mean a castle, fortress, or a keep. You should work on that speech impediment of yours," Chase said sarcastically.

"Screw you!"

They double-checked the ropes securing the three men and gagged them. Sunrise was not far off, and when it came, they packed their gear, went downstairs, and ate a hearty breakfast in preparation for the next leg of their journey.

Chase paid Wilbur for two more days' room rental and asked that no one enter the rooms. They asked Wilbur where they might be able to

purchase horses, and he gave them directions to a man on the north edge of town.

When they went outside, they found the three horses already saddled and waiting outside the stable attached to the inn. The group strapped their packs to the three animals and led them through the town until they found the man who sold horses.

The purveyor of horses had a large stableyard near the north gate with several horses of various ages and types. As the party approached, a small bald man with a thick beard and moustache walked out to greet them.

"Good morn to ya. You looking to buy or sell?" he called out cheerfully.

"Good morning to you, sir, we are looking to buy," Josh told him as he shook hands with the horse merchant.

The man's mood became even more cheerful at the prospect of a sale. "My name's Rolf, and I'll be happy to show you what I have. What kind of animal are you looking for? A riding horse, trail horse, or draft animal?"

Josh scratched his head at the question, not really knowing how to reply. He knew he did not want a draft horse, but he knew nothing about the difference between a riding horse and a trail horse. "Well, we do ride a bit along trails and through the mountains. The most important thing I guess is that the horse is strong, healthy, and good-natured. Only a couple of us are experienced riders, so a calm animal is important."

"Most of my animals are pretty calm. I train them that way, though I have a couple stallions and racers that are quite spirited."

Rolf took them into the corral and started pointing out different mares and geldings, explaining their quality and character. Felicia was the most familiar with animals, so they left it to her judgment on which ones to buy.

Josh walked over to her as she was examining one of the horses' hooves. "Do you know what to look for?"

"Not really. I know to look for stone bruises and cracked hooves. Too much sway in the back is a sign of an overworked horse or one that was ridden too young, but more than that is little more than a guess," she told him.

After she looked over several horses, she told Rolf the four they wanted. They haggled for a while before coming to an agreement on the price, and even managed to get bridles thrown in free. They then bartered for some saddles and saddle blankets before leading their new acquisitions away.

The group found the general store Rolf had directed them toward, and proceeded to load their backpacks and saddlebags with food supplies. Josh was afraid they were not going to have enough coin to pay for everything after they had bought the horses and tack, but Chase surprised them again with another small pouch of coins he had liberated from Boris and his men. This time around, he received far fewer complaints about purloining a purse.

It was almost noon before they were ready to leave the town, so they decided to eat one last hot lunch before setting off. They left through the north gate near where they had bought the horses, riding slowly but steadily until they became more comfortable in the saddle. By the time they stopped for the night, they were all saddle-sore and stiff-legged, but felt far more confident in their ability to ride.

Rolf had so far been true to his word. The horses were calm, followed their riders' urgings without fuss, and seemed quite healthy and capable of carrying their burdens. Felicia created a picket by stretching a rope between two trees and tethered the animals' halters to it with enough slack to allow them to graze.

It started to rain in the early morning hours during Gabe's watch. He huddled inside the tent flap, peering through a narrow gap he left open in the zipper, occasionally poking his head out for a wider view. It was still raining come morning with no sign of it letting up anytime soon. The group ate a cold breakfast in their tents before donning their rain slickers and ponchos and pulling up stakes.

The party rode throughout the day along the muddy, rain-sodden road. They rode in silence, too miserable even to complain. The horses plodded on through the downpour, seemingly oblivious to either the shower or their riders' misery. Camp that night was cold and wet, a fire impossible to make and keep lit. They all stripped down and dried off as best they could inside their tents. The next morning was identical to the last—wet and wretched.

"Bah, wet crotch and horseback riding go together about as well as peanuts and bubblegum!" Chase complained bitterly.

"I know it's lousy, but think of Drew," Gabe reminded him.

"I am thinking about Drew! That's what's got me so irritable, him in some nice dry dungeon eating warm gruel out of a bowl. Lucky bum."

Gabe could only shake his head at his friend's perception of the world. As the band of young, wet adventurers rounded a bend in the narrow road, they came face to face with a troop of orcs and an ogre. For a brief moment, the two groups just stopped and stared in surprise at each other. It took only a second for the orcs to overcome their surprise and charge the humans with a loud war cry.

Felicia and Phil's horses reared and pranced in fright, but they were able to control them and keep their seats. Chuck was less fortunate. His horse bucked and threw him to the muddy ground with a loud clang. His armor protected him from serious injury, and he rolled to his feet, but his horse had already bolted back the way they had come.

As the orcs and ogre closed in on them, everyone else's horses began to rear and buck in an attempt to flee the onrushing monsters. Chase, Phil, and Felicia were able to dismount with a measure of grace and composure. Josh was able to get down, but he was knocked to the ground as his horse turned and bolted. Gabe was less fortunate. As he tried to dismount, his horse turned to follow the others in their flight. His hands slipped from the saddle horn and his foot caught in the stirrup. The unfortunate cleric was dragged for several yards through the mud before his entrapped foot came free.

By the time Gabe regained his feet, the twins were sending arrows into the orcs and Ted was rolling to his feet from where his horse had thrown him from the saddle and onto his back. Ted's impact with the ground had knocked the wind from his lungs, and he was now fighting hard to get it back so he could lend his arcane might to the battle.

Josh and Chuck stepped to the fore and put their greater strength and deadly weapons to good effect, giving Phil and his sister time to drop their bows and draw their blades. Josh swung his greatsword as the lead orc ran into its lethal arc. The razor-sharp, four and a half-foot length of steel severed the head clean off the charging creature. Chuck slammed his shield into an orc that tried to take advantage of Josh's wild swing, and thrust his blade deep into the chest of another.

Phil parried an overhead chop from an axe-wielding orc, pushed the weapon aside and down to the ground, and brought his blade across the pig-faced creature's throat. Dark blood ran down the orc's chest as it dropped its axe and grasped its throat. It backed away several steps, pushed into the orc behind it, and dropped to its knees. With a final spray of black, viscous blood, the orc fell forward, planting its face into the mud.

Felicia was battling hard against two of the brutish monsters that forced her backward. Her skill and swift blade was the only thing preventing her from falling victim to the heavy weapons of her attackers. Ted sent a barrage of magic missiles into one orc and dropped it to the ground. Its companion balked at the sudden magical assault and got a foot of steel thrust through its heart as the price for allowing itself to be distracted.

The massive ogre's plodding stride finally brought it to the heart of the battle. In its lust to spill blood, it tossed aside two orcs standing between it and the puny humans who sought to do battle with it. The huge ogre swung its massive club, intent on crushing the young human who stood before it. Chuck brought his shield up and deflected it at enough of an angle that the force of the powerful blow did not shatter his arm. The club struck the shield with a loud bong that echoed over the din of the battle. Although Chuck managed to blunt some of the

force of the club, it still struck hard enough to numb his arm up to the elbow and send him flying onto the muddy roadway.

Josh swung with wild fury, trying to fight his way toward his fallen friend, but multiple orcs pressed him on three sides. Several blows landed, but failed to breach his armor. However, the next strike got through and cut a large bloody gash across his left upper arm. He could only watch helplessly out of the corner of his eye as the brutish creature stomped toward Chuck with evil intent.

The ogre lifted its tree-limb-sized club, intending to smash the human into the ground. Chuck rolled to the left as the club struck the sodden ground, spraying a wave of mud in both directions. Chuck brought his arm back over in a backhanded blow that landed across the back of the ogre's hand and thick fingers. The creature roared in anger and pain as it lost its grip on its weapon. The enraged monster snarled as it lunged at the human trying to stand back up, his feet slipping in the slick mud.

A magical arrow, burning bright with a supernatural flame and seemingly immune to the effects of the rain, sprang from the young wizard's outstretched hand and buried itself deep into the chest of an orc that had just opened another deep wound on Josh's right hip. The orc looked stupidly at the burning arrow and smelled the cooked-pork scent of its own roasting flesh before falling backward to the ground.

Chase sprang out of nowhere and thrust Biter deep into an orc's back. He pulled his blade out and stabbed for the back of a second one, but the creature realized it had an enemy to its rear and spun to the side. Chase ducked as the orc swung its sword in a whistling arc that threatened to take his head off, and jabbed out again. His attack pierced the orc's armor and stabbed it low in the stomach.

The orc backed away from Chase and Josh so both humans could not attack it at once. It decided the larger human was currently less of a threat, so it kept its attention on the smaller one that had just wounded it. Besides, several of his brethren had the more heavily armored human pressed hard on three sides. He would claim this victory for himself.

The orc and human circled each other warily. The orc knew he was stronger than the human, and probably more skilled in the use of its weapon from the way he watched his foe handle himself. He lunged forward and took a wild swing at Chase just to judge the human's reaction. It was more of a feint than an attack, and just as he figured, the human overreacted and swung wildly in an attempt to parry. He lunged forward again, this time intent on skewering him if possible, but the human was quick and dodged to the side, rolled, and nimbly sprang back to his feet.

The orc laughed at the human's amateurish reaction and made a couple more feints to throw him off before moving in for the kill. He swung hard once, seeing the young human jump back and slip in the slick mud. The orc saw his chance and took advantage of the opportunity. He lunged forward again, knowing his foe would be unable to dodge away as he tried to regain his balance. However, instead of dodging again, Chase sprang up and flung a handful of mud right into the wide-open, excited eyes of the orc. The orc brought his thrust up short in surprise and sudden blindness. Now it was Chase who took advantage of the opening his trick had created as he thrust Biter into the orc's heart. He jumped back as the orc fell over dead, then darted back to help Josh.

The twins finished off their opponents at nearly the same time and jumped to the beleaguered Josh's defense. The young warrior was bleeding from several wounds by now, but the odds were nearly even as his three friends rushed in to give him a respite. He just hoped Chuck was doing all right.

Gabe got to his feet and ran toward his friends just in time to see the monstrous ogre lose its weapon and grab Chuck. As Chuck gained his feet, he felt himself jerked from the ground. He turned his head and looked into the beady red eyes of the infuriated ogre. The ogre hefted the large man over its head as if he weighed no more than a small child, and hurled him several yards through the air where he struck the ground hard and rolled.

The ogre was not yet through with its toy. It strode over and grabbed Chuck once again, lifted him to his feet, and tried to squeeze the life out of him. Chuck felt his armor digging into his lower back and stomach, as if he were caught in a huge vise slowly being cranked shut. He pounded against the ogre's thick forearms and tried to pry its arms off him, but to no avail.

Gabe drew his mace and ran as fast as he could to try to help his companion. As he reached Chuck and the ogre, he looked at his mace and the huge creature before him, and realized that the fine weapon was likely insufficient to save his big friend. He closed his eyes and prayed to God to come to his aid. The young boy reached out, touched Chuck lightly on the arm, and bestowed his god's gift upon him.

Chuck felt a sudden renewal of strength flow through his body. The surge brought upon him a feeling of power he had never known, surpassing his normal strength by orders of magnitude. Chuck reached down, grasped the ogre's thick wrists, and pulled them apart, breaking the creature's hold upon him. He dropped two feet to the ground but did not lose his grip on the ogre's wrists. The ogre looked on in utter amazement as the smaller human forced its massive arms wide. Chuck stepped forward with his right leg, planted it firmly behind the ogre's leg, and pushed forward in a move he often used in wrestling. Even with his magically enhanced strength, it still took all of his power to force the creature's arms apart, shove it backward, and send it sprawling onto its back and into the mud.

As the ogre turned to one side in order to try to regain its feet, Chuck lifted and shoved it in the direction it was already turning and rolled it onto its hands and knees. He leapt upon the monster's back and hooked his left arm across its thick neck, grasped his own wrist with his right hand while pulling it toward himself with all his might. The ogre managed to stand and clawed at the human's armored forearm in an attempt to break the stranglehold cutting off its airway. When that failed, it flailed at Chuck with its huge hands, but its thick arms and expansive chest would not allow it to reach back far enough to dislodge its antagonist.

The ogre tried to roar in rage and fear, but it came out as little more than a gurgling growl and whimper. Its eyes bulged out from under its thick brow as it dropped to its knees and fell forward. Chuck refused to release his grip for several moments until he was sure the creature would not rise again. He stood up, panting from the exertion, and clapped Gabe on the back, breathing too hard to voice his thanks for the help.

The last few orcs turned and fled, their courage gone with the deaths of the ogre and several of their comrades. Phil and Felicia ran back to their bows and put an arrow into two of the fleeing creatures before the last two disappeared into the woods.

Chuck dropped and lay down in the middle of the road, not caring a bit about the rain or the mud. His lower back and stomach hurt badly from the crushing squeeze the ogre had put on him, and his left arm ached and throbbed.

Josh was bleeding from a half-dozen wounds ranging from minor cuts to deep bloody gashes. Phil had a large cut on the side of his head where an orc caught him with the flat of its blade, and Felicia was having a hard time drawing a deep breath without wincing from a hard blow she took to her side.

"Come on, we need to get off the road and into hiding before someone else shows up," Ted urged wisely.

Phil and Gabe helped Chuck to his feet, and they all hobbled off the road and into the trees. Those in better condition helped the ones who had a hard time walking on their own. Josh was losing a lot of blood and was starting to stumble.

"This is good enough. I need to heal Josh before he passes out," Gabe said as he took note of the surroundings.

They gently lowered Chuck and Josh to the ground and made them as comfortable as possible, which was not very, given all the mud and water left by the unrelenting rain.

Gabe prayed over Josh first, and the others watched as the wounds began to close and stopped their bleeding. He repeated his ministrations over Chuck before treating Phil's head wound and Felicia's bruised ribs. It was not until he had healed the others that Gabe realized several of

his own ribs hurt badly enough that a couple were likely cracked or broken.

The party rested under the leafy boughs of a large oak tree, partially shielded from the rain. Gabe managed to heal the worst of their wounds, leaving only a few bruises, aches, and pains. Josh would have a few scars to show off, but they had lived through another battle. Whether with the help of luck or fate, none could say.

Chase looked around at his friends. "You know, we never had a problem with horses running off in our D&D games. What are we going to do now? We have no food, no clothes, and no tents."

"We'll have to go after them; they probably stayed together," Felicia groaned.

"How far do you think they went? All the way back to town?" Gabe asked, dreading such a long walk in any kind of weather, and doubly so in the rain.

"I don't know. I hope not, but we can't go on foot without supplies. If that means we have to walk all the way back to town, that's what we'll have to do. Drew will just have to hang on a few days longer," Josh said.

Once they felt able, the group began tracking the horses. Fortunately, the rain was letting up and the hoofprints were easily visible in the road. With luck, they would not be washed away anytime soon.

The prints eventually left the road, and they found all seven horses grazing on sodden grass. It had taken them three hours to find their mounts, so they decided to make camp right where they were. They still had a couple of cans of camp fuel, so the tired, wet adventurers huddled around them for warmth while wrapped in their sleeping bags.

CHAPTER 13

Thankfully, the rain stopped that night and although the ground was still wet, at least they would not have to ride in the rain. They packed up, saddled the horses, and plodded their way back down the road toward Darkrell's keep. For the next two days, they saw a few small patrols but easily avoided them as they made their way toward the mountains. By early afternoon of the third day, they came to within view of the foothills.

"So what should we do now? Do we go east or west?" Josh asked, studying the range in the distance.

"From the information we gathered in town and my rough guess of our current location, I would say west," Phil recommended.

"All right, west it is."

The party traveled west for several more hours, and they started to see people in the distance. Some rode horses, several of them pulled carts, but most figures were on foot. People, horses, and carts seemed to appear and disappear into the side of the steep-sloped mountainside. The group turned south and stayed hidden within the tree line until they could get a better view of where all these people were coming from.

From their new vantage point, they could see people walking and riding through a narrow pass into a small valley. It was more of a deep draw than a real valley. The steep walls of the mountain securely surrounded a large keep or castle. Dozens of smaller buildings and houses were built around the imposing fortress. It was likely a town for the multitude of people supporting Lord Darkrell and his troops. A tall,

thick wall protected the entrance, and only a single massive gate and portcullis allowed entry or exit to the castle and surrounding buildings.

"I think we found it," Chase whispered, even though they were hundreds of yards from the people on the road and hidden in the trees.

"How are we going to get in there? And if we do sneak in, how are we going to get out with Drew?" Gabe asked.

"I could try to climb the wall and throw a rope down," Felicia suggested.

"Those stones look too tightly packed and smooth to get any kind of grip, and too tall to throw a hook over. Plus, they probably light torches along the wall at night and keep a heavy guard. You can see several guards on the wall even now," Phil pointed out.

"Ted, do you have any spells that can get us over the wall?" Josh asked, turning toward the bespectacled boy.

"Not over, but I think there may be something in here to get us past the guards unseen. Let me double-check." He unshouldered his pack, pulled out the book, and thumbed through several pages, scanning the contents before finding what he was looking for. "I got it. I can cast a circle of invisibility. It only reaches out about fifteen feet, but if we all stay real close together, we should be able to walk right past the guards as long as the gate is open. I'll have to study it for a couple hours before I'll be able to cast it."

"OK. We'll go a little deeper into the woods and take a break then head out as soon as Ted is ready," Josh informed the group.

They led their horses farther into the woodline and ate an early supper while Ted memorized the spell. Once Ted announced he was ready, they put the horses on a long tether in a small grassy glade. The group waited until the sun set before creeping as close to the gate as they could under the cover of darkness.

"OK, Ted, I think this is as close as we dare get. Go ahead and do it," Josh directed him.

Ted spoke a string of incomprehensible words while moving his hands in a series of mysterious yet deliberate motions. At the conclusion

of his casting, the members of the group disappeared right before each other's eyes.

"Hey, are you guys still here?" Gabe asked in a tremulous voice, frightened at the prospect of being alone.

"I'm here," Chuck replied, his voice coming from out of nowhere.

Each member of the party responded, assuring one another they were still there and had not been magically sent off into an alternate dimension or something.

"Hey, look at this, a disembodied hand," Chase called out as he stuck his arm just outside the sphere of the spell's influence.

"Get in here, Chase, so we can get moving," Felicia commanded.

The arm disappeared back into the area of invisibility.

"Just remember to stick close, everybody. Chase just showed us what everyone will see if any part of you moves outside the circle," Ted warned them.

Felicia let out a gasp of surprise. "Get your hand off my butt before I cut it off, Chase!"

"Fine, but you'd be real sorry if you found yourself in need of my talented hands."

"I wasn't talking about cutting off your hand."

"How do you know it's me? Maybe Gabe did it!" Chase said defensively.

"It could *not* have been Gabe!"

"You're right, it couldn't have been," he agreed. "You have no sense of humor. Besides, you didn't say anything when I touched your chest."

"That was my chest," Gabe said quietly.

"Now that's just disturbing. You really need to lose weight, Gabe."

"I have lost weight! I bet I've lost twenty pounds since we started this so-called adventure!" Gabe cried out.

"You didn't lose it, it just moved to your butt where you can't see it," Chase shot back.

"Nuh-uh, my pants are loose and everything!"

"Will you guys stop it so we can be done with this?" Josh hissed.

"Fine, just make sure Gabe keeps his derriere in the circle," Chase said as a parting shot.

"Why don't you kiss my derriere?" Gabe mumbled under his breath.

They walked in a huddled mass, putting a hand on the person's shoulder in front of them. Felicia made Chase walk in front of her just in case he got any more silly ideas. The group carefully shuffled toward the keep, avoiding the occasional late-night pedestrians. Just as Phil had thought, torches and braziers cast a flickering light all along the wall and in a wide lane in front of the gate.

More than a dozen guards walked along the top of the wall, and at least four more stood watch on the ground near the gate itself. The group walked quietly, and even Chase kept his mouth shut as they threaded their way through the guards and under the stone arch of the open gate. They made it through the gate undetected with only one narrow escape when Chase stepped in a pile of horse droppings and cursed aloud. The guard standing nearby looked around but just shrugged his shoulders, possibly thinking it was one of the men above him walking the wall.

Beyond the wall was a maze of stone and wood buildings with roofs topped by slate shingles. None of the streets ran straight, perhaps in an attempt to thwart any invading force that managed to get through the wall or past the gate. It was all fine and dandy for defense, but it made finding an easy path to the fortress much more difficult, not to mention making for a longer walk.

The group of invisible invaders hustled through the dirt streets as quickly as they could, dodging horses, carts, and pedestrians. The streets were teeming with people and creatures of multiple races. Humans, orcs, goblins, and ogres strode purposefully on some errand or task, ambled about seemingly at random, or just stood around.

Large numbers of people and creatures loitered outside or walked into and out of the numerous inns and taverns lining the streets. A wave of raucous sound assaulted their ears every time the door opened to one of the establishments.

The keep had towers built at each front corner, so the group used those as reference points as they wove their way down the muddy byways and between buildings.

"Everyone still with us?" Josh asked his small raiding force.

They each gave an affirmative, and the group soon reached the secondary wall surrounding the fortress. There was only one main gate with a small, thick sally port several yards away. Both were firmly shut and locked.

"What do we do now?" Phil asked.

"We'll have to wait until they open the gate, I guess," Josh answered, though he did not like the idea of having to wait. "Ted, how much time do we have?"

A disembodied voice answered behind him. "Quite a bit, I believe. As long as we don't do anything overt, it will last for hours."

"All right then, let's go wait over there in front of that building, just in case."

They waited in the dark shadow of a closed general store for about forty minutes before a cart loaded with foodstuffs pulled by two mules came rolling up to the gate.

"Here we go everyone. Stick close," Josh told his invisible party as he led them away from the building.

They followed closely behind the wagon as the gates opened, and two guards stepped out to inspect the load. The two guards looked over the sides of the cart, shifted around a few of the crates, and waved the driver through. The gates closed behind the wagon with barely enough room for the stealthy infiltrators to get through.

The mules' plodding steps pulled the cart around the side of the keep, where it came to a stop at a wooden door built into the thick granite wall. The fortress was grey and cold, and it lacked any of the fanciful designs of fairy-tale castles depicted in the movies.

Every corner was square and sharp. The entire structure was built for strength, defense, and practicality with no effort wasted on aesthetics. The expertly carved stones fit together almost seamlessly. The doors and

gates were built of hardwood and banded in iron. The driver stepped down from the wagon and pounded on the wooden door.

"Who is it?" a loud, rough female voice demanded through a small port near the top of the door.

"It's me, Marge, Horace. Open up now, and rustle up some help to unload the wagon," the driver called back through the door.

The door opened inward, struck the wall with force, and a heavyset woman wearing a bonnet and apron, and wielding a wooden spoon barged through the opening. The smell of food and warm air wafted out from the open door.

"Where have you been? You were supposed to have been here two hours ago!" she shouted, clouting Horace on the shoulder with the spoon. She narrowed her eyes and gave him a sniff. "You've been drinking again, I can smell it!" she accused him, then whacked him with the spoon again.

"Ow, stop that, woman! I'm a grown man, and I'll drink what I want, when I want!"

"Not when you're on duty and have a job to do! You're lucky I didn't run out of anything to make the lord's supper, or we'd both be in for it. Now, get that stuff in here. I'll fetch a few kitchen boys to help you unload it."

The boisterous woman stalked back into the kitchen and called out three names with a loud bellow. Within seconds, three young boys between ten and twelve darted through the doorway, dodging the wooden spoon she wielded like her personal scepter. The group had to wait until Horace and the bustling kitchen boys were busy enough to allow them to sneak past. Their opportunity came when it required the entire staff to pick up a crate of potatoes and take them down to the cellar.

As soon as they were through, the party ducked into the kitchen. The kitchen was warm, bordering on downright hot. Two iron stoves and a huge fireplace provided the heat and fire for cooking. Four large tables sat in the middle of the kitchen with an assortment of pots and pans hanging from hooks above them. Cabinets, looking like standing

wardrobes, lined the walls and held more kitchen utensils, dishes, and spices. Two huge sinks were built into one wall and were stacked high with dirty plates and dishes.

Two other women were toiling in the sweltering kitchen, scrubbing pots and wiping down the tables. Three more doors were located in the kitchen. One was open and led down to the basement, while two others stood closed on the other side of the room.

The gang quietly crossed the kitchen and selected a door at random. Josh looked back over his invisible shoulder to make sure no one was looking in their direction. He cracked the door open and peered through. Beyond the portal was a large dining hall. The walls were made of the same plain stone, but hanging tapestries and embroidered cloth gave them some decoration. A long, polished table sat in the middle with over twenty padded chairs lining its sides.

Josh closed the door gently and followed the wall to its corner where the other door was located. Checking once more to ensure no one was paying any attention, he cracked the door open and peeked through. The door opened to a dimly lit hallway. Torches in sconces flickered, providing the only illumination. Soot-stained stone formed a black teardrop above each torch.

Josh looked back into the kitchen once again before opening the door wider and leading his group through. He could still feel a hand on his shoulder, so he was confident that everyone was still following.

"Everyone still here?" he whispered to be certain.

"Yep, still here," everyone reported, one at a time.

"Whoever is last, close the door gently," he instructed.

Ted closed the door, ensuring that no one was coming or looking their way. The party crept down the dimly lit hall, which was fortunately empty at that moment. A brighter glow showed a larger chamber just ahead.

The passage opened up into what appeared to be a large audience hall. More tapestries, hangings, shields, and other objects adorned the walls. At the far end sat a carved throne of polished red granite on a

raised dais. Immediately to their right was a large set of double doors allowing entrance to the audience chamber. Straight ahead, the dim hallway continued, the end of which was lost in shadow.

"Where to now?" Ted asked.

"We'll keep going straight," Josh replied in a whisper. "We need to find some stairs. I doubt Drew is being held at ground level. Most likely, he is locked up in a tower or a dungeon."

They continued down the hall, this end even gloomier and more poorly lit than the section they had just come down. At the end of the hall was a sturdy wooden door. Josh carefully tried the handle.

"It's locked," Josh whispered.

Chase moved forward. "Let me try," he said confidently, pushing past Josh in the narrow corridor.

Chase reached into a pocket sewn onto the outside of his right thigh near the knee and pulled out a small leather case. He flipped it open and felt inside for the lock picks he wanted. He jabbed the metal frame around the keyhole a couple of times, like his mom often did when coming home on one of her late nights out, before he was able to get his pick and probe into the mechanism. He levered the picks around for a couple of minutes before cursing in frustration.

"This would be a lot easier if I could see!" he hissed irritably. "Hey, you guys back up a bit. Stop right there," he ordered as his hand came into view.

He worked his picks around inside the keyhole for another couple of minutes before he was rewarded with an audible click and was able to ratchet the bolt back.

"There, got it," he exclaimed a little too loudly.

Josh retook the lead and led them into the small landing beyond the door. Any semblance of choice was taken from them when they realized their only option was downward or back the way they had come.

"It looks like the stairs only go down," Chuck said, pointing out the obvious.

Phil looked at the walls and stairs in confusion. "Huh, that's odd. My direction sense is telling me that we should be directly under the tower."

"Maybe there is a different entrance somewhere else that leads to the stairs going up," Gabe suggested.

"Must be. I think we should go down and hope Drew is down there. If he's not, we'll just come back and try to find the stairs to the tower," Josh pointed out.

"Down it is then," replied Felicia.

The party trod carefully down the stairs, often relying on the shoulder of the person in front of them to catch themselves from stumbling. Walking down stairs without being able to see your feet was far more difficult than they had expected. As they descended, they could smell the air getting staler, and the walls became damp and slick with moisture. The stairs were almost completely dark. The lit torches were so far apart, large sections of the spiraling stairway were lost in darkness.

"Do you think anyone's down here?" Ted asked quietly.

"Probably not more than a jailer and one or two guards if anyone," Phil replied, trying to sound more certain than hopeful.

They reached the bottom landing and the end of the stairs with a feeling of relief. The stairs ended in a long, gloomy corridor lined with doors as far as they could see. Judging by the sparsely placed torches, the hall was about a hundred yards long with doors every ten feet. If the intervals remained constant, that made roughly sixty cells.

"Let's split up so we can cover both sides of the corridor at once," Josh suggested.

"It's no use; we're going to need light. I can't see very far into the cells," Felicia complained.

"Grab a torch off the wall. Ted, you'll need to back up until we can see," directed Josh.

Josh and Felicia each took a torch from a nearby sconce. The flame disappeared into their circle of invisibility until Ted backed up enough that the two torchbearers' arms and part of their upper bodies were

visible. Josh and Felicia held their torches aloft and peered through the small, barred window set in the top center of the cell door. The torch cast just enough light for them to see the back wall of the small prison cells.

They all kept step with each other as they made their way down the corridor, peeking into the cells and softly calling Drew's name. It took several minutes to investigate every cell, but none of them held their missing friend. Their hopes of finding him evaporated as they reached the end of the corridor and looked into the last two cells.

"Darn it, there's nobody here. All of these cells are empty," Felicia said dejectedly, her shoulders slumping in disappointment.

"Wrong on the first count, child, and your second observation shall be remedied shortly," a soft yet malevolent voice declared from behind them.

With a gasp of surprise, the party spun to face the voice that seemingly came from the wall at the end of the corridor. Only now, there was no longer a wall there. Where the wall had been, the passageway continued another twenty feet and was occupied by a dozen crossbow-wielding guards led by a hooded and cloaked figure. And the party was visible again.

"Ted, can you do something?" Josh whispered to the young wizard, but he did not receive a reply.

"I have restrained your young mageling to keep him from doing anything foolish," the hooded figure explained. "You will set your weapons down at once, and surrender peacefully."

It was not a request, and one glance at the cocked and ready crossbows made everyone realize that any kind of resistance was futile and likely deadly. Even without the threat of the guards, the man in the robes gave off such an aura of evil and power, they doubted they would have had a chance to resist with any hope of success.

They all wisely chose to lay down their weapons. Three of the guards lowered their crossbows, stepped forward, and collected all of the grounded weapons, as well as any knives or daggers they had on their person.

Lord Darkrell glided confidently forward and faced the immobile Ted. "I believe you most likely have my book."

Ted regained control as his muscles relaxed. "Tell me where Drew is, and I'll give it to you."

"Young man, you are hardly in the position to set conditions. However, your friend is safe and far more comfortable than you shall be, since I actually have a use for him. Now, if you would be so kind as to take my book from your satchel and hand it to me. Otherwise, I will have one of my men retrieve it from your corpse."

Ted sighed and slipped off the small leather pack that he kept the book and a few other assorted items in and pulled out the ancient volume. He felt a heartrending loss as the evil lord's boney fingers clutched the precious tome that had allowed him to learn and cast powerful magic. It felt like all the strength he possessed fled his body with the loss of the book. Now he was nothing but a small, weak, smart boy again.

"Chain them up and post two guards at the top of the stairs," Lord Darkrell commanded his guards before striding off down the passageway and disappearing.

Without a word, Gabe, Ted, and Felicia were forced into one cell while Chuck, Josh, and Phil were pushed into another. The guards clapped manacles around each of their wrists and secured them with heavy locks. The manacles were made of thick iron and securely bolted to the wall with barely enough slack to allow them to drop their hands to their sides.

They waited until they could no longer hear the retreating sounds of their captor's footfalls on the stone floor before speaking.

"At least we know Drew is all right, if you believe what Lord Dark-and-Scary said," Josh commented, hoping that Lord Darkrell was telling them the truth.

"What do you think he's going to do with us now that he has the book?" Gabe asked, more afraid than he ever had been.

"I have a better question," Felicia mused. "Where the heck is Chase?"

CHAPTER 14

Drew stood alone in his small room, staring out of the narrow window at the stars that managed to poke through the clouds, bored out of his mind as usual. His solitude was broken as the door opened without so much as a courtesy knock. He spun about and watched as Lord Darkrell practically skipped into the room, almost giddy with excitement. Drew recognized the tome he clutched tightly in his gaunt hands.

"Where are my friends?" Drew demanded, praying that his captor had not recovered the book from their corpses.

"Do not concern yourself. They are enjoying my hospitality, though not to the level of comfort you are. So long as you cooperate they will continue to do so, and perhaps their current living conditions can even be improved," he said, shoving the book into Drew's hands.

"Fine, but I will only help you if you promise me they will not be harmed."

"I am not a sadistic man. I take no pleasure in pointless pain or death. I simply do not allow such silly sentiments to block my path to what I desire. So long as I get what I want, I have no qualms in letting you all go your own way. I imagine you all wish to simply return to your world, which is precisely my goal as well."

Drew did not know if he truly believed him or not, but he had little choice but to hope that Darkrell kept his word. He sat down at the table, opened the book, and started flipping through the pages. After several minutes, Drew turned back to the beginning of the book and studied it more carefully. He read each page as Lord Darkrell watched eagerly. His growing impatience was almost palpable.

"What is the problem? Have you located the spell yet or not?" the dark lord growled.

Drew gazed at the book in confusion. "It's not here. I went through the entire thing twice, and I don't see it."

Lord Darkrell tore the book away from him impatiently and started reading it himself. "If you are toying with me, boy, I will make you sorry."

"I swear, it's not in there!"

The agitated lord peered intently at one section, pressing the pages down hard against the table. "There, it looks as though some pages have been removed!"

Lord Darkrell's eyes narrowed as he thought for a moment before he sprang up from the table with a curse, darted through the door, and stalked purposefully down the stairs.

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"What happened to Chase? He was just here a little while ago!" Felicia said, frustrated.

"What's the matter, miss me already?" Chase's voice asked through the door.

"Chase! What happened to you? Where did you go?"

"I hid and followed them for a little ways. I think I know where they are keeping Drew. There were stairs going up but they must have been hidden like the wall down here hid all those soldiers. There, got it!" he cried excitedly as he unlocked the cell door and swung it open. "Chase the Magnificent does it again!"

A shadow fell over him as the sharp point of a blade pricked him in the back through his leather armor.

"Aw, crap."

Chase turned his head and stared into the blank face of Captain Lucien. The mercenary prodded the young rogue into the cell and

stripped him of weapons and armor. He chained Chase to the wall next to Gabe, exited the cell, and bolted the door.

"Way to go, *Chase the Magnificent*," Felicia said, her voice mocking.

"Hey, you all got caught before I did! Besides, I found out where they're keeping Drew."

"A fat lot of good that does us, thanks to your not-so-successful jailbreak. I don't suppose you have a back-up plan?"

"As a matter of fact, I do have a contingency plan for such a situation," Chase told her in a haughty tone. "Do the chains allow you to reach the front of your shirt?"

"Yeah, why?" she asked, puzzled as to how that would allow them to escape.

"When the guard comes in, I want you to lift your shirt and flash him."

"Oh, so you can pick the locks on these chains and jump him while he's distracted, right?" she asked, picking up his line of thought.

Chase shook his head. "No, it's just something I want to see before they kill us. It's on my bucket list."

"You are such a pig!" Felicia tried to kick past Gabe to hit Chase.

"Ouch. Hey, watch it! I didn't do anything!" Gabe cried as he became the unintended target of her anger.

"You know what your problem is? You're a prude, and you can't take a joke!" Chase fired back.

"This is neither the time nor place for jokes! This is the time to try and get the hell out of here!"

"It's never the time or place for a joke with you! *I'm Felicia. I'm so uptight that when I fart only dogs can hear it*," he mocked her in a falsetto voice.

"Oh, you little creep! I have your bucket list right here!"

Felicia scooped a small wooden bucket up off the floor with her foot and flung it at Chase. The bucket made a hollow thunk as it struck him in the forehead.

"Ow! You bitch!" he cursed, then tried to kick her past Gabe.

Felicia cursed him back and kicked out at him as well. Poor Gabe was trapped in the middle of the fight and took most of the beating.

"Ow, you guys, stop it! Ow!" Gabe yelped as a flurry of blows hit him in his thighs, stomach, and chest.

Chase and Felicia seemed oblivious to Gabe and Ted's pleas for peace and kept kicking at each other's legs and cursing each other vehemently. Their tirade would likely have continued until they wore themselves out and Gabe was turned into a mass of bruises had their cell door not suddenly crashed inward.

Lord Darkrell stood faintly illuminated by the flickering torchlight. The two combatants paused their kick fighting. Each of them had the other in some sort of leglock and was suspended above the floor, hanging from the wall by their chains and shackles.

"Where is it? Where is the spell that brought you here!" the furious Lord Darkrell demanded as he stormed up to Ted, waving the book accusingly under his nose.

Ted actually smiled at the fearsome man. "I tore it out while we were in town and hid it."

"Tell me where it is, or I swear none of you will ever leave here alive."

"I'll tell you where it is, but you have to give me your word that you will take us all back to our own world when Drew opens the portal for you," the young wizard offered without flinching under the dark lord's gaze.

"You are in no position to bargain. I could simply have Lucien flay the skin from your bodies until you told me what I want to know."

"Which takes time, and you don't know what may happen to me if you torture me. It would be a shame if I died under torture. You do not know my medical conditions or my health problems. I assure you, there are more than a few. Plus, I have no reason to make anything easy on you if all you are going to do is kill us in the end."

"Perhaps it would be best to take you all with me. I cannot kill you until your friend actually opens the portal for my men and me. In the meantime, you would have a chance to escape or be rescued if I left you

here. The last thing I need is heroes running about my domain bent on my downfall. Very well, you have my word. I will not have you harmed and will dump you back in your world as long as I get my portal opened."

"It's a deal. The missing pages are in my boot."

"You lied to me, you little scoundrel! You told me you hid it in Martin's Vale."

"No, I said I tore it out in Martin's Vale and hid it. I only inferred that I had hidden it in Martin's Vale. You came to your own conclusions," Ted said.

Lord Darkrell actually grinned, although no one watching would have taken it for friendliness. "You are a very clever lad. You remind me of myself when I was young. Very well, I will have Lucien bring you and my missing spell upstairs where you can join your friend. I pray that not all the people of your world are as difficult to deal with as you all are."

The sinister lord turned on his heel and glided back out the door. As soon as he disappeared, his faithful second strode into the room and opened their shackles. No one even considered trying to overpower the captain, and they were glad they had not tried as they stepped out into the corridor and saw several more guards waiting. Even without the additional guards, they knew it would likely have been suicide to try something so foolish.

Under the watchful eyes of the guards, Captain Lucien freed the others from their chains and marched upstairs. They reached the landing where they had initially descended to the dungeons. Just as Chase had said, the stairs now continued up in a wide spiral, previously hidden by the use of a clever illusion. They finally entered a door on the fourth landing and were escorted inside.

"Drew!" Felicia cried, running across the room and wrapping him in a hug tight enough to make it hard to breathe.

"Drew, are you all right?" Josh asked.

"I'm fine, I guess, all things considered," he replied, once Felicia let him go. "Josh, you came too? I can't believe it!"

"Of course I came. You're my little bro, aren't you?"

Drew gave him a look of disbelief. "Yeah, but, you know, we're not exactly what you would call close."

"We're just different, is all. No matter what, you're still my brother. I guess it took this little life-threatening adventure trip for me to learn that."

"Man, I bet Mom and Dad are freaking out right now," Drew said.

"Yeah, I would imagine. They probably have the FBI and everyone all out looking for us. But Ted made us a deal to get us all back though, so we'll be OK."

"I made the same sort of deal myself." Drew looked over the heads of his gathered friends and finally noticed Chuck's large form standing quietly in the back. "Chuck! What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't let my best friend run off to some T*wilight Zone* place with no one to help him but a bunch of dweebs. Besides, I didn't want to miss out on cracking a few heads."

"Wow, thanks for coming. I'm glad they had your help, no matter what the reason."

Lord Darkrell, who had thus far remained patient and silent in the corner, cleared his throat. "Now if the family reunion is complete, I will have my spell," he insisted, reaching his hand out toward Ted.

Ted pulled four pieces of paper neatly folded up in a plastic bag from the top of his boot. He removed the papers from the bag and smoothed the pages with his hands. The sinister lord snatched them like a snake after a mouse and eagerly read their contents.

"Yes! Yes, this is what I have been looking for," he whispered in a dry hiss. "Here, you look at these and tell me you can do this again!"

Drew took the proffered pages and scanned through them. It was the same spell he had cast that started this whole thing. "I can do it. I just have to get back to the same spot where it opened, and I should be able to do it again."

"Excellent," Lord Darkrell cackled. "Get your rest. You will need it. We leave at first light," he declared as he snatched back up the papers and turned to leave the room.

"Wait," Felicia called to his back. "We have horses tied up a ways outside your town. Someone needs to get them."

Lord Darkrell turned and faced her. "Your animals were brought in nearly an hour ago." He then turned and swept out of the room.

The guards who had been previously waiting outside filed in with cots and blankets and set them up in the small room before departing and leaving them to themselves. The group was certain there were a sufficient number of them waiting just outside the door to ensure they did not try to leave. Everyone except Chuck was too excited at their reunion to take immediate advantage of the cots and stayed up for over an hour exchanging stories of their adventures while Chuck stretched out and almost immediately began snoring.

Exhaustion eventually won out over excitement, and they all took advantage of the remaining night to get some much-needed rest. The morning came far too early for the beleaguered group as guards brought in trays of food. Apparently, Lord Darkrell wanted to ensure that his young guests had the strength and energy to make the long journey ahead.

Regardless of whether being well-fed was beneficence or self-serving, they ate it all gratefully. Soon after finishing, Captain Lucien and several of his guards came and escorted them downstairs to the courtyard where a caravan of riders awaited. Prominent amongst them was the fanciful carriage of Lord Darkrell himself. Their own horses were saddled and waiting, their packs securely strapped onto the horses' rumps behind the saddles.

"You will ride unfettered as long as you do not attempt to escape. Lord Darkrell wanted me to remind you that he holds the only means of returning to your world, so it is best for all of you to see this through to its planned conclusion. He will hold to his word so long as you hold to yours," the captain informed them.

"We'll do what we agreed to. It's time we all went home," Drew assured him.

Captain Lucien nodded once, satisfied with his answer, and shouted for the convoy to begin moving. Once outside the gates, an army of ogres, orcs, and goblins formed ranks and marched behind the horsemen. The young humans were amazed at the creatures' ability to maintain the pace that the cavalry set for such a distance. They only stopped once during the day for a thirty-minute rest and lunch before moving once again until the sun set.

The army stuck to the roads as much as possible but avoided any towns and farms along the way. It took nearly a week to reach the pass Drew recognized as the same one where the snow creatures had attacked him and Droog's small party of goblins. Apparently, the size of the army he rode with now was sufficient to deter any sort of attack, because they passed through in two days without so much as a sign of the hairy white creatures.

As they drew nearer their destination, some of the young people started to have doubts as to what they were soon going to do. What had begun as a straightforward rescue mission was now a convoluted mess of conflicting morals and responsibility.

"Drew, are we doing the right thing?" Felicia asked. "If we let this Darkrell creep bring weapons and soldiers back from our world, he'll enslave the people of this one."

"What else can we do? This is not our war. Besides," Drew said as he looked pointedly at his friend, "there is a big difference between him getting through the portal and getting back with what he wants."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think he knows that much about our world and how things work. His mind cannot comprehend much beyond what he has experienced in this world. All his concepts and ways of thinking about sociology and the way the world works are based entirely on what he knows from this world. If he thinks the only difference between our worlds is our weapons, he is in for a big surprise."

"What do you mean by that? He has gold and gems, all of great value in our world. There are bad people who will give him whatever he

wants for the right price. What is going to keep him from succeeding and conquering everyone here?"

"We'll just have to wait and see, I suppose. Regardless, we are not in much of a position to take any kind of direct action, no matter what we would like to do."

The others were forced to concede Drew's point. They were unarmed in the midst of a hostile army. This was not a game where a mistake could be corrected with a roll of the dice; it was their lives on the line. The army marched for three more days before Lord Darkrell approached them.

"We will arrive at the location from whence you entered tomorrow afternoon. You will be prepared to do your part," Lord Darkrell informed them.

"I'll do my part, don't worry," Drew replied crossly.

"You had better. Do not think of crossing me. I assure you, my imagination, when it comes to punishing those who cross me, is far greater than yours," he warned sinisterly.

"Whatever. We'll cooperate."

There was a slight change to the routine the next morning. Once the party had eaten, guards came and bound the captives' hands together. Fortunately, they tied their hands in front of them so they could still ride. It appeared that Lord Darkrell was taking no chances of his charges escaping or trying anything funny. Shortly after the sun broke above the tree line, they marched forward to what may be the conclusion to their destiny.

Human and goblin scouts ranged ahead on their horses and massive wolves. Their job was to scout the path ahead of the army's line of march, ranging wide and as far as two miles ahead of the main force to ensure that no traps or ambushes lay in wait. The scout leader came to a halt and signaled the men with him to converge on his point.

"Looks all clear so far, Sergeant," one of his human scouts reported.

"Yes, we seem to be fortunate. It appears as though our harassing forces are keeping the king's army divided and properly occupied. We'll

move together at a walk from here until the goblin wolf riders bring me a report of our flanks before returning to Captain Lucien," the sergeant told the four human scouts in his charge.

He almost always sent the wolf-riding goblins out on the flanks, not just because their mounts were swifter than his horses and more maneuverable, but because he couldn't stand to be around the foul little vermin. As the minutes dragged on into an hour, he began to curse his goblin scouts' delay.

"What in the blasted hells is keeping those stupid gobs? They should have caught up with us at least half an hour ago!"

The scout sergeant's curses were cut off as the shrubs and vegetation abruptly burst into motion all around him, and a flight of arrows feathered the small scout contingent. A second volley unseated the last of the scouts before they had time to even wheel their horses about and attempt to flee the ambush. The shrubbery, sporting longbows and arms, grabbed hold of the horses' bridles before they could bolt. Soft words of reassurance calmed the spooked animals as additional, cleverly camouflaged men and women separated themselves from the surrounding foliage.

"Quickly, change uniforms with one of the scouts. Try to find one without too much blood or holes in it," advised one of the rangers.

"Should I take the leader's uniform?"

"No, he is more likely to be known by someone in command. Better to take one of the underlings' uniforms. Here, this one took a single arrow to the throat. We can wash the blood off the leather, and you should be able to go unnoticed," the first ranger declared.

The second ranger stripped down, donned the dead scout's leathers, and mounted his former steed. With a quick word of luck, the ranger turned the horse and rode hard back to the forward troops of Lord Darkrell's army. Within minutes, he spotted the front ranks of riders and slowed to a trot, waving his arm and calling out a greeting to identify himself as friendly.

The ranger rode past the front rank of riders until he found a human with a lieutenant's rank. The ranger spy reined in his mount and rendered

a salute to his superior before giving his report. He glanced sharply at the young group of people riding just behind the junior officer.

"Sir, our scouting foray has shown the route ahead clear of serious antagonists, with the exception of a small group of rangers that we easily dispatched. I would have reported directly to Captain Lucien, but the goblin riders were late reporting back, and the sergeant is waiting for me to return so we can ride ahead and regain our proper lead on the vanguard," the ranger spy lied.

"Very well, scout. Return to your duties. I will relay this good news to Lord Darkrell personally."

With a parting glance at Josh and his crew, the ranger wheeled about and swiftly rode back the way he had come. The lieutenant cantered back down the line to where Captain Lucien was currently apprising their lord on their progress and the proximity of their destination.

Felicia looked at her bother and exclaimed in a low tone, "Wasn't that Lucas?"

"Yeah, I'm sure it was!" he replied in an excited whisper.

"What was he doing in that getup and reporting to these jerks?" Felicia asked.

"I'm not sure, but I think we should all be ready to duck at a second's notice," Phil suggested.

Captain Lucien rode forward a few minutes later and ordered the foot soldiers to precede the cavalry. The young adventurers had to wait as the infantry stomped by in mass procession before they once again started forward, riding alongside Lord Darkrell's carriage. A score of cavalry and about a hundred orcs and a dozen ogres of the reserve force flanked them.

They rode for another two hours before spotting the first signs of something amiss. All along the infantry's front and flanks, arrows flew from the woods and brush. The ambush inflicted only light casualties, but the harassing attacks were ceaseless and slowly took their toll.

"Captain, what is happening out there?" Lord Darkrell demanded to know.

Captain Lucien, who was currently being briefed by one of his junior officers, broke off with a nod to the man. "My Lord, our forces are being harassed by ranger archers. My men chase after them, but they swiftly disappear back into the woods as soon as we attempt to engage them. I have ordered two platoons of cavalry to ride them down the next time they dare show themselves."

"Tell your men that nothing is to keep us from getting to our destination. They are to walk through the fires of hell if necessary and die to a man if that is what it takes to succeed! My success is vastly more important than the lives of this force!" Lord Darkrell snapped.

"It is as you command, My Lord. Worry not. My troops will hunt down and destroy these pitiful rangers. Their pathetic resistance is an annoyance at best."

Lucien rode back hard to his soldiers and started barking orders at all those around him. Men, orcs, ogres, and goblins jumped to obey or just to get out of his sight before he took out his rage upon them.

"Looks like the rangers are giving them hell right now," Chase remarked, smiling mischievously. "I hope Samone is all right."

"I hope they are *all* all right. Even if Elderin was able to call in more rangers and druids, they can't hope to defeat an army this size. There must be three or four thousand of these goons," Gabe said.

"All they can do is try. You know they'll never just roll over and take it," Ted sighed.

Their surroundings began to take on an air of familiarity as they started to come near the original portal location. A large portion of Lord Darkrell's army had just reached the bottom of a small flat area between two very low hills when Captain Lucien came riding back as fast as his mount would carry him. His horse was in a lather as he reined up hard next to his master's carriage.

"My Lord! We are under heavy attack at our head and front flanks! The way was not clear as the scouts reported!" Captain Lucien said in heavy breaths.

"How much trouble could a bunch of rangers and a few pathetic druids give an army this size!" the furious lord demanded to know.

"Milord, it's not just rangers. A large force of the king's men seems to have joined them. Their numbers are nearly equal to ours from first estimates! Most of my cavalry are scattered chasing down their harassing forces, and most have not reported back, sire!"

The door to Lord Darkrell's grand carriage flew open, banging hard enough against the side to break one of the polished bronze hinges, causing it to hang askew.

"Order the reserve forces to surround us, Captain. You! Children! Get off those horses, now!" he commanded, his face burning in outrage.

The young men and woman obeyed, not wanting the fearsome lord to shift his ire toward them. He ordered the huge ogres to lead the fore while he and his young charges followed behind, surrounded by the vicious-looking orcs and a score of elite human guards. As they topped the first rise, they could see the rangers and the king's infantry desperately engaged in battle with Lord Darkrell's forces.

Cavalry under the command of Captain Acadis broke from cover and plowed deep into the evil army's left flank, carving away a large piece of Lord Darkrell's army and separating it from the main force. Another heavy force of General Haskins's footmen crashed into the now vulnerable group of foes and forced it into a rout.

"This is intolerable!" Lord Darkrell screamed in rage. "Captain Lucien! When a breach presents itself, you will command my forces to hold it open while my reserve force charges through the middle and holds the portal location!"

How Captain Lucien always seemed to be at hand when his master called was inconceivable to the adventuring group. Captain Lucien relayed his master's orders to his men. Lord Darkrell reached down, grabbed a handful of small stones, and began spouting spidery words of magic as he gazed intently at the titanic battle that raged below.

Midway through his casting, a spell so complex that Ted could not even begin to fathom its intent, the stones in his skeletal hand began to glow a fiery red. The stones shone so brightly that even in the bright daylight, the evil wizard's gnarly old bones shone under the red-tinged

luminescent skin. As his spell hit its crescendo, he threw the stones up into the air. Instead of making a lazy arc out into the troops below, they streaked high into the sky and disappeared.

Drew and his friends stared anxiously between the sky and the forces in the small valley, waiting for something to happen. Bright, flaming orbs streaked down from the sky at great velocity. The small, fiery stones had grown in size until each was its own small meteor. The blazing rocks crashed mostly into a line of General Haskins's infantry, creating a massive breach in his forces.

Lord Darkrell's army wasted no time in taking advantage of the opportunity and filled the breach, creating a nearly undisputed path to the top of the hill and the portal site that lay just beyond.

The dark master ordered his personal force to charge forward, prodding along his captives to keep up. The young humans were amazed at the speed the wizard's spindly legs seemed to tirelessly propel him down one hill and up the next. Once they gained the top of the far hill, more of the general's forces slowed their headway. Lord Darkrell ordered his ogres to clear another breach and surround the small area just beyond.

The huge ogres, specially trained and equipped as the wizard's personal guard, waded to the fore and struck aside their human opposition with their huge swords and heavily armored bodies. Captain Lucien and a few human guards prodded the captives forward behind their evil leader.

Lord Darkrell came to a halt in a perfectly circular patch of ground completely devoid of plant life. It looked as though someone came through and swept the area clean on a daily basis.

He pulled the book stuffed with the pages containing the spell from a leather satchel and thrust it hastily into Drew's hands. "Do it now, quickly!"

"Um, I need to draw a circle and pentagram and trace it with salt!" Drew shouted nervously.

"There is no time; stand aside!"

The baleful wizard raised his arms and began another casting as Drew looked around and saw what had him in such a hurried frenzy. The king's forces were pressing his personal guards. Heavily armored knights battled the hulking ogres just a few yards away with massive two-handed swords and pikes.

The ground before the group flared up in a brief but intense blaze of fire, scorching a perfect circle and pentagram on the ground. The points of the pentagram continued to burn with a small flame, an apparent replacement for the candles Drew had previously used.

Lord Darkrell turned his smoldering eyes from the results of his spell back to Drew and spoke coldly. "Cast the spell, child. You have no need of salt. The earth's own minerals and ash are a suitable substitute."

Drew swallowed hard and read the spell from the paper that shook in his quaking hands. A small breeze began to pick up and steadily grew stronger. As Drew continued chanting the words to the ritual, a faint light began glowing softly in the center of the large glyph and steadily grew brighter. As he neared the completion of the spell, the glow turned from a faint luminescence to a brilliant glaring aura of incandescence.

"I need a knife or something to shed a small amount of my blood to open the portal," Drew shouted above the whipping wind and the din of battle.

Captain Lucien strode forward with his dagger in his hand, grasped Drew's wrist roughly, and drew the blade swiftly across the startled young man's open palm. A virtual torrent of blood welled up from the needlessly deep gash and ran onto the ground. Drew had to jump back with the book as the wind turned into a swirling vortex within the confines of the pentagram. This time, however, the portal remained stable and did not forcefully attempt to pull him through.

"I have to go through last because the portal will close behind me," Drew shouted in warning. "Take my friends through, and I will follow after you."

Lord Darkrell stared a moment at Drew in distrust before nodding his head. "Very well. Captain Lucien, ensure that he and as many men as

can break away follow us through immediately," he ordered his commander.

"It shall be done, My Lord," Captain Lucien assured his master.

Lord Darkrell began roughly shoving his captives through the portal, although they hardly needed any encouragement. He spared a brief second to look back over his shoulder before jumping through himself. Captain Lucien looked to see if he could pull any of his men from the fray, but determined it was going to be impossible to rescue any of them. Only a thin line of his fighters kept his foes from overrunning him and following his master through the portal.

Lucien grabbed Drew by the front of his shirt and was trying to pull the boy behind him through the portal when an arrow took the captain in the back of his thigh. He cried out in pain as he stumbled and clutched at his wound with both hands, releasing his hold on his prisoner.

Drew turned and saw Brody reach for another arrow to take a second shot at Captain Lucien. Lucien grabbed a piece of Drew's shirt again and started to hobble toward the portal. Drew raised the thick tome and brought it hard across the side of the captain's head.

Captain Lucien stumbled to the ground and Drew jumped through the portal without him. The magical gate snapped closed with a thunderous crack and disappeared from view, instantly leaving only a scorched pentagram and a furiously swearing former commander pounding the ground in rage with his fist.

As the last of Lord Darkrell's personal guard force fell to Captain Acadis and General Haskins's army, with the help of the rangers and druids, the rest of the invading army was routed and fled the battlefield as swiftly as they could. Rangers and cavalry continued to press and harass them, chasing them for days, until the survivors managed to escape into Storm Peak's Pass.

Once the rout was well underway, Elderin approached General Haskins. "It looks as though your army was victorious, General."

"With the help of your rangers and druids," he said with a nod to the elder druid. "What about the situation with Lord Darkrell and the portal to that other world?"

Elderin took a deep breath and sighed. "Lord Darkrell was able to get through, but only with the young people of that world. Your soldiers and my rangers were able to tie up his guards enough to prevent them from getting through. One of my rangers also managed to bring down his military commander and prevent him from following his master, so Lord Darkrell will be by himself in that world. Whether that will hamper him enough to prevent him from successfully executing his plan, I do not know. He is a remarkably powerful and resourceful man."

Elderin paused a moment to think about this last statement. "Although a great deal of the power he relied on may not be available to him in that world. I wonder if he knows that."

"Only time will tell, I'm afraid."

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The party of adventurers burst into the dimly lit room of the old abandoned house, one after another, each bumping into the previous person as their momentum propelled them several steps into the room. Lord Darkrell appeared with Ted firmly in his grip before the others were able to shake off the disorienting effects of traveling through the magical gate. The sinister lord even seemed to shake off his vertigo before the youths preceding him. Gabe was still holding his stomach and drooling, trying valiantly not to throw up when Drew burst through the gate clutching the book to his chest.

"Where are we?" Lord Darkrell demanded.

"We're in an abandoned house a few blocks from my home," Drew replied, still dizzy from his travels.

"I did it! I made it!" he cried almost gleefully. "Where is Captain Lucien? Why did he not follow you through the portal?"

"He didn't make it. None of them did. Your guards were busy holding off the other soldiers, and Captain Lucien took an arrow in the leg and fell," Drew answered.

"It does not matter. I made it, and that is what is important. Take me to your home, and you will advise me from there," he ordered.

"Taking you home was not part of the deal!"

Lord Darkrell increased the pressure of his grip on Ted's arm and pulled out a gleaming dagger from under his robes. "You will do what I command! You will provide me with whatever information I require to make contact with the mercenaries and weapon makers or sellers of your world! Do I make myself clear?"

"Fine, I'll take you home. I should be able to find out something online, but then you leave me and my friends alone forever."

"Once you are of no further use to me, I will gladly depart your company and return to my world as the greatest conqueror in history!" he cackled in delight.

Drew led the way down the stairs of the abandoned house and out the back door. He and the others pulled up in surprise as they rounded the corner of the house and saw the flashing lights of two police cars behind three police officers and nearly all of their parents. Then everyone started shouting at once.

"Mom, Dad!" Drew shouted.

"Drew, Josh!" Drew's parents shouted together.

"Mom, Dad!" Gabe cried.

"Oh thank the Lord, Gabriel!" Gabe's parents shouted.

"Ted!" Ted's parents shouted.

"Mom, Dad!" Ted shouted.

"Mom, Dad!" Phil and Felicia shouted in unison.

"Kids!" their parents shouted back.

"Mom, Dad! Did you bring any pizza?" Chuck shouted.

"Charles! We'll order some as soon as we get home, I promise!" Chuck's mother shouted back.

"Oh crap, I hope the cops aren't here for me!" Chase shouted.

"Freeze! Sheriff's Department!" the cops shouted as they pulled their pistols and pointed them at the robed individual holding Ted in one hand and a large knife in the other.

"Damn it all to the abyss! None of you move, or I'll slit this little rat's throat!" Lord Darkrell threatened.

There was a great deal of shouting going on and more than just a little confusion. Lord Darkrell switched his grip to hold Ted around the neck with the arm gripping the dagger so his other hand was free to cast one of his deadly spells.

It was a perfect example of pandemonium. The deputies continued to train their guns on the kidnapper while trying to talk him into releasing his hostage, the parents cried out in fear and outrage, Ted's friends alternated between pleading and threatening the evil wizard to let Ted go, while Lord Darkrell babbled out the incoherent words to one of his spells. A strong bolt of electricity shot out of the evil wizard's hand and struck one of the sheriff's deputies in the chest, knocking him to the ground.

"He's got a Taser!" one of the deputies warned as he glanced at his partner rolling onto his knees, quivering and groaning from the jolt.

"What in the abyss?" Lord Darkrell cried.

He did not understand why his spell had not turned the man and half the people around him into piles of ash. Ted understood what had gone wrong. Their world was nearly magically barren, a secret he had intentionally kept from his captor in hopes of catching him unprepared.

"Bah, enough of this! I'll end this now!" the incensed lord snarled as he reached into his robe and drew forth a powerful, rune-inscribed wand.

Ted was certain the wand would work as designed since the rod itself contained the power necessary to release its destructive spells, much like an arcane battery just waiting to unleash its pent-up energy.

He felt the wizard's grip around his neck loosen a bit when Lord Darkrell pulled the wand from his robes. Buckling his knees, Ted let himself fall straight down. Lord Darkrell's arm scraped at his nose and forced the glasses off his head, but his unexpected escape attempt succeeded in taking him out of the cops' line of fire.

Everything seemed to happen all at once. Lord Darkrell brought out his wand, Ted slipped down out of his captor's grip and rolled away, and Darkrell brought the wand up to unleash its assault with a single word of command. One of the deputies cried out "Gun!" as the wooden rod was pointed at him, and another deputy fired his Taser into Lord Darkrell's chest. The dark lord fell to the ground in a spasm and screamed shrilly. The kids all ran to their parents, with the exception of Chase.

"Taze him again. He cut Drew with a knife and touched me in my no-no parts!" Chase cried, egging the cops on, even giving the helpless wizard a kick in the backside.

The deputy glanced at Chase and apparently shocked the wizard again as Darkrell started cursing and writhing on the ground once more before the second deputy could handcuff him and search him for more weapons.

"Oh my God, Drew, what happened to you all?" Drew's mom asked tearfully as she embraced him and his brother. "What happened to your hand?" she cried out frantically as she saw the blood-soaked strip of cloth he had wrapped around it.

"It's a long story, Mom. I'll try to tell you all about it later. How long have you been waiting out here?"

"We just arrived with the police a few minutes before you came around the side of the house. We found your note less than an hour ago. We were all so worried," she tearfully replied.

Ted looked over at Drew while his parents hugged and kissed him mercilessly. "Time is kind of weird when you travel like that. I'll try to explain it later."

Drew just nodded as one of the deputies walked over. "We've got the suspect in custody now, folks. Are you kids all right?"

"Tired mostly, but otherwise we're OK," Drew answered for the group.

"That's good. I know you have all had a rough time, but we need you to come to the station and fill out at least a preliminary report for now. We can hold off on the details until you have rested a bit."

"Right now? Can't it wait at least until tomorrow?" Gabe's mother asked, still crying over her formerly missing son.

"We really need to ask a few questions while their memories are still fresh, ma'am. I'm sure we can keep the interviews short for now and get into more details after they have rested up," he assured all the parents around him.

"It's all right, Mom and Dad, we'll go make a statement," Drew said, then turned to address the deputy. "Make sure you take everything from him. He's really tricky. He said he has magic rings, necklaces, and stuff. It may be nothing, but they may be trick stuff to help him escape. I know he has a bunch of secret pockets in his robes where he pulls out all kinds of stuff."

"We'll look into it. Thanks for the heads-up. You can all just follow the cruisers to the station." The deputy then left to confer with his fellow officers.

"Can I ride with you and Josh, Drew?" Chase asked, the only one who did not have a parent there.

Drew's mom looked at Chase and smiled. "Of course you can, Chase. We tried to call your mother, but she wasn't home."

"That or passed out, it's pretty much a fifty-fifty chance as to which," Chase replied with more ease than he felt.

"What the hell are we going to tell them at the police station?" Josh whispered to Drew once they were packed into the back of their car. "If we tell them the truth, they'll either think we're nuts, or they'll make us show them how we did it."

"Do what works best in these kinds of situations—lie," Drew said simply. "Tell them we were playing Dungeons and Dragons when this creep came in and kidnapped us at knifepoint."

"How do I explain the note I left?" Josh asked.

Chase spoke up to supply the answer. "Tell them that the lunatic was demanding gold and gems from us and sent me to get them. I ran to your house and told you what was going on. We grabbed as much money as we could, since that's what we thought he must have wanted,

and ran back to the abandoned house. We didn't go to the cops because we were afraid he would hurt the others. All he did was ramble about gold and gems and taking over the world."

"Why all the talk about gold and gems?" Drew asked.

"Trust me, it's going to come up," Chase replied, patting a distinct bulge in his leather coat.

"You didn't!" Drew whispered in surprise.

"Are you kidding? How could I not?"

"All the gold and stuff he brought to buy weapons and soldiers? When did you do that?" Drew begged to know.

"As soon as he popped through the portal and was still a little dizzy. It was easy with everyone bumping into everyone else," Chase told him, grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

"You still manage to amaze me sometimes, Chase."

"I am pretty amazing. I keep telling you all that, but you never listen."

EPILOGUE

Drew could not help but smile as he thought about his friends and all they had gone through just for him. He saw the changes that even that short adventure had wrought in him and his friends.

Some were obvious, like Gabe's weight loss, but there was more, much more. He saw how Gabe had found courage and opened his mind to more than one truth.

He saw how, despite his brother's hostility, they were family. Josh had risked his life for his annoying little brother.

That thought made him think of Chase. Chase had always displayed a deep loyalty to Drew, but it was not until now that he realized what that really meant. Drew looked over at his friend staring out of the car window, his typical mischievous grin plastered on his face, and saw that Chase viewed him as more than a friend. They were family, and practically the only one the troublesome young man really knew.

Ted had shown great courage and found a strength in himself he never thought he could possess. It was his impressive intellect that got all his friends through the portal, and his strength of will that helped them rescue Drew.

Thinking of the twins, Drew saw how important and strong the bond between family was, and how that bond could even reach out and support those friends that were truly close. He realized this misadventure might have created the opportunity for him to experience a similar bond with his own family.

Even Chuck, that big lout who had only shown enough interest in Drew to give him an occasional wedgie, had come in support of his best

friend. All of these things made Drew look at himself and gave him a new outlook on what was truly important in life. Not everything and everyone he disagreed with needed to be fought. There were greater evils in the world that he may one day need to face once more, and if he expended the energy doing battle with all those minor annoyances, he would be too exhausted to fight when the real battles came.

Drew did not know if the others were having such profound realizations or not, but what he was sure of was that none of them were the same people today that they were just a couple of weeks ago.

Well, except maybe Chase.

FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you enjoyed this tale and will try my other works. Feel free to look me up on Facebook! You can also check me out on my website http://brocksbooks.com/ where I post release dates, keep you apprised of my newest projects, and answer questions!

PLEASE **REVIEW** MY BOOKS (Especially if you liked it). Customer reviews are the primary means of enticing others to purchase them. I am dependent upon the sales of my books to earn a living that will allow me to continue writing stories that I hope bring you some measure of entertainment. Thank you for your support.

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The Sorcerer's Path is an epic fantasy series.

The Sorcerer's Ascension: Torn from a life of comfort and luxury, his family destroyed by political intrigues and aspirations, a young boy must quickly grow into a man before the deadly streets of Southport devour him. Follow Azerick through a page-turning adventure that pits him against thieves, thugs, murderers, and men of power that will stop at nothing to achieve their goals.
Azerick must fight just to survive, but for him survival is not enough. A hunger to avenge the wrongs committed against him burns deep within. But that is not all that lies within the young man. There is a power waiting to be unleashed that may be the key to achieving the justice and security he seeks--if it does not destroy him first.

The Sorcerer's Torment: Azerick flees The Academy but quickly falls prey to powerful beings that use his skills and power for their own amusement. What these creatures do not understand is the power of the young sorcerer's will and the lengths he will go to for vengeance. Despite becoming a prisoner, Azerick finds his first true love, but can he keep it?

The Sorcerer's Legacy: Azerick has found himself a home and tries to settle down. He takes on an apprentice and tries to put all the death and desire for vengeance behind him. But when the Rook finds him, Azerick is once again pulled back into Ulric's schemes. Knowing that all he has worked toward and everyone close to him is in danger as long as these schemes are ongoing; Azerick decides to put an end to it, once and for all.

The Sorcerer's Vengeance: After narrowly avoiding being killed in his own bed by the land's most feared assassin, Azerick leaves his school behind to find out who sent him and to put an end to the threat once and for all. Azerick's search will take him to the very pits of the abyss and back to unleash hellish fury upon those that threaten him.

The Sorcerer's Scourge: With the siege broken and Ulric dead, Azerick can finally relax, study his magic, and run his school in peace. Unfortunately, Jarvin's reign is far from uncontested and the true usurper decides to make his move. Jarvin escapes with help from an unlikely source—a vampire named Landrin who still clings tenaciously to his own humanity. While Azerick and a large force from North Haven race to save the king in exile, evil forces are preparing to unleash a nightmare upon the kingdom that may well destroy them all.

The Sorcerer's Abyss: Now the master of the Fifth Circle of the abyss, Azerick is challenged by another demon lord for supremacy. Azerick must face this threat as well as his innermost demons, all the while searching for a way to escape his hellish prison.
Ellyssa fears she is going insane as she plagued by nightmares of her capture and enslavement. Deciding the key to saving herself lies in the total destruction of the object of her fears, she embarks on a crusade to find and kill the slaver, Captain Jake, and eradicate the slave trade.
Ellyssa's nightmares and battles spill out onto the streets of North Haven and gains the attention of The Academy. Fearing Azerick's school is turning out rogue wizards, The Academy decides to hunt down and destroy the rogue and place the school within their control.

The Sorcerer's Return: Azerick has come back from the abyss in order to try to unite all the races against the return of the old gods who seek to destroy them and subjugate the few they allow to survive a brutal purging. However, fighting ancient gods may be the least of his troubles as he battles to save a fractured kingdom, a brilliant son traveling a dark path, and the splintered soul of his own humanity.

The Sorcerer's Destiny: Brutally purged of his demonic influence, Azerick continues the struggle of uniting the kingdom to face the coming of the Scions, ancient gods banished by the mortal races during the Great Revolution two thousand years ago. The fallen

gods' prison is crumbling, and Azerick is powerless to stop them from breaking free and enacting their cataclysmic vengeance upon the world.
The humans must ally with the other races in a final battle against impossible odds while their entire world crumbles to the ground and is trod beneath the feet of an unstoppable foe. How can they set aside their distrust of each other when they fear the very person trying to save them?

Brooklyn Shadows is a modern day vampire tale. Full of action and snarky dialogue, Brooklyn Shadows is an enjoyable read for anyone who enjoys the supernatural underworld and butt-kicking vampires.
Shrouds of Darkness (Brooklyn Shadows Book 1) Leo Malone has been a vampire for the better part of the twentieth century. Once a prominent Sherriff (vampire cop), he now earns his living as a private eye and occasional bodyguard for anyone that requires some serious protection. Leo is hired by the daughter of a mob accountant who has gone missing.
The fact that her father is also a werewolf has Leo following a trail of grisly murders that will lead him through a web of intrigue and conspiracy involving his fellow vampires and the local werewolves that make New York their home, all the while trying to keep one particularly determined cop off his back and himself out of jail. Leo is not some pretty-boy vampire that all the girls ogle over, but a hard-eyed, remorseless killing machine who does not take crap from anyone.

Blood Conspiracy (Brooklyn Shadows Book 2): While dealing with the aftermath of the failed vampire council coup, Leo discovers that the modified Cure has fallen into the hands of a black ops government project designed to create vampiric super soldiers. When the inevitable happens, the off-book Homeland Security operation forcefully enlists Leo to help them resolve the situation. Worse yet, he has to work not only with an antagonistic werewolf named Meat, he is reunited with his hated creator, Lesile.

Primacy of Darkness (Brooklyn Shadows Book 3): Jack the Ripper, sadistic madman of old London, once thought long dead, has returned to New York in an effort to quench his thirst for blood and mayhem. When the city's vampire enclave finds itself insufficient to deal with a madman of Jack's caliber, Vincent, the enclave head, enlists Leo Malone to put the maniac down before he reveals the existence of vampires as he throws the city into the throes of chaos and terror. Leo soon finds that Jack is not the only monster with which he must contend. A ghost from his past has also seemingly crawled from its grave and seeks to put an end to him and the rest of his kind.

The Transcended Chronicles is the story of an outlandish young man as he goes from being a troublesome youth to one of the kingdom's greatest secret agents. Blessed (or cursed) with an amazing ability to both fight and abuse his body with every conceivable vice known to man, Garran Holt is either the kingdom's greatest hero or its biggest embarrassment.

The Miscreant (The Transcended Chronicles Book 1): Garran Holt is a troubled young man. Unable to tolerate his self-destructive ways, his mother sells him into indentured servitude as part of a work crew building King Remiel's new trade road. When mercenaries sent to disrupt the road's construction attack his work camp, Garran discovers an inner power capable of turning him into a warrior of unparalleled ability. When the leader of his work crew recognizes Garran as being one of the transcended (a fighter able to slip into the swifter currents of time), he is trained as an agent, one of the kingdom's elite spies. Crude, abrasive, and deeply committed to destroying himself with drugs, alcohol, and debauchery, Garran might be the kingdom's only hope against falling to The Guild, the powerful trade cartel bent on becoming the true and undisputed power in the land.

The Agent (The Transcended Chronicles Book 2): The Guild rules the kingdom through their puppet monarch, and Garran must race to save the last living heir to the throne before the powerful

syndicate's assassins complete their extermination of anyone who could oppose them. Garran and Prince Adam Altena struggle to find allies in hopes of rescuing Adam's sister, who was forced to marry the usurper in order to prevent even the thought of rebellion, and raise an army capable of defeating The Guild. With The Guild now in control of Anatolia's powerful army as well as their legion of mercenaries, their future is grim. How can a disreputable agent and a deposed prince convince their neighboring rulers to oppose The Guild, an organization that has had them cowed for decades?

Empire of Masks is an exciting and explosive new series that takes place in the world of Hedon and takes you across the land of Eidolan where ships sail through the skies and men and women wage war with magic, swords, muskets, and cannons.

Highlords of Phaer (Book one of Empire of Masks): Born a slave, descended of kings, Jareen Velarius just wants to provide the best life he can for his family, but Eidolan is a realm that challenges even the most stalwart of souls. Caught between his masters and those brave or foolish enough to strike against them, Jareen struggles to reconcile his role as a dutiful slave with that of a man who desires to be free. His goal: to return his people to a life stolen by the highlords more than a millennium ago.

Auberon Victore, sorcerer, alchemist, son of a powerful overlord, and Jareen's master, creates an alchemic compound he is certain will change the world; he just does not know how. Jareen sees it for the weapon that could break the sorcerers' iron grasp wrapped around the necks of every lowborn in the empire. It will change the world, but not in the way his master desires.

Across the Tempest Sea, a mighty storm has raged for a thousand years, keeping a terrible, long-forgotten enemy at bay, an enemy whose cruelty knows no bounds. Only the perpetual storm and their fear of the sorcerer highlords keep the Necrophages from returning to Eidolan and cloaking the empire in death and darkness. But the tempest is waning, and the dissidents' freedom may well come at the cost of their total destruction.

Nightbird: The Great Revolution ended the highlords' tyranny two hundred years ago, but the legacy of that epic war, and that of the principal architects' descendants, lives on. With the highlords' death and their taking magic, as it was once known, to their graves, Eidolan fell into a time of darkness and its cities lived in isolation. However, some people, dubbed arcanists, discovered a new form of magic and the airships returned to the skies, rejoining the cities in trade as well as conspiracy, but a new darkness, more dreadful and deadly than any they faced before, is coming.

Kiera is a fifteen-year-old nightbird, one of many who flit about after dark, stealing whatever they can find in order to survive. She lives on a derelict airship in the poorest part of the city with Wesley, a young man who plies his trade as an escort to wealthy older women, and his little brother Russel, an autistic savant who communicates only through sign but who could secretly be the most powerful techno-arcanist the empire has ever known. Deep in debt to the underlord Nimat, Kiera dives into evermore dangerous schemes that put her at the heart of a secret war that could spell the destruction of not just the city, but the very empire.

Kiera is caught in the center of several factions on the brink of war. When she can no longer tell friend from enemy, there is only one side she can trust—her own.

Mourningbird: A creature of darkness lurks in the shadows of Velaroth, wearing the skin of its victims, and grips the city in terror. Dorian, a Necrophage bent on sowing chaos and paving the way for his people's invasion, has declared war on the humans of Eidolan, and there appears to be no one capable of stopping him.

Kiera's world is shattered by those who hold power, and she is forced to seek an ally. The nightbird is coming into power of her own, but can she stay alive long enough to seize it? Russel's behavior has taken a turn for the worse, and his actions have drawn the

attention of those who would use his amazing talents for their own gain…and everyone else's loss.

The battle for Velaroth, and perhaps the world, has begun. Who will win? Who will live to mourn the dead? Will there be anything left for the victor to claim as their prize?

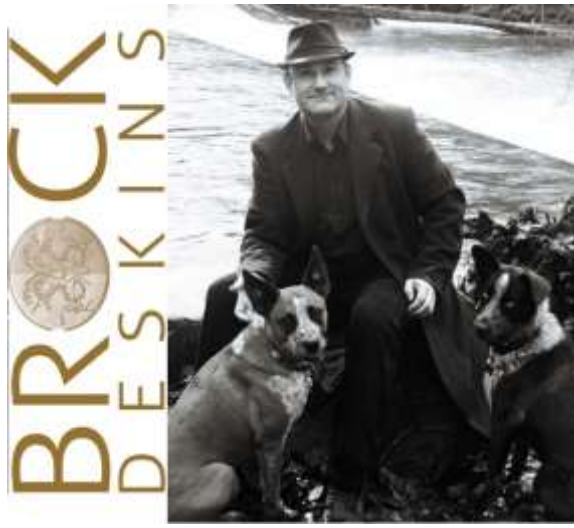
Standalone books

The Portal is a fun and exciting story of some less than popular teenagers that accidentally open a portal to a mystical land during one of their role-playing games. Drew, a dour and anti-establishment teenager, is pulled through and captured by evil creatures lying in wait on the other side. Now it is up to his friends and older brother to rescue him, but who will rescue Drew's captors from him?

Amelia (Battle for Ardentia): Amelia is a precocious, ten-year-old girl with a powerful imagination. In her alter-ego guise of a demi-goddess warrior princess, Amelia fights against a powerful demonic sorcerer named Romut and his horde of monsters in a never ending series of battles to protect the people of her imaginary world. However, the true battle strikes home when Amelia is diagnosed with a brain tumor. Now Amelia must fight not just the evil living in her imagination, but for her very life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Again, I just want to thank everyone who has purchased my books. It gives me a great deal of satisfaction knowing that I have been able to provide something enjoyable to so many people.



Brock Deskins was born in a small town located in rural Oregon. At age twenty, he joined the army and served as an M1A1 tank crewman, dental specialist, and computer analyst. While in the military, he became an accomplished traveler, husband, and father of three wonderful children. His military career completed, attended college to brush up on his skills as a computer analyst and gain new skills as a writer. Brock received his degree in computer networking and is devoting his full time and limited attention span to writing.