

# A Shadow Falls

By

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Book One  
of  
The Song of the Elves

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This book is for Linda with love – for every shadow there is a light; and in memory of Ernie Brown, a great man who loved life and walked tall in it.

## Chapter One

### The Winter Chill and the Summer Breeze

*The Horseshoe Pass: mid-winter. Year of the Light  
674; Year of the Sundering 172*

He wakes to snow, the dazzling white of winter replacing the absolute black of unconsciousness. Sovereign-sized snowflakes settle fleetingly on his forehead and cheeks before melting into oblivion. The world is so peaceful he wonders if he has passed to the other side. He surely should be dead following the fall; the only noise the gentle patter of snow on his tunic and the rasping rattle of his breathing.

How long has he lain there? The soldier is unsure, but he is keenly aware of a deep chill settling in his bones. He tries to rise, with great effort lifting his head, pushing his chin towards his chest. A storm erupts inside his brain; the soldier whimpers like a child, head flopping back in the snow. Black rain assails his vision but he fights against the draw of sleep; to pass out now would surely be to die. He tries to move again, this time edging his arm inch by inch towards his stomach. He stops. An arrow protrudes from the leather and wool, firmly planted in his midriff.

The soldier, gritting his teeth tries again to raise his head. Once more there is fire, but he clings to consciousness. He can see the grey shadow of a rock-shelf, shrouded by the heavy curtain of snow; can see the eagle's feathers dyed silver and gold that fletch the shaft buried in his middle. The arrow triggers the soldier's memory. Like a bad play, where the denouement is revealed too fast, vivid images of his last days come flooding back: the imprisonment of his father; his mother, driven from their home in the middle of the night; the flames in the forest that seared his skin; the kindness of friends that saved him from the clutches of the enemy; his desperate flight across snowbound peaks; and finally, the betrayal.

He closes his eyes. It is easier to give in to the winter chill than to face the truth. He swims in a kaleidoscope of

memories; his mother and father, happy at the hearth of their woodland home; his first horse Juniper, walking by the stream at the bottom of his field with him on top, supported by his father's loving hands; and always his father's strong face, his warm hands holding the soldier's infant cheeks as he delivers a tender kiss.

The soldier wails, exhaled breath forming a white cloud, which immediately dissipates.

*It should not end like this.*

He cannot give in to the numbness that spreads like creeping death along his limbs; cannot leave his father to rot in his dank dungeon. Tears run down his cheeks, their hot sting perversely making him shiver.

*Please do not let it end like this.*

'Hoy, who's out there?'

The challenge echoes across the vale and the soldier rolls his eyes in the direction of the gruff voice. He wants to respond but his lungs will not provide the air to voice his words. Vision grows vague. Through thickening snowfall he sees the shadowy shapes of horsemen. Does he imagine, or can he feel the thrumming of hooves vibrating through the snow?

He falls away from the light, hope washed away under waves of blackness. From nowhere a hand reaches for his retreating soul.

*Is this Heaven?*

Arms push at his shoulders. Pain returns.

'Father, is that you...'

Fingers touch his brow.

*It mustn't end like this...*

Hands pull at his shoulders...

***The Homestead of Councillor Eidur: Farsee Forest, late summer. Year of the Light 669; Year of the Sundering 167.***

Hands pulled at his shoulders, gently shaking him to wakefulness. Begrudgingly Kirik opened his eyes to see Thomas towering over his bed.

‘Time to be risin’ master,’ the servant stated, moving towards the window, head bowed to avoid the oak beam. There was giant’s blood in Thomas’ ancestry and he stood a good two feet taller than the rest of the Farsee Forest folk. With a delicate flick of pan-sized hands Thomas pulled back the shutters, allowing light to wash over the room and its reluctantly rousing inhabitant. The boy groaned, turned over on his pallet and pulled his blanket over his head.

‘Won’t do you no good,’ muttered Thomas. He had fought this battle many times before and with routine casualness yanked away the grey cover.

‘In the name of the Lady!’ yelled Kirik, hands flashing down to cover parts of his body that he wanted to remain private. ‘You’re a flaming animal Thomas!’

His head still groggy with sleep, Kirik began to pat the bed to locate the harshly withdrawn cover, but Thomas was already on the landing, the bed sheet draped over a tree trunk arm. A string of curses from Kirik did nothing to stop the manservant as he descended to the lower floor of the mansion.

Defeated, Kirik swung his feet over the side of his bed. He sat for a few moments with his head in hands, scratching at the unruly mess of black curls that fell to his shoulders. He never liked getting up in the mornings, even less so when his head had hit the pillow a mere three hours earlier - *Will had a lot to answer for, and Old Aggie for that matter!*

To make matters worse, it was harvest time, and the day ahead held a list of chores longer than his arm. His mother had repeated frequently during the past week that the merchants in Joraniak wouldn’t care if the corn were picked by a Lordling like Kirik or the lowliest of his father’s servants. The crop had to be brought in and everyone had a part to play

if the estate was to have enough revenue to buy sufficient supplies for the long winter to come. No amount of sulking could change that.

An illuminating thought pierced the gloom of Kirik's mind, chasing shadows away like the sun's rays scouring his chamber. He reached inside his pillowcase, fingers feeling for the small leather pouch, pulling the hidden packet free from the linen.

With a gentle shake Kirik's treasure rolled out, a bronze disc that he caressed as if it were the most delicate porcelain. He held it up before his eyes, inspecting the artefact that was not really his. At first glance there had appeared nothing at all remarkable about his find, yet in the days since its discovery the disc had presented Kirik with a puzzle that he had been unable to fathom. It had teased him with its intricacies, firing his imagination, making his brain hurt. Today he would show it to Will. Perhaps his best friend could help him to unravel its mystery.

After washing in warm water from a bowl brought up by Thomas, Kirik dressed in his work clothes. Pocketing the disc he took a mouthful of bread from a platter that Thomas had placed on his bedside table. He tore at the crust and crossed to the window; before him lay his world.

Farsee Manor was perched elegantly on the brow of a hill, which fell gradually away to Taria's Tear. The tributary fed the great lake to the south of Jorniak, greatest city of the elves. Viewed from the top of the three-storey mansion, the river was a ribbon of blue, bisecting the estate into two distinct halves. On the bank nearest the house the land had been tamed into a lush lawn that rolled to the water's edge. Aside from one monstrously tall oak that Kirik could touch if he leaned far enough out of his window, the garden had been cleared of trees; manicured hedges and flowerbeds in the shape of crescent moons flanked the main sweep, echoing the grandeur of the manor that had been lovingly crafted by his father.

Beyond the river the land had a more practical look: green, yellow and brown strips running in parallel to the river. A dozen of his father's human workers could already be seen bent over their tools and beyond them a fresh strip was emerging. Steadfast and Patience, his father's shires strode purposefully across the field, preparing the land for the winter corn that would be sown in the weeks after the harvest.

The scene reminded Kirik of a favourite phrase of his father, that life never stood still on a farm. As he considered this wisdom tiny butterflies stirred in his stomach. The Lord of Farsee would return home today and the young noble could hardly contain his excitement. He wasn't too old to miss his father.

Nearly thirteen, Kirik was already showing signs that he was different from the other elves in the forest. He had the height and broad set of his mother's race, and strength of body more in common with the humans of the West. Yet it was his shock of black curly hair that most visibly marked him as different from his father's kin. He had however inherited the pointed ears common to elves, which poked through his curls like mountain peaks from a forest and a keenness of sight no human could hope to match.

Kirik picked out Tam, his father's trusted foreman leading the plough team. Alongside the stout human walked his son Will, Kirik's best friend in the whole world; beyond them stretched the imposing green-canopied curtain of Farsee Forest.

Pangs of guilt caused Kirik to bite anxiously at his bottom lip. He should have been with Tam at sun-up for the harnessing of the shires, yet at that moment he and Will had been sneaking back to their beds.

Uncertain of the reception that his lateness would bring, Kirik stepped out on to the broad branch of his oak. With the surefootedness of a squirrel, he scampered along its length until he could touch the trunk. Bending down, he gripped the branch on which he stood with both hands, letting gravity pull him downwards so that his feet dangled freely in the air. He

released his grip and landed with feet planted firmly on the branch below and repeated the action several times until he stood in the shaded lawn below his bedroom window. This was the way Kirik left his room every day in the summer, much to the chagrin of his mother who lectured him frequently about broken necks.

As he strode from the dappled shade it was his mother's voice that called to him from the direction of the house.

'What have I told you about that tree?'

Kirik turned to see his mother, standing outside the long windows of his father's study. She had a basket of cut flowers hooked over one arm, the morning breeze ruffling her auburn curls. As she smiled Kirik felt his feet carrying him to his mother's side.

'Still not too old for a hug then,' Lady Eleanor beamed, gently squeezing her son's shoulders.

'Morning mother,' Kirik squeezed back, and then, as if remembering that he was nearly thirteen, looked anxiously about.

'It's alright, I don't think anyone saw us,' Eleanor teased. Kirik grinned sheepishly before waving a hasty goodbye and setting off at a pace through the ornamental gardens.

'Don't forget, your father returns today,' Lady Eleanor called after him. 'He'll want to see you as soon as he arrives!'

'I won't forget mother,' replied Kirik, his feet already pounding on the worn cobbles of the bridge, his mind running through a menu of excuses that he could offer Tam for why he was so late.

'Morning,' Kirik called, finally catching up with the plough team halfway towards the hedgerow that marked the boundary of the estate.

'You call this morning Master Kirik?' replied Tam, with more than a hint of annoyance in his voice. 'Nice of you to eventually join us.'

Tam was spokesperson for the human families that had formed Lady Eleanor's dowry on her exile from Rosewall. With reluctance, King Rogan had grudgingly allowed Tam and a score of human families to pass through the Gates of Summer. They had resided in Farsee Forest ever since, never leaving the estate where they enjoyed his father's protection.

Kirik sometimes wondered about how narrow their world must seem, forever trapped within the forest, but he had found it impossible to broach the subject with Will or Tam. It was almost as if it was taboo amongst his father's human workforce to mention the past. The foreman certainly did not look too happy this morning as he trod wearily alongside the plough, though his foul mood was most likely to do with the mischief that he and Will had got up to the night before and Kirik's absence from the field for the first few hours of the morning.

A thick rope ran from Tam's gloved left hand to the nose of Steadfast and on through her bridle to the muzzle of Patience. The brown and white shires, brother and sister, nodded their heads gently as they strode towards the forest.

'Sorry I'm late,' Kirik apologised tentatively, settling on a simple excuse for his tardiness. 'I slept through the dawn bell and Thomas didn't come for me until just now.'

'Hmm, slept through the bell be damned. You were only just slipping under the covers as it rang. What have I told you both about stopping up late, listening to Old Aggie.'

Tam shook his head from side to side disapprovingly. 'Took a pail of water in the face from our Otty to get this one out to work!'

Kirik began to snigger, stopping immediately when he saw the stern look from Tam and the warning glance from Will, who trudged contritely by his father's side.

'Anyway, you're here now,' said Tam. 'Have the reigns so I can take up my scythe and help get this crop in; and see if you can cheer this miserable beggar up.' The foreman gestured with his eyes at Will. 'He's been sulking since his soaking.'

Tam passed Kirik the reins. 'And make sure you keep those furrows straight like I taught you!'

'Yes Tam,' said Kirik, biting his lip again at the look of disapproval the foreman gave him as he left.

'So what's up, apart from the obvious?' Kirik asked Will as he fell in step beside Steadfast. The shire curled her lip and gave a snort in greeting and Kirik patted her flank in return.

'Nothing you'd know about,' retorted Will, his shoulders stooped and face bent towards the earth.

'Come on,' urged Kirik. 'Tam won't stay angry with you for long. He's a pussycat. Anyway, he's probably angrier with me because it was my idea to get Old Aggie going last night.'

The boys had stopped by the wise woman's cottage on an errand for Will's mother. Old Aggie had quickly produced the herbs requested by Gwendolyn, but her subsequent offer of a glass of fruit punch and a story of the West had proved too much to resist. Old Aggie told the best stories of any of the human elders about the Westlands. Kirik had urged her to tell them again about King David's red-armoured cavalry and the wise woman had willingly obliged, regaling them with tales of swordfights and impossible deeds until the goose-fat candles had burned to stumps, by which time both boys had missed their curfews. They had thought they would be able to slip into their respective dwellings unnoticed, but it appeared they had been found out by their inability to rise for work the following day.

'It's got nothing to do with last night,' said Will, still not looking at Kirik. Patience snorted and tossed his head wisely as if he already knew what Will was thinking.

'Then, what is it? You can tell me.' Kirik adjusted his grip on the reins and skipped a step to keep up with the shires as they neared the edge of the field.

Will looked sideways at him, as if he was going to say something important, and then he let his gaze fall back to his boots. 'It's nothing,' he said. 'Just let it go will you?'

‘Alright, but the Lady knows Tam was right; you are in a sulk today!’

Will huffed, but would say no more and so the boys began the backbreaking job of slowing Steadfast and Patience and turning the plough around for the run back across the field. They repeated the process a dozen times and with a distinct lack of conversation Kirik passed the time observing the labourers in the adjoining fields as they stacked sheaves of corn on to a wagon. The ponies Gerry and Mouse slogged relentlessly back and forth to the barn, iron bound wheels raising clouds of dust on the clay track that edged the ornamental garden. As the sun climbed towards midday Kirik welcomed the toll of the chapel bell that signalled lunch and a well-earned break.

Lady Eleanor led a team of servant girls down to the river’s edge. They brought platters piled high with cuts of freshly baked bread and wedges of cheese. Tomatoes and salad leaves framed the platters. As the human and elven labourers sat side by side in the shade of a white willow, the servants moved amongst them, pouring apple juice into wooden goblets from large white pitchers.

Kirik flopped down to eat with the rest of the tired workers, but Will moved away from the group to sit with legs dangling over the riverbank. He had hardly said a word all morning and Kirik was relieved that he did not have to spend his precious break trying to draw conversation from his friend. He resolved instead that when the day’s work was done he would drag his friend up to the Anvil. The large rock peered out over the trees to the south of the clearing. It was Kirik and Will’s favoured meeting place and offered exactly the sort of privacy needed to try to get to the bottom of what was behind Will’s miserable mood.

As Kirik munched on a sandwich of bread and cheese Maria, the cook’s daughter, dropped down on the grass beside him. ‘Hello Kirik,’ she said, leaning in close enough so that he could feel the warmth of her breath on his cheek.

‘Mmm...erro M’ria,’ he mumbled through a mouth full of bread. He had noticed lately that Maria had started to go out of her way to see him as she went about her chores, but she had never singled him out in front of the other workers like this before.

‘I like to see you eat, Kirik,’ she teased. ‘You have a way of making food look right tasty. May I?’

She leaned over his outstretched legs and pinched a piece of cheese from his plate, at the same time managing to brush his knees with her fingertips. Despite the shade offered by the willow, Kirik felt his face flush with heat.

‘Do help yourself,’ he replied nervously, not sure what to make of her attentiveness. He had known Maria all his life. They had shared a bench in school as youngsters, and Maria had gotten into many scrapes with Kirik and Will, like stealing apples from John the Blacksmith’s garden. She had been ‘one of the gang’, yet as they had grown older and the boys and girls of the estate had begun to train for their different roles in life, Maria had grown apart from Kirik. She had continued to be Will’s playmate as they lived next door to one another in the row of human cottages down the hill from the manor, but now she seemed to make a beeline for Kirik whenever she saw him and he did not know what to make of this change in their relationship.

Maria nibbled delicately on the cheese that she had plucked from his plate and then brushed her fingers against her lips, licking the crumbs. Kirik couldn’t help noticing how shapely her lips were, or how pretty her oval face had become, framed by wavy black hair that fell to her shoulders. He saw nothing of the tomboy he had played with in childhood. Too late, he realised he was staring. He started to say something to cover his blushes, but Maria beat him to it.

‘There’ll be a festival at the end of the harvest. They say musicians are coming down from the capital to honour your father. I expect there’ll be a lot of dancing.’

‘Oh, I daresay you’re right,’ replied Kirik, not sure where the conversation was going but glad to be able to talk

about something. ‘Mother’s been talking about it being a grand affair because its ten years this summer since my father became a member of the High Council. She’s been sending messengers to Jorniak for weeks to make the necessary arrangements.’

‘Then do you think there might be a dance for me and you, Kirik. I mean, will you save one for me after all the formalities are done?’

Maria leaned in closer to the half-elf and he felt his face glowing even redder. He thought she might kiss him and his mouth went dry. He had never kissed a girl before. Then the awkward moment was broken by a harsh, yet familiar voice.

‘Maria! Stop your gabbing and fetch up those plates!’

Now it was Maria’s turn to blush. A vexed look crossed her face but she leapt to her feet, gathering her skirts about her, stooping to pick up Kirik’s empty platter. It did not do to keep Cook waiting.

‘Oh, see you then,’ said Kirik weakly, opting not to offer an answer to Maria’s question. *Saved by the cook!*

Maria gave a small wave as she departed, scurrying after her mother with the rest of the servant girls, but Kirik did not notice. He was wondering why his mother was frowning at him disapprovingly and more importantly, why Will had just thrown his mug in to Taria’s Tear and stormed off across the bridge.

## Chapter Two

### The Anvil

After lunch the long list of chores compiled by his mother took Kirik and Will to the cornfields. As the sun bathed the estate in golden light, the boys leant their backs to the scything of the corn. They took up position at one end of the line of farm hands advancing systematically across the field, their crescent blades rising and falling, the severed stems collected by the women who followed behind.

By the time that Kirik's shadow had lengthened to twice his height, half of field one had been cleared and Gerry and Mouse were refusing to budge another inch. The elven workers, who were seemingly as fresh at the end of the day as they were at the start, set about collecting the field tools in long wicker tubes that they slung over their backs and carried to the barn. Their exhausted human counterparts either dived in to the refreshing waters of Taria's Tear, or drifted exhaustedly down hill to Little Rosewall, the affectionately named collection of cottages that they called home.

Kirik strode over to Will, who had made his way to the grassy bank of the river, and was undoing the laces on his shirt. They had not spoken all afternoon.

'That last hour was evil,' Kirik began. 'Thirsty work indeed in this heat.'

'You could say that.' Will's reply was muffled as his shirt came over his ears.

'You going for a swim?'

'Look's like it,' replied Will sarcastically, clearly in no mood for small talk. 'Are you going to join me or just stand there all evening asking inane questions?'

Kirik frowned at his friend's rudeness. 'No, I'm not coming in, not yet anyway. We need to talk.'

'About what?'

'About last night and about why you've been in such a foul mood lately. I want you to come with me to the Anvil.'

‘You’re joking right? After last night I daren’t be late ever again.’

‘No, I’m not joking, we need to clear the air.’

Several farmhands already splashing in the stream paused to watch the boys. Despite Kirik’s noble birthright and Will’s modest background the two had been inseparable since they were old enough to toddle. They rarely quarrelled in public, though lately many about the estate had commented that the two, normally as thick as thieves, did not seem to be getting along. Kirik quickly became aware of their audience. He did not want to provide any fodder for the fireside gossip-mongers.

‘It won’t take long, and we can come back and bathe later if you like,’ Kirik added when it looked like Will was not going to follow him.

‘Fine,’ said Will in a tone that told Kirik his friend thought it was anything but fine. He pulled his shirt back on and stomped past Kirik in the direction of the forest. The young noble fired a look of disapproval at the ear wiggling workers. They looked away guiltily as he hared off after his friend.

Kirik caught up with Will just as he was setting foot on the wooden bridge that crossed the meandering river and gave access to the little deer run that lead up to the Anvil.

‘If Tam catches us he’ll give me the lash,’ stated Will as their boots drummed on the weatherworn planks.

‘He won’t catch us,’ said Kirik confidently. ‘Besides, this is too important to let drift.’

‘What’s to let drift?’ asked Will. ‘We’ve had a telling off is all! It’s not the first time and it probably won’t be the last.’

*It’s about more than that Will and we both know it* thought Kirik. Instinctively he patted the pocket where his coin was concealed and for a moment the troubling air between them evaporated and he felt something of the excitement of sharing his discovery with his friend. ‘Besides, I’ve got something important to show you as well.’

Will raised his eyebrows at the sudden enthusiasm in his friend's voice. Maintaining an air of mystery, Kirik trotted a few strides ahead.

'Come on, last one to the top stinks!'

Looking back briefly over his shoulder to beckon Will on, Kirik set off at a healthy jog and vanished into the trees. Will huffed moodily before picking up his feet to race after his friend.

The Anvil was a distinctive outcrop of rock that defined the southwestern rim of the clearing. Wider than a row of cottages and rising high enough to peak over the treetops, the landmark afforded an excellent view of the estate. One of the Anvil's sides sloped gently enough to allow easy access to the summit, a flat plateau of smooth stone, with enough room for ten villagers to sit in comfort, or for two nearly-teenagers to sprawl side by side on their backs.

Carved graffiti told of a lifetime of adventures; Kirik and Will had been climbing the Anvil since they were old enough to explore the forest alone. The rock had been named a generation ago for its resemblance to the huge slab of metal at the heart of John the Smith's forge, but for Kirik and Will the name could not be more apt – the rock was where their fathers had sent them to hammer out their disagreements since they were old enough to be trusted to go out of sight without placing themselves in danger. "The truth will out on the Anvil", was a well-used mantra of Tam's. Kirik hoped that the sentiment would hold true as he prepared to tackle his troubled friend about what it was that ailed him.

The boys sat with legs outstretched, looking back towards the field where they had toiled away the afternoon. The last of the workers were pulling themselves from the river and already thin plumes of grey smoke were twisting skywards from the cottages; the women had wasted no time in setting fires for the evening meal.

'Been a while since we came up here together,' said Kirik, shielding his eyes. The evening sun felt comfortably

warm against his cheek, lacking the searing intensity that had sapped them for most of the day.

‘You better tell me what you want,’ said Will impatiently, refusing steadfastly to be drawn in to idle banter. ‘It’s because of you that I’ve got a night of chores ahead. Tam’s making me scrape out the candleholders to collect wax, and he’s threatened to make me sleep with Toby if I don’t get the job finished before dark.’

Toby was Will’s sheepdog. He was kept in a kennel at the back of their cottage, which Kirik knew the pigs also frequented - not the most welcoming accommodation after a hard day in the field. He understood his friend’s anxiety to get about his chores, but not the accusation that it was his fault that he had been landed with such a miserable task.

‘What do you mean, it’s because of me?’ Kirik found himself getting distracted already from what he wanted to talk to Will about. It was too easy to fall out with his friend these days.

‘You know exactly what I mean, drawing Old Aggie on about King David and the Lords of Rosewall. You know she can go on for hours.’

‘Well, no one had you tied to Aggie’s chair,’ Kirik defended himself. ‘You could have left whenever you wanted.’

‘Yeah, right,’ hissed Will. ‘Like you don’t know that I’m desperate to hear about the land where I was born.’

And there it hung between them, the matter that Kirik wanted to broach with Will, and which Will could no longer pretend did not pre-occupy his thoughts and dictate his mood.

Kirik stared out across the estate as an uneasy silence descended between them. He observed the elves melting in to the trees to the east of the clearing, as distant at rest from the humans as they had been close during their chores. He thought of his father’s frequent soliloquies on how Farsee Manor was a perfect model for how the world should be outside the forest; but the shared hours of toil in the fields

never seemed to translate into shared company around the hearth for the elves and humans who lived within the forest.

Kirik was fast coming to realise that not everyone shared his father's belief that Farsee Forest represented some kind of utopian paradise. A case in point, Will had been going through private torment for weeks now, and Kirik feared it had little to do with missed curfews and everything to do with the peculiar arrangement of Eidur's estate.

'When Tam said you've been sulking a lot, this is what it's all about isn't it? You're no longer happy here.'

Will swatted away the first of the evening midges. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'I'm talking about you withdrawing into yourself. Five times I've called for you in the past month and every time you've had some excuse not to come out. You used to be such a laugh. Now you just mope about, moaning like a teenage girl!'

Kirik regretted the harshness of his words as soon as he had said them. He never had been good at expressing what he thought, but he was satisfied that it was better to speak clumsily than to ignore the obvious distance that was growing between them. He could hardly have imagined the reaction they would provoke.

'It's not fair,' countered Will. 'You've got the world at your feet, and what have I got? You're safe, surrounded by people that love you and your destiny is clear. You will become the next Lord of Farsee and take your place out in the Summerlands, whereas for me, this is it - those bloody trees mark the boundary of my world forever!'

Kirik reeled from the depth of his friend's feelings. He had begun to wonder whether Will was content with the forest life that had seemed idyllic to them both as children, but he had no idea how unhappy his friend had become. As he looked at Will, sitting with chin resting on raised knees, staring off across the clearing, Kirik wondered if he knew his best friend as well as he thought he did.

‘I had no idea that you felt this strongly,’ Kirik offered, his thoughts suddenly jumbled.

‘No, well, there you go,’ mumbled Will, talking in to the coarse cloth of his breeches.

A red squirrel dropped down from one of the branches overhanging the Anvil and stood on its hind legs, an acorn clasped between its claws. The creature looked the two boys up and down boldly, chattered its teeth and then scampered down the back of the rock and into the shelter of the undergrowth.

‘You know, I was only a baby when I came here. My mother carried me in swaddling clothes on the back of a cart, despite the fact that she nearly died giving birth to me.’ Will’s voice was low and hesitant. To Kirik it seemed as if a drawbridge was being lowered on private thoughts that his friend had kept walled away for a long time.

‘She’s told me the story loads of times,’ continued Will. ‘She loves your mother so much that she could not bare the thought of being left behind when Lord Matthew decreed that his only daughter must go and live in the Summerlands.’

Kirik was of course familiar with the tale of Lady Eleanor’s banishment from the West, yet it felt strange and somehow unsettling to hear the story of his mother’s exile coming from the mouth of his friend.

‘Gwendolyn could not be torn away from Lady Eleanor’s side. She turned her back on her family and everything she had known to pass into the East! Imagine that, a new mother and destined to be one of the first humans in living memory to pass into the lands of the enemy.’

It was difficult for Kirik to hear his friend refer to elves as the enemy, but he tried not to let his hurt show. ‘It must have seemed like a fantastic adventure,’ he prompted.

‘She talks about those days like a child talking of its fondest toy,’ said Will. ‘She truly believed it would be a great adventure, and all done in the service of the woman she loved.’

‘It sounds like you’re saying that she doesn’t feel that way now?’ Kirik’s heart began to hammer in his chest. He was moved by the sadness in Will’s words, but a part of him also began to feel agitated by his friend’s negative talk. *Since when had his father ever done anything but good for the humans in his service?*

Will turned to look at his friend for the first time since he had started talking. ‘Well, that’s because she doesn’t Kirik. Not anymore.’ He flicked at a loose bit of stone and as he continued his voice became more agitated.

‘You probably can’t understand this, because you’re not me and you don’t see what it’s like in the dark evenings when the elders sit by the firesides, pining for their homes back in the West. Mum used to tell the old men off for going on about Rosewall, fearing they would make themselves ill with homesickness and cause the children to fret over something that could never be reached. Yet lately it’s all she goes on about. You see there was no adventure was there? All that was waiting for them was a member of the elven royal family who told my mother and father, and all Lady Eleanor’s servants, that they should be honoured to be allowed in to the Summerlands; but if they strayed beyond the fringes of the forest they would be cut down like traitors to the kingdom.’

‘That’s a lie!’ Kirik gasped, recoiling from his friend’s words as if he had been struck a physical blow.

‘No it’s not. It’s what my mum says happened.’

‘Never,’ said Kirik. ‘You and your family are guests here at my father’s pleasure. You are in no danger whatsoever. My father would never allow it.’

‘Guests!’ retorted Will. ‘Funny guests that have to toil night and day and never have a chance to leave the damned estate.’

‘You know what I mean,’ Kirik berated Will. ‘You are deliberately twisting my words. You are servants here, obviously, but you are loved by my father, and I!’

Will snorted and rose to his feet. ‘That’s big of you. Servant indeed; I thought I was your friend!’

‘Yes, of course but....’

Kirik stopped mid sentence, searching for the words to undo the hurt of his unintentional insult. He sensed that things were getting away from them and that if he did not say the right thing a rift was going to open in their friendship that would not be easily repaired. He stood and took hold of his friend by the arm. Will tried to pull free, but Kirik held firm.

‘Look, this is coming out all wrong. You are my best friend in the entire world. First and foremost, that’s all that counts, and don’t you ever forget that.’ Will tried to pull away again, refusing to look him in the eye.

‘What you’re saying is news to me. I’m sure there must be some mistake. My father’s back today and I’m sure...’

‘Oh, stop it Kirik,’ Will interrupted him. ‘It’s the truth and a well talked about fact at that around Little Rosewall. Your father may not have said it, but he damn well never lets any of our folk wander in to the woods, does he now?’

Kirik sighed. He let go of Will and put his hands on his hips, his head lowered in thought. *Was it possible that the human servants on his father’s estate were kept as prisoners?* He could hardly contemplate such a thought. This was Councillor Eidur’s homestead after all. His father was renowned for being the most liberal master in the Summerlands and he was always boasting to anyone who would listen about the harmony between the humans and elves on his estate. And yet, a nagging doubt pulled at Kirik’s thoughts. *Did his father really mean that it was the way of the world for humans to serve elves?* Humans had after all, been the enemy during his father’s youth. Eidur had talked many times of his service in the king’s army as a young soldier, skirmishing with the Westlanders before the Great Wall of Summer was erected to divide the continent into two kingdoms. Was the only kind of peace that was possible between their races one where the defeated force was subservient to the other?

A new, much darker thought entered Kirik's conscience. *If that was true, then what of his heritage? Half human, half elf: where did he fit in to this picture?*

Will had been about to storm off the rock in anger before Kirik had pulled him back. He hated the fact that he and Kirik were destined to take different places in society, but until recently it had seemed almost insignificant, as if their friendship was somehow above their social differences. Yet in recent months, as Kirik's schooling and grooming for service had pulled him away from fieldwork to yard games, it had loomed as an unspoken obstacle between them. Gwendolyn knew this was where his moodiness and brooding stemmed from. She was terrified at the impact that this natural development would have on her son, just as her relationship with Lady Eleanor had cooled since the coming to the forest.

Two months ago, as spring gave way to summer, Will had explored his feelings with his mother and the truth of what she felt about their life in the Summerlands had come pouring out.

They had talked by the fire into the early hours of the morning. Gwendolyn had begun reluctantly at first, and then like rain clouds bursting after a long drought, started pouring out emotion and memories about her momentous decision to travel East.

Will sat transfixed as his mother related the tale of Lady Eleanor's illicit meetings with the Eidur Stronghand in the heady, wine fuelled days after the allied victory over the Southren in the Valley of Lost Souls. "Gwendy", as Lady Eleanor called her, was a confidante to her mistress throughout the affair. Indeed, she had been instrumental, with the help of loyal Thomas, in the smuggling of Lady Eleanor out of Lord Matthew's mansion and in to the tent of the handsome elven general who had captured her heart.

They had not really considered the consequences of such a liaison; a child was certainly not part of the plan. When

Lady Eleanor's morning sickness had come, their world was set into an irretrievable spin.

Gwendolyn, several months gone with Will, had begun to make arrangements for their escape from the humiliation that would surely follow if they remained within the walls of Lord Matthew's estate. However, before they could carry out their midnight flight, Eidur had arrived at the manor.

Somehow the elves knew about the pregnancy. Lord Matthew's rage on hearing of his daughter's condition was matched only by his embarrassment. His family was forced to kneel in public humiliation before the joint court of the elven King Rogan and old King Martin of Rosewall, in the very tent where they had toasted their victory over the Southren.

When the punishment was handed down, Lord Matthew was only too happy to agree to send his only daughter to the Summerlands, even though he knew he would never see her again.

Will had stared, slack-jawed at his mother, and at the remarkable twist of fate that had shaped his life. As the light from the hearth danced over his mother's features, she recounted the leave-taking of Lady Eleanor from Rosewall.

Shattered by the news of her exile, Lady Eleanor had been shown a crumb of mercy by King Rogan, who decreed that she should be allowed to take a dozen of her favourite servants into the east.

Lord Matthew grudgingly agreed. At first he tried to stop her taking his best worker, Tam, using the argument that the farmer's wife, now the mother of a tiny baby boy, would not last the month's march through the mountains to the Gates of Summer. Yet Gwendolyn would not be parted from her Lady and Tam, seeing his wife's mind was made up, pleaded with Lord Matthew for his release. In an instant, Will's life had been irrevocably altered.

As Will stared at Kirik's bemused features, he was reminded of the sense of bewilderment and confusion that he had felt on that night of revelations, and something in his heart stirred, making him want to reach out and reassure Kirik. In a

sense, both owed their lives to fate and Will had a sudden feeling that he was being incredibly selfish. *Was not Kirik as much of a pawn in this as himself?*

Gingerly, Will reached out with work-hardened fingers, touching his friend lightly on the shoulder. Kirik looked up, his reverie broken and for the first time in those two long months of sullenness and bickering, the boys regarded each other with openness and honesty.

‘Friends?’ offered Will.

Kirik hesitated for a moment, surprised by the abrupt change in Will’s attitude, and then his face lit up with a smile and the boys clasped each other by the wrist.

‘Friends,’ he confirmed.

## Chapter Three

### The Wisdom of Old Aggie

By the time the boys had reconciled their differences they were long over due for their evening meals. Although both Kirik and Will realised it would be more prudent to go straight home and start making amends for missing the harvest curfew the night before, neither had the inclination to do so. They were so relieved to be free of the black cloud that had hung over their friendship that they sat talking on the Anvil for a further hour.

As the shadows lengthened and the midges began to bite, the boys chatted about all the important things in their lives; from fencing and archery practice to the relative merits of the jousting horses that Kirik's father kept stabled at the manor. They joked about the prospect of stealing apples from the orchard at night, and Kirik made Will re-enact the soaking he had received from Otty. At one point the conversation veered towards the pending harvest festival, but when Kirik told Will about saving a dance for Maria a strange look appeared in his friend's eye and he swiftly steered the conversation away to more mundane things.

After a while Will remembered something Kirik had said to him back in the field. 'Hey, what's this thing of great importance that you said you had to show me?'

'Oh yes,' replied Kirik, pulling a tightly folded handkerchief from his pocket. 'I almost forgot!' He unwrapped the little parcel to reveal the small brown disc. He held it in the palm of his hand for Will to inspect.

'Is that it?' said Will, finding it hard to hide his disappointment. 'It looks like an old war medallion or something.'

'No, look,' said Kirik. 'It's a coin. Here, I'll show you.' He used the handkerchief to carefully scrub the faces of the disk, removing some of the dirt that caked its surface. 'Now take a look.'

‘Oh yes,’ Will agreed, underwhelmed but nevertheless taking what he could now see was a coin between thumb and forefinger. He held it up to his eyes for closer inspection, twisting it back and forth to view both sides. On closer inspection his interest grew a little. He had never seen a coin quite like it. ‘There’s a fist on one side, and a lightning bolt on the reverse.’

‘There are markings on the rim too,’ encouraged Kirik.

Will turned the coin on its side and squinted to see more clearly. ‘Yes, I can just make them out, but I couldn’t tell you what they are. I suppose they could just be scratches, although they seem too deliberate for that. If I just rub... Oh hang on, did you see that!’

Faint tendrils of blue light snaked about the disc and to Will’s amazement the coin was transformed. The fist faded away to be replaced by the silhouette of a head. He immediately flicked the coin over and saw that the head of a dragon had replaced the lightning bolt.

‘By the Light, that’s incredible,’ gasped Will.

Kirik was beaming at his friend. ‘I know, amazing isn’t it? If you watch it closely the new symbols will fade and revert to the fist and lightning bolt.’ As Kirik spoke that’s exactly what happened. Will rubbed at the scratches again, anxious to see the phenomenon for a second time.

‘It won’t do any good,’ interjected Kirik. ‘I’ve tried many times since I found it. It’s as if the coin needs to rest before it can do it again.’

‘It’s amazing,’ repeated Will. ‘Where did you get it? How long have you had it?’ So many questions wanted to jump out of his mouth at the same time.

‘Well, I’ve had it for about five weeks. And before you say anything, I’ve tried to show it to you three times already, but you were so grumpy that I didn’t think you would want to listen.’

‘You have me there,’ said Will. ‘I’m sorry for the way I’ve been. I should have talked to you earlier instead of bottling it all up. But tell me, where did the coin come from?’

‘I found it. In the garden,’ stated Kirik.

Will looked at his friend sceptically, discerning more than a hint of guilt on Kirik’s face. ‘Give over.’

‘It’s true. I was collecting rose petals for one of mother’s perfumes, kneeling under the window box at the back of the manor - you know the one by father’s study. And there it was, half submerged in the flower bed.’

‘Then why haven’t you given it to your mother,’ said Will, knowing exactly why Kirik had not given the coin up.

‘I didn’t realise it was special at first. I pocketed it, thinking it had been dropped by my father and was next to worthless. It wasn’t until a week later that I discovered its properties. I pulled it out one evening to have a closer look and found a soft blue light glowing all around it. I was frightened to touch it at first and then... *I felt I had to*. Like you, I discovered its trick when I was trying to see what the scratches on the rim might be. What do you think?’

‘Magic,’ said Will without hesitation. ‘That’s what it is. Elven magic too, I’d bet.’

‘That’s what I thought,’ said Kirik. ‘I’ve been dying to show you. Now I know it’s not a normal coin I think it might be something my father collected. You know he often brings things back from his travels, and he does look at them in the garden. He takes them out there so that he can see them better in the natural light.’

‘I know,’ said Will. ‘I’ve seen him poring over his maps and books when I’ve been tending the garden. Blimey! You’ve got to give it him back.’

‘I know,’ Kirik conceded. His cheeks were red with embarrassment and a guilty look had returned to his features. He looked down at the lichen-specked rock beneath their feet. ‘I would have done sooner, only he’s been away from home for nearly three months now, and I thought, well, mother won’t know what to do with it, so I sort of decided to look after it for him. He is due back tonight though, so I can give it him then. Do you think he’ll be very angry with me?’

Will whistled through his teeth and shook his head. They'd both been involved in enough mischief in the past to know the answer to that question.

'Give it him back,' said Will, but tell him that you only found it a few days ago. That way, it doesn't sound like you were keeping it deliberately from Lady Eleanor. And whatever you do, don't let him know you've discovered what it can do. Play dumb. That, at least should be easy.'

'Very funny,' said Kirik, shoving Will playfully as he took back the coin. Before wrapping it up he looked wistfully at the worn disc. His curiosity had been stirred by the coin, and he had become quite attached to it in the last few weeks, even to the extent that he had started to think of it as his. He knew that this was a ridiculous thought; a boy of his age would never be permitted to keep such a treasure.

*And yet where was the harm in wanting it?* What use could it be to his father, this old thing that was probably a left over from a conjurer's show? His father already had a study stuffed with artefacts from all over the Summerlands and beyond. Surely he would not miss something so small from so vast a collection? And yet Kirik knew Will was right. It wasn't really his to decide what to do with. Still, it would have been good to discover what the coin really was before he had to give it back. If he was going to return it and be told off, he might as well do so having done a little research in to it. Contrary to Will, Kirik believed it would be better to tell his father everything; that way he could impress the councillor and for once steal the limelight from Forge and Wulfric, his older half-brothers who rode everywhere with their father.

Inspired by this sudden notion a plan began to form in his mind. 'We need to go back to Old Aggie. She'll know what it is!'

'You need your head feeling,' Will retorted, incredulous at his friend's lack of regard for their predicament. A visit to Old Aggie's would lead to more trouble than he could afford. And yet, how often did something this mysterious, this exciting fall within their grasp? Slowly, his features echoed

the recent transformation of the coin. His stern look melted away, worry-worn features morphing into his best face-splitting grin. 'May as well get into trouble for something exciting, rather than just boring war stories. Come on then!'

Before reason could get the better of him Will leapt to his feet and half scrambled, half rolled down the slope of the Anvil to the forest floor. Kirik, laughing, secured the coin in his pocket and hared after his friend. It felt good to have his partner-in-mischief back again.

Old Aggie's cottage could be found nestled amongst the ancient and twisted oaks on the fringe of the forest. It was separated from Little Rosewall by the village green, a physical distance symbolic of the relationship that the wise woman had with the rest of the human inhabitants of Farsee Manor. The Westlanders regarded Old Aggie as one of their own, yet she was as much an enigma to them as the wood-elves that served Councillor Eidur. They respected her greatly for her wisdom, but feared her more than a little. This fear was only partly shared by the two most mischievous boys on the estate, for in Old Aggie, Kirik and Will had found a non-judgemental listener in whom they could confide their many adventures and misdeeds. They had also found a teacher who could captivate them with stories of heroic deeds, of famous warriors of the Westlands and terrifying tales of the green-skinned Southren, the savages who raided from the south. It was no surprise therefore that both boys immediately thought of Old Aggie as the one who might provide answers for their most exciting discovery of all. If anyone knew what the magic meant, the wise woman would. They just had the small problem of how to get to her cottage without being spotted by Tam, who would now be on the warpath for a very tardy Will.

It was Kirik's idea that once off the Anvil they should skirt round the edge of the forest rather than re-cross the footbridge. In the ploughed fields they would be in full view of the cottages of Little Rosewall that stood on higher ground on the far bank of Taria's Tear. As a result of their circuitous

route, they had to pick their way laboriously through thick undergrowth. Will, the heavier of the two boys, stumbled more than once and Kirik, who with elven agility seemed to be skipping through the briar patches and knotweed with consummate ease and grace, twice had to warn him about noise.

Eventually they knelt side by side beneath the swooping branches of a weeping willow on the edge of the village green. They had never approached Old Aggie's cottage from the Anvil before and therefore could not have known that their way would be barred a hundred yards short of their destination by a long and rugged ridge of rock that disappeared into the blackness of the forest depths.

Well, what now?' asked Will who was panting from his exertions and rubbing at several long scratches on his legs and forearms.

'We could follow the line of this ridge and come round to Aggie's cottage from behind,' suggested Kirik.

'Forget it,' snapped Will. 'There's no way I'm going deep into the forest, not without a bow and the shadows lengthening and all. Not a chance. My ma's told me all about the sorts of creatures you might come across in the deep woods at night. You know better than to suggest that!'

Kirik gave his friend a look that said "coward", which Will chose to ignore.

'No, we've got to run for it, along the edge of the green. It's the only way!'

Kirik had doubts about his thickset friend's ability to dash unnoticed across anywhere, let alone the wide-open green, but what other plans were left to them? Reluctantly, he gave in. The boys agreed that their best option was to go one at a time, keeping fast and low and as close to the tree line as possible. Kirik would go first. If he was caught, there would be no point in Will trying to make the dash and at least he could wait for a quiet moment and head straight for home, full of well-rehearsed apologies.

They waited for a few moments to check the way ahead was clear and then Will signalled for the half-elf to go. Up Kirik sprang, racing noiselessly and unnoticed around the edge of the green. As soon as he saw his friend was safe Will took in a lungful of air and lunged forward into the early evening sunshine that painted the cottages of Little Rosewall gold.

‘Will!’

Tam’s unmistakable voice bellowed across the clearing. The foreman’s son froze in mid stride, cringing and full of dread. When he looked up he fully expected to see Tam striding towards him, work hardened hands ready to cuff him about the head. Instead he saw his father, hands on hips, staring out across the fields in the direction of where the boys had last been seen. He had not been spotted after all. He turned towards Old Aggie’s cottage and saw Kirik frantically beckoning him from the shade of an oak. Realising he was standing in the open, Will launched himself back into his stride and hustled his way to the safety of the trees.

‘Phew, that was a close one,’ Kirik laughed, clapping his friend on the back as he collapsed at his feet.

‘Yes, but by the Light am I in big trouble now!’ exclaimed Will, rolling on to his back.

‘Well, we may as well make it worth the stick we’ll have to face,’ said Kirik, pulling Will to his feet and leading his friend into Old Aggie’s cottage.

Through a thick fog, laden with the heady smell of spices, Kirik and Will spied the silhouette of Old Aggie. Before they had a chance to announce themselves she called to them in a voice that rasped with the wear and tear of a long life.

‘Come in boys, come in; I certainly did not expect to see the two of you so soon!’ Her familiar frame became clear as the wise woman shuffled through the pleasant-smelling clouds billowing from a pot that bubbled away over the central fireplace. Ancient and arthritic, she moved slowly towards them with the aid of her stick. With her free hand she touched the foreheads of the boys, who had already bowed to allow the hunched wise woman to carry out the old Westland greeting. Custom served, Old Aggie gestured for them to take a seat on the cushioned bench by the fire as she gingerly lowered herself on to her age-worn rocking chair.

‘Well, this is a surprise,’ she stated. ‘My cushions still bear the imprint of your behinds from last night, and if I’m not much mistaken master Will, you’re risking a lot to be sitting here with me again so soon. Wasn’t that the familiar tones of young Tam I heard floating across the evening air.’

Old Aggie prefixed everyone’s name with “young”, no matter how old they were. No one in the forest was quite sure just how ancient the wise woman was, though there was apparently nothing wrong with her hearing.

‘Thought so,’ she added, before the guilt-ridden friends could reply. She fixed Kirik with keen blue eyes that defied age and the half-elf instantly experienced the familiar feeling that the wise woman could see right through to his inner most secrets.

‘Well then, lets get to it young master,’ she said, as if to prove his theory right, ‘because I may have all the time in the world but Will certainly hasn’t.’

Old Aggie listened intently, interjecting the odd knowing grunt as Kirik re-told the finding of the coin. When he finished she snatched the coin with unexpected speed from his upturned palm where it had lain for the duration of the tale.

With a strength belying her appearance she hooked the bubbling pot off its settle with her stick. Water sloshed over the side as the pot was dumped on the stone floor. The wise woman produced a battered frying pan from an oak sideboard, causing a shower of sparks as she slammed it down on to the fierce heat of the coals. As the boys crowded round the wise woman spat into the pan and then cast the coin onto the sizzling metal. Without warning she turned to Kirik and yanked a curl of black hair from the top of his head.

‘Ouch!’ yelped Kirik. ‘What did you do that for?’

Old Aggie grunted, reaching in to a small leather pouch that hung from her waist and throwing a sprinkling of blue powder in to the pan along with the plucked hair. A bright flash of light made the boys gasp and caused Old Aggie to go in to a series of curious grunts and utterances, intelligible only to her. After a pause of several seconds the wise woman plucked the pan off the heat and reached for a pair of long tweezers, fishing the coin from the smoking powder. Leaning heavily on her stick she hobbled back to her rocking chair and sank heavily in to its embrace.

‘Put the stew back on my dear,’ she croaked to Will and then focused her attention on the coin; gripped tightly by the tweezers she twirled it slowly before her eyes.

‘Kirik, light the torches,’ she ordered. ‘I want to see this magic more clearly.’

‘Oh, well, did you not hear what I said.’ Kirik used a taper from the fire to light the wall brackets. ‘It only transforms once every few days.’

‘I heard you perfectly well Master Kirik. I’m not senile!’ Kirik cringed. ‘And we’ll see about your coin’s reluctance to perform. I’ve made a few adjustments of my own.’

As Kirik and Will settled themselves once more by the fire the wise woman allowed the coin to fall in to her palm. She dropped the tweezers and rubbed at the scratches on the rim. Kirik and Will looked at each other doubtfully, but instantly a halo of soft blue light shrouded the coin, just as it

had half an hour before on the Anvil. Before their eyes the engravings shifted like reflections on water. The original symbols melted away and new ones emerged. Once again the fist became a silhouette and the lightning bolt a dragon's head.

'Hmm... 'Tis just as you said.'

Amazed by her ability to bring about the transformation, Kirik stumbled over his words. 'What... I mean how on earth did you do that?'

'Ah, a trick learned from your father's other guests.' The wise woman winked in the direction of the front door. Kirik presumed that she meant the wood-elves. 'You were right to think this was of elfish doing, though at first I doubted it. Magic is scarce in the Summerlands and elves are not ones to waste their skills on items as tiny as this, which I think makes this discovery all the more intriguing. Don't you?' Her piercing eyes, undimmed by age sparkled as she looked from Kirik to Will.

'The elves use their own energies and any power that they can draw from the earth to perform what we of the West crudely call magic. Their ability to do this has waned since they fled the Ancient Lands and came to Rhoderica. That's what makes this coin such a mystery. Why would an elf waste precious energy on a simple coin?'

The boys, sitting cross-legged in front of Old Aggie, were once again entranced. Will had wrestled with his conscience for all of about a second since entering the cottage. Even the likelihood of a beating from his father could not dampen the excitement he got from being in the wise woman's presence.

'As to how I did it young Kirik, all I did was to rejuvenate the magic - water from my body to exert my will over the object; a hair from the possessor to breakdown any prejudices the object might have to the viewer; a pinch of a very special substance provided by Mother Nature. Works every time on simple magic, though "simple" is not really the word to describe this wonderful little curiosity.'

She twirled the coin in her fingers and as she did so the symbols reverted to their original state. ‘Oops! There it goes,’ she exclaimed. ‘Ah well, it was only to be expected. My work was too crude to hold the spell for long.’ She tossed the coin nonchalantly back to Kirik who parcelled it up once more in his handkerchief and returned it to his pocket.

‘So what do you think?’ asked Will, almost bursting with excitement at what he had witnessed. He had never seen a spell made before.

‘It’s a message,’ she said with a certainty that startled the boys.

‘A message? But who would send a message in a coin. And what does it mean anyway?’ quizzed Kirik.

‘Ah, well, isn’t that a fine mystery.’ Old Aggie leaned conspiratorially in towards the boys and reduced her voice to a whisper. ‘There are questions here that need answering. But they need answering by the true owner of the coin.’ She fixed her eyes firmly on Kirik who looked sheepishly at his feet.

‘Your father returns tonight, does he not?’

‘Yes,’ said Kirik.

‘Then I suggest you find a way to return this to him without provoking his anger.’

‘Yes,’ repeated Kirik. He could see out of the corner of his eye that Will had lowered his head in shame and his own heart suddenly felt heavy. Such a mixture of emotions in one day he could not recall in his young life.

‘Good. Well, we’re done then. You had better both be on your way.’

The boys got to their feet, the giddiness of being in the presence of magic replaced by a sinking feeling that settled in the pit of their stomachs. Old Aggie did not usually admonish them for their misdeeds and somehow her disapproval felt worse to Kirik than being told off by his own parents. Downcast, the boys rose to leave, only to be halted in their tracks by a loud, impatient rapping on the front door.

‘Tam!’

Kirik and Will swapped terrified glances. Old Aggie frowned disapprovingly, muttered “boys”, and shuffled past them. She heaved the door open. Tam cut a grim figure on the porch, red-faced and fists balled at his side. Despite his obvious anger with Will, whom he could see quivering behind the wise woman, the foreman remembered to stop on the threshold as manners demanded and to remove his hat. He was about to launch into a tirade about his wayward son when Old Aggie held up a hand to silence him. His eyes widened with surprise as the wise woman turned to Kirik and Will.

‘Thank you again boys, I couldn’t have managed without your help!’

‘But...’ Tam began.

‘Yes, yes, Tam, I can see you are going to be angry with me and the boys did insist that they could not be late again, but when I saw them walking to their cottages an hour ago I couldn’t resist using them to find me some sweetroot.’

Tam’s tirade remained trapped on his tongue. ‘Sweetroot?’

‘Yes, sweetroot,’ repeated the wise woman. ‘It’s a woodland herb, very tasty but hard to find, especially with my eyesight. I needed it to finish your stew!’

‘My stew?’ Tam asked, looking less annoyed and more puzzled by the second.

‘Of course, to make up for the loss of work in the fields today. I really must apologise for keeping the boys up so late last night, but they were too polite to tell a lonely old woman when to shut up. I hope you won’t take it out on them.’

‘Well, I don’t know, I mean...’

‘Good,’ said the wise woman. ‘That’s settled then.’ Old Aggie winked discretely at the boys as Tam scratched his head. The overseer was feeling hoodwinked, but he didn’t dare to question the wise woman.

‘Right boys, pick up the stew,’ said Old Aggie, gesturing to the large pot, which sat simmering on the fire. ‘We’ve kept young Tam waiting long enough for one night, and it won’t do for me to wreck your bedtimes again.’

Kirik and Will, dumbstruck by their sudden turn of fortune did as they were instructed without uttering another word. They would have to thank Old Aggie another time, though they left the cottage feeling a foot taller than when they had arrived. The boys used a long stick to carry the pot into Will's cottage, Tam following behind, a rumbling thunderhead at their backs. As they stepped back into the dwindling light to make arrangements to meet the following day, a horn rang out high and clear across the common.

Kirik's eyes lit up. 'Father!'

Will sighed. Councillor Eidur had returned to Farsee Manor.

***You can read more at:***

<http://www.songoftheelves.com>