

King's Blades

Song of the Elves: Book Two

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Chapter One: Whispers in the Dark

The Horseshoe Pass: mid-winter.

Year of the Light 674; Year of the Sundering 172.

A warrior's prayer, delicate as dandelion seed, cast to the wind in the hope that eddies and swirls will bring it unto a place of pollination. Many go unanswered. Death can be arrow swift. The soldier is startled more than relieved when the angel spreads its wings about him, blotting out the dazzling winter white.

More of their kind flits about him. He feels nothing of their touch, but his head lolls and for a moment he is adrift in a black sea. Once before he fell beneath wings, a great grey dragon, terrible in its ferocity. That day had been the end of innocence. Everything that went before was lost and everything that came after tainted by the Dark. And yet, that was not entirely true. There had been a girl, wilful and wild, and friendship, the best of friends – before the betrayal.

Seraphic voices call him back to earth. He floats, a feather in their hands, rising heavenward, sinking sumptuously onto cloud soft cushions. Ash of arrow bites, needlessly reminding him of the precarious balance of life.

What could he have done differently to save his home? What steps could he have taken to protect his father?

Even before the dragon plans were in motion. Most were beyond his ken. His is only a small part of the tale, but he had hoped he might prove more.

That pain again, impossible in its intensity. An ending would be preferable. He doesn't know why the angels bother. His wound is deep, deep like the cancer eating at his homeland.

If he could choose his last words, what would they be? Who would he say them to?

'For the king.'

He whispers the words, causing the angels to peer interestedly at him.

'All for the king.'

And then he is devoured.

*Jorniak – capital city of the Elves; the Summerlands.
Year of the Light 669; Year of the Sundering 167.*

Beecher held his breath for the fourth time in as many minutes, afraid to let even the softest of sighs slip from his lips. He pressed his body against the damp, rough walls of the catacombs. Momentarily, his skin took on the ghoulish hue of the green phosphorescent rocks, through which the tunnel wound.

A droplet of moisture from the slimy surface caught on his lashes.

He blinked.

It was the only movement he dared to make - somewhere further along the slowly descending tunnel, his quarry had stopped moving.

He waited in silence, ears straining for the twin, glassy footfalls that had echoed back along the draughty passageway since the descent into darkness had begun.

Nothing.

Only the intermittent patter of water droplets to remind him he was alive.

The scripture elf's pulse pounded in his temples. He tried to picture the pair ahead.

Did they wait in the dark, listening for a sign that they were not alone? Was it possible that he had given himself away?

Beecher uttered a silent prayer to the Lady. He did not rate his chances of escape if he had to flee. They had not passed any junctions in the catacombs for at least half an hour and Beecher was sure that his ageing limbs would not carry him far enough ahead of the pair he was stalking if they turned tables and came after him.

The moment seemed to stretch in to an eon as Beecher waited to see if he had been discovered. His slowly released breath screamed in the silence of the cave and the scripture elf felt totally devoid of any connection with the world above. It occurred to him fleetingly that he could be murdered in these green depths and his body not be discovered for a thousand years. It was this feeling of helplessness and not the damp of the tunnel that sent a shiver through his thin frame.

'It was nothing.'

The sharp, clipped voice shattered the silence.

Beecher jumped, a yelp of surprise almost slipping from his clenched lips. For a moment it seemed that the words had been formed in the air next to him, and then he remembered the quirk of the tunnel's acoustics, conveying every syllable with crystal clarity, despite the distance that Beecher had carefully kept between himself and the two ahead.

The scripture elf instantly recognised the voice. He had heard it often enough in court to know that it belonged to Councillor Daktarok. Funny, that something so familiar could suddenly sound so alien; so menacing.

'Are you sure?'

Beecher did not recognise the voice that replied, but knew it belonged to the tall, hooded figure he had observed entering the catacombs with the War Minister. Silence again. Then, following an excruciating delay, the councillor's clipped tones came once more.

'Quite sure,' insisted Daktarok, a degree of impatience evident in his voice. 'No one uses these tunnels anymore. Not unless they are doing my bidding.'

'Then why did I hear footsteps councillor? Is somebody *doing your bidding* in the tunnels tonight? I do hope you have not broken our agreement. I thought I made it quite clear that we were to be alone!'

The unknown voice snarled with menace. Beecher, his body still squashed against the cold rock, shivered. He had never heard anyone speak thus to the councillor. In the world of King Rogan's court above, Daktarok was never one to be trifled with.

'We are quite alone, I can assure you.'

Beecher imagined Daktarok biting his lip as he fought to bring some civility to his response.

'I am a slave to my word, if nothing else. You were merely startled by the strange echoes of this place.'

There was silence again before the other spoke once more.

'I hope for your sake this is true. It is not too late to cancel our arrangement.'

Beecher waited again. This time no reply came to the stranger's words and following a further delay the echoes of retreating footsteps rebounded along the tunnel.

The scripture elf remained still. After a count of ten, he peeled himself away from the rock face, shivering again as he did so and wiping the slime from his hands along the front of his damp tunic. He shook his head.

What was he thinking, at his age, to be stalking about in the dark?

If the pair ahead didn't capture him, surely he would be seized by the cold. Then he remembered why the Order had sent him to the capital, and the things he had already seen.

If not he, who else was in a position to investigate?

Cautiously he started forward again. He could not let his quarry get too far ahead. He was terrified of discovery, yet he knew only too well from experience, that openings and other pathways through the catacombs could appear at any moment. With the bizarre acoustics of the damp depths, it was entirely possible that he could take a wrong turn if he fell too far behind and be lost before he knew it.

Treading with all the care he could muster, Beecher trailed after the councillor and his mysterious partner. They descended further and further into the secret depths beneath Jorriak. For what seemed an age, Beecher used the echoes of the footfalls ahead to judge a safe distance between himself and his quarry. Twice he came to forks in the passageway, the scripture elf straining his hearing to decide on the correct branch to follow. Both times he endured heart-stopping moments of solitude, before the tip tap of distant feet reached his ears and it became clear he had chosen correctly.

It was during these tense moments that a new fear began to eat away at the edge of the scripture elf's conscience. Alone, would he be able to re-trace his steps to the surface? It occurred to him that being discovered by the pair that he followed was only marginally less preferable to getting lost in the maze of tunnels.

At length, the sickly sheen of the passageway began to lighten to a yellow luminescence, and soon afterwards strange shadow shapes started to leap along the tunnel walls. At first, the movement startled Beecher and he panicked, believing the two ahead had lain in wait and were stalking back along the tunnel towards him. He froze, unable to think of an appropriate course of action. His aging limbs offered no solution. Eventually, when it became apparent that no figures were coming in to view, he plucked up the courage to continue forwards.

Cautiously creeping round a bend in the tunnel, Beecher was surprised to come across a burning torch bracketed to the wall. Ahead, more such beacons were dotted along the length of the passageway, a string of stars dancing into the infinite darkness. The additional light came as both comforter and tormentor to Beecher. To be granted a glimpse further ahead than his hand was a relief from the grip of claustrophobia, but the revelation of the enormous scale of the labyrinth merely increased his trepidation of never finding his way out of the depths.

Standing before the torch, Beecher sniffed inquisitively at the air, his discerning nostrils picking out the unmistakable metallic odour of magic. Beecher felt immediate disgust for the War Minister. The councillor must have cast a simple spell to ignite the oil soaked torches. The scripture elf screwed up his face in contempt.

How could one so talented be so flippant with the use of his gift, especially when so much of what the elves used to know of the arcane art had been left behind in the Ancient Lands?

Beecher hated to see the use of magic trivialised so. What was wrong with a block and flint to light the torch? As soon as he had formed the question in his mind, the scripture elf chastised himself. Why should he expect War Minister Daktarok to show any respect for the Ancient Arts? It was like expecting a bear not to eat the salmon it has fished out of the river.

Concerned that his hesitation had caused him to fall even further behind, Beecher raced on as quickly as his tired feet could carry him, careful not to let the noise of his passing give him away. Without warning the gradient of descent altered sharply, and the steeply sloping tunnel became dangerously slippery. Rivulets of water ran from the walls, greasing the soles of the scripture elf's boots and nipping at his toes with its icy bite.

Abruptly, he came to a precipice, the passageway descending dramatically in a series of stepped flights. Here there were no more wall brackets to light the way and the steps vanished in utter blackness. To add to his concern, the scripture elf could no longer hear footsteps ahead.

Was it possible the pair could have slipped through a side opening in the tunnel? He had been so concerned with keeping his footing for the last few minutes that he had failed to check the walls for fissures.

Beecher chastised himself. This was no time for indecision. He had to believe that he had not gone wrong. Panting from his exertions he started down the dim stairs, heart in mouth as he could barely make out each individual step, even with the keen eyes of an elf.

A dozen steps in to the descent, Beecher slipped.

Against his will, the scripture elf let out a cry. He wind-milled his arms wildly about, fighting to maintain his precarious balance. Lady Luck was smiling on him. His right hand hit metal and he instantly snatched at the cold iron. Less fortuitously, his body continued in its forward's momentum, contorting his arm into an unusual angle. An alarmingly loud clicking sound emanated from his wrist, echoing up the shaft, followed by a sharp pain that caused sickness to rise in Beecher's stomach. His legs continued to slide from under him, and his feet slipped a further step down the stairs.

In defiance of the fracture, Beecher would not surrender his grip on what he now recognised as a rusty handrail. His fall was arrested, yet he feared for what the lancing pain might mean.

Slowly hauling himself upright, he gingerly examined his wrist bones with the fingers of his good left hand. He winced at the touch of his fingertips, but thankfully no bones had broken through his skin. The wrist felt relatively straight. With gritted teeth he wriggled his fingers and found his movement unimpaired. He almost sagged to the step in relief.

Yet relief quickly gave way to despair - how much noise had he made during the fall?

After waiting in silence for several seconds Beecher was relieved to hear nothing from below. If he had given himself away, no one was coming back to investigate. He decided to take this as a positive sign and warily this time of the treacherous nature of the steps, he continued his descent. Holding his injured arm steady with his left, he moved in shuffling steps, until his feet finally met the bottom of the stairwell. Five steps after regaining the flat; he discovered why his slip had not been detected. A wooden door barred further passage along the corridor.

Beecher placed his good hand against the rough wood of the portal. It was criss-crossed with iron bars that he presumed passed in and out of boltholes in the rock with the turning of a rusty wheel that sat in the middle of the oak structure. A tentative touch indicated that the bolts were free from their holes and that the door, despite its age, was ready to swing open.

Beecher hesitated again, his hand hovering inches from the turning wheel. If the councillor and his acquaintance were just beyond the doorway he would instantly be discovered. Yet, what good would it do to linger outside of the door? Eventually the two would come back this way and he would be discovered anyway. Waiting here in the damp stairwell would also reveal nothing of the councillor's purpose. Why else had he embarked on this risky venture, if not to discover some morsel of truth for the Order? It was plain from his observations that the War Minister was up to no good. If his time spent scratching away in the scriptorium was to amount to something, then he had to do this.

Beecher, resolved now on a course of action, drew his short dagger that he had carried down in to the depths in a leather pouch at his waist. Holding the slender blade before him in his undamaged hand, he took a deep breath and pushed the door slowly ajar with his foot.

Beecher's heart hammered in his chest as he waited for a squeak from the aged door to give him away. When none came he surmised that the door must have been in frequent use for it to move so freely. This thought would have troubled him under normal circumstances, but all he could focus on was what lay in wait in the chamber within.

Boldly, the scripture elf stepped through the doorway. He made ready to fight, but found himself standing alone in a room piled high with rows of old wine casks. The storeroom itself was unlit, but a dancing orange glow came from a connecting chamber. Beecher tucked his dagger back in his belt and made the sign of the Order on his chest for good luck, tracing a large circle with a line through it with his pain free hand. On tiptoes he crossed to the light-lined archway, peering carefully in to the next chamber.

There were more wooden barrels in this room, a high ceiling vault with twice the dimensions of the one in which he crouched. Stacked in long rows, the casks had enough space in between to allow a grown elf to slide through and with relief, Beecher realised he had at least found a spot in which he could allow the others to slip by later if he needed to.

Beyond the carefully arrayed barrels stood a long wooden table on which an iron tree of sputtering candles had been lit. On the far side of the table was another door, fitted with a similar turning wheel to the one at the foot of the stairs. It was from out of this partially opened door that the voices of the War Minister and his associate drifted. Beecher knew this was where he must go.

It took one hundred strides to cross the storage chamber. Beecher moved quickly, hidden from view by a teetering tower of barrels. He paused briefly at the open space where the table stood and then padded across to the doorway. Standing in the middle of the next chamber was War Minister Daktarok, his back to the door, obscuring any view of his associate. Beecher was surprised to hear the gentle lap of waves, feeling the chill of wind and the hidden presence of a great body of water.

‘So Councillor, you are happy that this wretched hole is beyond the protective magic of your King?’

‘Quite sure,’ replied War Minister Daktarok. ‘Even old Rogan’s spells could not penetrate this deeply, even if he knew the extent of the catacombs. I am confident that we can speak freely.’

‘Good,’ the other continued, a hint of wariness suddenly invading his tone.

‘Well, you will be pleased War Minister, to hear that it is done; the beast has been sent south.’

Beecher thought he saw the War Minister shiver in response to this statement.

‘Will it obey?’ the councillor asked with uncertainty.

The other moved away from Daktarok, taking a seat in a chair arranged before a wooden chest. Beyond the cloaked stranger, Beecher could see glimmers of light reflecting off the black pool of water. *What was this place?*

The stranger drew back his hood. Human features were unveiled. With some satisfaction, Beecher saw that this was the same man he had observed being smuggled in to the Sky Palace several weeks before. The shock of that discovery had prompted Beecher to reach out to his nearest fellow agent of the Order. He did not know whether Agatha had received his message, as it was impossible for a return casting from the wise woman to break through the magic barriers of Jorniak. He had only been able to cast through the barriers as he knew what sort of spells protected the king and because he had spent his years in the Scriptorium researching ways of getting around them. Thinking of Agatha suddenly reminded him of how alone he really was and made him wish that the wise woman were here to share in this dangerous mission with him. They had made a formidable partnership in the old days.

‘It will obey long enough,’ replied the human, whose face held a ghostly pallor that seemed to reject any of the warm glows of the torches that burned about the room.

‘Long enough?’ questioned the councillor.

The man seated before him raised an eyebrow and his thin lips creased in poor imitation of a smile. ‘Do you want me to spell it out Councillor Daktarok? Are you so in need of affirmation of the deed?’

Daktarok turned away from the human with a swish of his cloak. Beecher watched as the councillor mashed his fist in to his palm to control his anger, before turning back to confront the pale-faced human.

‘I merely seek assurance that the targets will be taken care of.’

Pale-face’s features suddenly drew dark. ‘It is done. The beast has no will, only the desires that my agents in the north set in its breast. After tomorrow you will have no more trouble from that old *soldier!*’

The human spat the last word out as if the mere formation of it had tainted his mouth.

Beecher moved back apace in to the storage room.

Old soldier? Who could this outsider be referring to? Then, a memory stirred in the recesses of his mind. It had been common knowledge in Rogan’s court for a while now, that Daktarok carried some malice towards the old general Eidur.

Could Daktarok have paid for Eidur’s murder?

It seemed incredible to the scripture elf, but then again he had not thought a few months before, that he would have found one of the king’s closest aids meeting in secret with a human. And what was this beast that they talked about? What manner of creature had they had sent south; an assassin perhaps?

‘Very well,’ replied Councillor Daktarok, apparently satisfied, though Beecher could see the councillor’s continued agitation in the way he meshed and unmeshed his fingers and stalked about the chamber like an impatient child.

‘And what of the other matter? Do you have it with you?’

Peering around the doorway, Beecher observed the human rise from his seat. He let out a mocking laugh, his momentary apprehension at finding himself alone with the councillor apparently having evaporated. The scripture elf noted that the human was broad beneath his cloak, standing almost as tall as the elven councillor. The human walked towards Daktarok, reaching within the folds of his garment to produce a drawstring pouch.

War Minister Daktarok took the proffered item, almost snatching it out of the human’s hand in his impatience. The councillor quickly loosened the drawstrings and let the pouch fall to the ground. In his hand he now held a triangular shaped glass phial, filled with a dark substance that the scripture elf could not discern. The councillor walked over to a wall bracket and held the phial up so that he might observe it better in the flickering torchlight. The substance swished about, yet even from where he watched in hiding, Beecher could see that it left a muddy stain wherever it had rolled against the glass. It was a liquid of some thickness.

‘To your liking?’ inquired the human, a look of amusement crossing his pasty features.

It took the councillor a moment to reply, as if he were rapt with the sight of the liquid.

‘Yes, yes, very good Nathaniel. Very good.’

‘Then I expect you will want to give me some of that elven gold of yours Minister. It would be a shame for me to have to take the phial back.’

Daktarok turned on his heels, snapping back to his senses by the threatening tone in the human’s voice. He looked at the other with disgust for a moment, as if he were tolerating a being of lesser import than himself. At length, he reached inside the folds of his own cloak, producing a small purse of leather that he threw to the human.

‘Take it.’

The councillor paused and then added, ‘we are done here. You will find food and wine in the chest as usual. My people will arrive within the hour to ship you out of the city.’

‘Most gracious of you,’ uttered Nathaniel, bowing to underline the heavy sarcasm in his voice. ‘And do you have any words for me to pass on to my master?’

The councillor looked pensive for a moment. ‘No. I will contact him by the usual channels when the time is right. Until then, make no attempt to reach me.’

‘Your caution does you credit councillor,’ Nathaniel replied, ‘though I am hopeful that one day things will move faster between us. But we respect your wishes. We will await further instruction.’

The human made a great gesture of bowing again. Contempt flashed across Daktarok’s features and the councillor looked as if he might say more, before suddenly turning and striding at great speed in the direction of Beecher.

The scripture elf had become so caught up in the conversation that he barely had time to dash behind one of the long rows of barrels before Daktarok reached the doorway. Beecher listened as the councillor’s feet beat a fast pace across the stone floor of the chamber. He waited until they had almost faded from earshot, before edging from his place of hiding.

In the chamber beyond, the human called Nathaniel was now busying himself with the refreshments in the chest. Beecher lingered a moment, committing the outsider’s features to memory, before setting off after Councillor Daktarok. He had much to cogitate. He only wished Agatha was there to share his findings with him.

Chapter Two: Dragon's Head

The dead lie in pools of maroon; scores of corpses piled one on top of the other in grim mounds of broken life. All across the battlefield dozens more of the fallen are being committed to mass graves, the only burial that the survivors of the conflict can offer. No dignity of a separate funeral is afforded these unfortunates. Instead they are tipped without ceremony in to hastily dug pits, lest disease from their bodies spreads amongst the living.

Kirik watches from a distance. A figure he feels he ought to know kneels at the foot of one of the dread mounds. The middle-aged elf, a soldier of some import it seems, with red cloak draped about his shoulders and epaulettes of gold, shakes with grief and with the fingers of one hand, claws at the earth. His other arm Kirik cannot see as it is held protectively out of sight beneath his cloak.

The soldier is clearly wounded. He appears to dig at the soil with his nails, as if he is seeking anchorage, clinging on to the turf for dear life. Kirik wants to call out to the grieving warrior, to offer some comfort. He makes to move, but he feels strangely detached from his body. His legs are not his own and try as he might, he cannot stir them to life.

With jolting immediacy memories of the dragon come rushing back to overwhelm the half-elf's senses. His hands tremble and cold trepidation travels along his spine. Has he been wounded in the battle? He cannot remember, though the fact that he cannot now feel his body fills him cold with dread.

Yet something here is not right. He lies not upon the tournament ground, but sits upright, his back propped against a fire-ravaged willow. There were no trees on the common ground where the tournament was held.

Nervously Kirik surveys his surroundings, quickly confirming that he is not in Farsee Forest at all. Instead, he sits at the heart of a conflict torn landscape that is both alien yet hauntingly familiar.

Through the drifting smoke of the aftermath of a great battle, Kirik can see the ramparts of a castle. Though it is a hundred paces away or more, he can see through the swirling smoke and fog that great rents have been torn in the castle walls, revealing gaping cracks where large blocks of white stone lie in jumbled ruin. In the grey distance stand the castle gates; one iron latticework leans dangerously forwards, held upright only by a hinge at the bottom. The other gate still stands, but has been forced inwards to leave the defences ineffectual. Whoever or whatever has assaulted the castle has gained entrance.

The rhythmical thunder of approaching hooves comes from the direction of the ruined entrance and out of the twisted gates gallops a score of riders. The foremost wears a helm of silver, topped with yellow feathers and he races right up to the battle mound where the red-cloaked soldier grieves. The newcomer leaps from his horse and shouts words that Kirik cannot make out. The kneeling soldier ignores him and refuses to look up from the ground. Kirik wonders if red-cloak is taken by his grief or merely acting in defiance of the newcomer.

Being ignored, the silver helmeted rider lets go of his reins and pulls the other to his feet. The elf that has been kneeling recoils from the rider in shock, as if he has seen him clearly for the first time. Kirik can see the anger etched on red-cloaks face, a face that he suddenly recognises. It is square jaw from his dreams, but he looks like he has aged a decade.

Kirik cannot make out the specific words passing between the elves, but the sense of aggression is conveyed in the actions of square-jaw, as he repeatedly jabs the hand of his good arm at the helmeted rider.

Without warning, the rider strikes square-jaw across the face with the back of his mailed hand. Square-jaw's face is painted in blood from the blow of the iron fist. Kirik is incensed by the blatant act of brutality inflicted upon the grieving elf. He wants to react, but try as he might; he finds he still cannot move. If it is Marko's body that he has once more provided the vessel of his visit to this other land, the servant of square-jaw is incapacitated in some way.

Instead Kirik is forced to watch helplessly as square-jaw scrambles backwards in the mud, reaching for the sword belted at his side with his good arm.

He is too slow. The silver helmeted rider draws his blade and holds it point down against square-jaw's neck. The rider beckons with his free hand and the mounted soldiers obediently urge their horses in to a tight circle about the fallen elf.

Kirik's view of the wounded soldier is obscured, and then the horses break their ranks and the helmeted warrior leaps astride his mount. The grey beast snorts, its hot breath rising in clouds in the cold air; it dances a little as it takes the armoured warrior's weight. Silver-helmet raises his arm and abruptly the riders thunder away around the walls of the castle, disappearing swiftly in to the gathering mist of evening.

Still unable to move, Kirik squints to see through the mist. Square-jaw does not move; his cloak is bloodied and torn. A raven that has been watching all from its perch atop a nearby battle mound unfolds its wings and swoops on to the newly made corpse. It laps at the warm blood seeping in to the earth.

Kirik screams.

He came awake in the familiar shadows of his bedroom. The wooden shutters had been closed and the heady smell of incense infused the air. Immediately a hand touched his forehead with something cold and he could hear Thomas calling on the landing outside the room.

‘He’s awake, he’s awake, come quickly my Lady!’

In an instant his mother was at his side, Lady Eleanor taking the wet cloth from the hand of Pederic, who stood on the opposite side of the bed from her. Gently, she mopped his brow.

‘M... m... mother?’

Kirik tried to respond; yet his mouth was tinder dry and his tongue swollen to an old piece of shoe leather. He shivered in spite of the heat hammering at the shuttered windows, sheen of cold sweat covering his body and soaking the sheet that lay across him.

‘Shhh,’ soothed Lady Eleanor. ‘Everything will be alright.’

She turned away and called across the room in a quiet voice. ‘Thomas, pass me some water, quickly.’

A large shadow fell across the bed as the giant manservant brought forward a wooden cup. Lady Eleanor took the vessel and held it to her son’s lips, whilst Thomas gently lifted Kirik’s head off the pillow so that he might better take a sip.

‘Will the young master be alright now?’ Thomas questioned anxiously.

Pederic reappeared at the bedside. ‘Well, its early days, but with rest...’

‘Of course he will!’

Lady Eleanor cut across the serious tone of the physician who she admonished with a stare for his lack of subtlety. ‘Of course Thomas,’ she repeated. ‘Kirik will be just fine.’

The familiar faces hovering over his bed swirled in and out of focus as the young noble battled with the fever that held him in its grip. Through the veil of his delirium, he was yet able to recall the last images from the tournament ground before he had passed out. The frantic scene on the common land, when his best friend Will and his father Tam had tried to coax Old Aggie away from the dragon, would be etched in his memory forever. The movements of the human workers re-played in his mind’s eye, each nuance unfolding in vivid slow motion. With jarring enlightenment, Kirik realised he still did not know what had happened to his best friend and his father.

The half-elf tried to ask his mother about his dear friends, but she did not seem to be able to understand what he was trying to say. He watched as his mother struggled to find a reply. Then from across the room he heard another voice say: ‘Tell him nothing, he needs his rest.’

‘W... What is it?’

Kirik struggled to focus on his mother; something in the way she would not hold his gaze set his mind whirling. Yet before he could voice his concerns his energy gave out like a doused flame and once more he was sliding down a long black tunnel in to unconsciousness.

He did not know for how long it was that he slept on, but when Kirik woke again he was alone in his room and the heavy incense smell was gone. The three-quarter moon lit the room; the shutters having been flung back to let the cool air of the summer evening cleanse the chamber.

With great effort, Kirik propped himself up on an elbow, reaching groggily for the wooden cup that had been refilled during his slumber. His throat was as dry as parchment and he drank greedily of the water, taking it down in one draught. Replacing the vessel on his bedside table, Kirik swung his feet slowly to the floor.

He was instantly aware of a burning pain that throbbed at his thigh. Alarmed, he lifted his nightshirt and felt his leg gingerly for the apparent wound. Kirik winced when his fingers hit a gristly lump of scar tissue, sitting midway along his right thigh. Anxious to see his injury, Kirik climbed unsteadily to his feet and shuffled to the window. The moon was bright enough to allow him to see the scar that he presumed he had gained in the fight with the dragon.

He gasped. Surely that was not possible?

And yet he saw clearly that the raised flesh was shaped perfectly in the image of the dragon’s head that had magically appeared on his coin.

‘It’s alright Kirik; no one has seen it except me.’

The councillor's son banged his head against an open shutter. 'Who's there?' he demanded, his heart hammering in his chest.

'Shhh! No need to be alarmed young one!'

It was a familiar voice, and Old Aggie stepped forward in to the moonlight.

'Aggie, it's you,' Kirik sighed with relief. 'You frightened the living daylights out of me.'

The wise woman moved from the shadows and hugged Kirik to her in an unexpected show of emotion. Then she held him out at arms length, drinking in the sight of him as if to confirm that he was indeed still in one piece.

'And you us!' she replied. 'You've been in a fever for five days. There were moments when even I thought we had lost you!'

'Five days.' Kirik was incredulous. Then, as if the events of the end of the tournament suddenly caught up with him he blurted out all the things that he had failed to ask of his mother.

'What of my father? And the dragon? And Prince Nemar? Oh Aggie, I missed it all. Please tell me what happened.'

'Easy there young master,' coaxed the wise woman. 'No good getting yourself worked up and fevered again. All in good time.'

'But I need to know now Aggie. My head will burst if you don't tell me everything.'

The wise woman sighed. She seemed to visibly shrink and her countenance grew dark. 'Very well Kirik. You have a right to know. These are terrible times, as you will find out soon enough. First some good news: your father is fine. Amazingly he escaped the attack with nothing more than bumps and bruises. As for the dragon, it is gone; slain by the hand of Prince Nemar, though you yourself can take some credit for the victory over the beast. I daresay things would have turned out a lot differently without the intervention of you and Nemar's youngest!'

'Brawdhein? Here, in the forest?'

'Aye, now there's a whole different can of worms,' said Agatha. 'But that can wait,' she added. 'At least until you are a little stronger.'

'But what about you?' Kirik asked, and the wise woman realised that his thirst for knowledge was going to be much harder to satisfy than the thirst for water he had awoken with.

'The last time I saw you, you were underneath the beast.'

The young noble halted then, incredible memories of watching the wise woman coax the dragon from the sky flooding his senses. Then he remembered something else, something much darker. 'Will was there, and Tam too. And then, oh Lady, the dragon struck!'

An uncomfortable silence fell between the wise woman and the young noble as Kirik's unfinished statement hung in the air. Agatha was unable to hold the eyes of the councillor's son and her gaze sank to the wooden boards of the bedchamber. For Kirik, this was the only sign he needed.

'Oh Lady no, tell me it's not true. Tell me Will is not dead. Please Lady, not Will.' The young noble pleaded with the wise woman and she met his gaze again, finally resolving to tell Kirik what had occurred.

'Yes Kirik, Will is not dead, though he lies in his cottage, sick with burns and smoke inhalation. But with care and time to recover, he will live.'

Kirik, unsteady on his legs, gripped his bedside table for support. 'And Tam?' He asked the question, though from the wise woman's expression, he already knew the answer.

'I am sorry,' was all Agatha could manage in reply.

Kirik's strength left him. He was too numb to cry; too devoid of energy to shed tears, and his lack of an emotional response worried the wise woman more than if he had collapsed with grief. With great care, Agatha crossed the room to where Kirik shook with fatigue.

She helped him back to his bed, where he sat on the edge, rubbing at his new scar. As if to block out the terrible news of his badly injured best friend and Will's dead father, Kirik looked down at his leg.

'Agatha, my scar - what does it mean?'

The wise woman hesitated for a moment, unsure what to make of the young noble's strange reaction to Tam's death. She knew that Kirik was in shock and that in his weakened state the facts may not have sunk in properly. She was reluctant to say more about his scar, lest she give him too much to think about. He was in a delicate state after all. Then she came to a decision. Following her own adage, she accepted it was too easy to underestimate the capacity of the young noble and unnecessary to keep him completely in the dark.

'It is so easy for the young to cut through to the most crucial questions,' she stated. 'What does it mean indeed? I noticed it as soon as I went to you on the tournament field; a hole in your breeches at that spot had

been scorched away and I meant to apply a salve to it that I keep for burns. While others raced around tending to the rest of the fallen, I cut the cloth away and saw as clearly as you did tonight what we had only previously seen on your coin - the Dragon's Head. The coin lay a hand's breadth away on the grass. It is now devoid of magic. Here, take a look for yourself!

The wise woman produced the small bronze disc from a pouch at her side. Kirik held it between forefinger and thumb and rubbed at the runes on the rim. No matter how hard he tried, nothing happened.

'What does this mean?' Kirik asked again.

'Well, indeed,' replied Agatha. 'That is a good question. I have some ideas young master, but for now I will keep them to myself. You need to rest.'

'Oh, Agatha,' moaned Kirik. 'Then why sit with me all this time if you mean not to tell me?'

'I haven't been sitting with you more than half an hour,' she stated. 'I sensed that you were stirring a while ago and I made my way across here in secrecy.'

'Secrecy?' questioned Kirik. 'And what do you mean, you sensed it?'

'Ah, never mind any of that now,' the wise woman waved away his questions with a bony hand. 'I came here because I knew you would be worried by your scar.'

She watched as Kirik rubbed at the raised flesh again before continuing. 'I concealed it from everybody for your own protection, because I think eventually it may be of great importance. You need to be able to fathom out it's meaning on your own without interference. Not even your father knows about the scar, and for now Kirik, I think it should stay that way, a secret of yours and mine.'

Kirik contemplated this in silence for a moment and then lowered himself on to his back. For reasons he could not explain, he felt sure that Agatha was correct. He settled back in to his pillows, tiredness swamping his senses and gave a large yawn. His tired mind was starting to switch again from the burning at his thigh to thoughts of his best friend, lying stricken in his bed across the village. Tears formed in his eyes as he pictured Tam. Tall, gentle Tam, coaxing the shire horses Steadfast and Patience across his father's fields. Kirik knew in that instant that his life would never be the same again and he sobbed selfishly for the life he had lost and for the friends he would never see again.

Agatha was relieved to see a more normal reaction from the young noble. She stood over Kirik's bed and waggled her fingers in the air. Kirik thought he saw something sparkle in the air, but before he could say anything he slipped into a deep, peaceful sleep. As his eyelids shut, Agatha stepped away from the bed and looked fondly at the sleeping noble.

'Goodnight,' she whispered, and then with a turn of her wrist threw a pinch of blue powder in to the air and uttered a spell of concealment. The shadows drew about her once more and she walked unseen from the manor house.

Chapter Three: Dragon's Blood

Five days had dragged by since the slaying of the great wyrm; days that for Mation and Spiro were laden with the heavy chains of loss. Weighed down by the suffocating sorrow that permeated every inch of the forest dwelling, the boys struggled to shake off the anxiety that was gripping the entire forest community. The villagers and their guests were seized with terror at the thought that another dragon might appear in the sky at any moment. A twenty-four hour watch had been established to scan the tree line for further danger, and three times already panic had broken out as thunderheads forming on the horizon were mistaken for winged beasts.

The outsider elves fretted with added trepidation over the prospect that their homes in the north might also have been attacked. Wild speculation abounded about why a dragon of the icy wastes, a creature regarded by most before the attack as little more than myth, would be so far south. It swiftly became the consensus amongst the gossipmongers that if Farsee Forest had been attacked, then winged beasts might have also devastated the capital and beyond. Such morbid speculation and doom saying helped to transform Farsee Forest Manor into an open wound that oozed with the poison of dangerous talk.

To Mation it seemed that the clearing had been divided in to two sets of people. There were those that apparently revelled in the drama of the crisis, spreading rumour and fear about the estate with the same grim satisfaction as those souls that enjoy a good execution; then there were those who were beyond caring about such gossip, for they had slipped in to great pits of emotional despair, buried beneath the mountainous despair caused by the loss of their loved ones. Death had visited over a quarter of the families residing in the forest. Shock and shared sorrow gripped the rest of the people with a tightness that threatened to suffocate even the most hopeful amongst them.

Dictating the symphony of mourning were the daily processions of grey-faced families, bearing their dead to a freshly made graveyard in the shadow of the orchard. The solemn tolling of the chapel bell echoed across the clearing like a heavy heartbeat, announcing funeral after funeral for those poor souls whose lives were crushed in to nothingness by the arrival of the fell beast. Loved ones wailed in the tented visitors' enclosure and on the cobbled lanes about the clearing. Dazed by the sudden bereavements, widows and orphans and sobbing parents stood huddled together in small groups. Paralysed by their sorrow, they painted a heartbreaking picture of despair that reduced even the most seasoned army veterans to tears.

Through it all, Mation and Spiro observed as Kirik's father strode about his blighted estate, his face set with grim purpose. As if he were somehow to blame for the catastrophic events, he barely set foot inside his private chambers in the aftermath of the attack. Despite the despairing protestations of Lady Eleanor that he should rest after his near-death encounter, Councillor Eidur stalked tirelessly from family to family, bringing crumbs of comfort and offerings of food and barking orders at his troops to carry on with the dread work of disposing of the beast.

The latter task was an undertaking of desperate urgency. Already the black blood of the dragon had poisoned the land where it had finally been brought down; the earth about the beast was blackened, a bruise upon the earth that inch by inch, expanded with every passing hour. Mation, and Spiro willingly leant their backs to the task of digging up the blackened earth, glad of a distraction from the misery that hung like a black pall over the clearing. Yet even hard labour with the spade could not make them forget their worries about their new friend, Kirik.

Of the young noble, they had seen nothing since he was carried away from the tournament field in a state of collapse, scooped up like a child in the arms of his Thomas. The giant servant had pawed at the limp form of his master like a puppy trying to shake its master from a deep sleep. Each day since the attack, Mation and Spiro had made their pilgrimage to the Manor House to beg for a visitation with their stricken friend. Each time they had been gently turned away by Lady Eleanor, who urged them to leave the family's physician Pederic to get on with the administration of his medicines in peace. Thwarted, they had instead thrown their backs in to soldiers' work, and under the instruction of Captain Okey, they set about carving a deep trench around the circumference of the ruined tournament ground, creating an island of infected land so that the poison might not spread any further. Though they and the other elves that helped them were swift about their work, the doomsayers forecast decades of decay before the infected land would be fit to grow so much as a blade of grass again.

Eidur set a relentless pace for the disposal of the beast. Forge and Wulfric directed his soldiers in the grim task of hacking up the carcass. They worked in teams of eight or ten for short amounts of time, the smell of the leaked blood and decaying flesh noxious enough to send more than a few of their comrades to the hospital tent. The hastily converted catering tent was now employed as a makeshift medical centre. Lady

Eleanor and the wise woman Old Aggie were almost permanent presences within its billowing walls, as they struggled to nurse some of the worst victims of fire and crushing.

On the third morning following the attack, the protective earth works were complete. On the fifth, the first parts of the dragon's carcass were incinerated on a huge bonfire on the common land. Lord Eidur emerged from the hospital tent, where he had completed another of his hourly appraisals of the wounded, to light the kindling and soon a tall plume of grey smoke towered over the clearing as the beast burned.

Only the dragon's head escaped the great conflagration, that lit up the forest through that day and night and following dawn. Of this the skin was flayed and the teeth were pulled and piled in to a long wooden box; fearsome trophies for Prince Nemar, the slayer of the beast. Despite the suffocating sorrow no one had overlooked the fact that he had now slain two serpents, and as ancient custom dictated, the head was his to do with as he wished.

For Prince Brawdhein, the days dragged by even more slowly. He had been confined to the royal enclosure, with strict instructions from his father not to venture further than the dwellings of the wood elves that inhabited that side of the clearing. The young prince effectively found himself under house arrest. This was not how he had envisaged the tournament turning out. His carefully made plans had gone awry and he had no more cards to play. All he could do now was sit in isolation and await his father's judgement.

None of it seemed to matter any more. The dragon had changed everything. Brawdhein would have swapped his freedom for a life in the priesthood if he thought it would bring back all the poor unfortunates who had met their death on the common. Seeing the terror visited upon his grandfather's subjects had reminded him of his duty to the crown. If King Rogan felt he could serve them best with prayer, then that was what he would do. He would enter the church of Her Lady without a look back.

There was no doubting that the scandal of the two princes had gripped the crowds that had descended upon Farsee Forest for the tournament. Second only to speculation about the prospect of further dragon attack, the gossip mongerers basked in the furore over the shock revelation that the mysterious veiled competitor who had dazzled all with his skills, had been none other than Prince Nemar's son. Their predictions about the boy's future following his treacherous deception of his father, ranged from execution to exile, to future King in the making, conveniently ignoring the fact that Prince Brawdhein was not actually in line to inherit the throne.

On the sixth day after the dragon's death, four outriders galloped in to the visitor's enclosure with news of an imminent arrival from Jorniak. Half an hour later, a most unexpected host followed them in from the capital. They came on blowing mounts, road dusty and wind blown, in response to Councillor Eidur's hastily despatched messenger. The Lord of Farsee had kept his wits about him in the aftermath of the attack, sending his best rider Hurstol to the capital with the details of the dread event. The sight of a long column of one hundred riders galloping in to the manor under the royal sigils of fist holding sun was enough to warm even the most sorrowful of hearts. When it became clear that the riders were led by none other than Prince Warseratt, older brother of Prince Nemar and the heir to the throne of the Summerlands, a surge of hysteria swept about the forest, scooping up the lowliest of hearts.

Within seconds of their dismount, it became clear that the attack on the forest had been a most singular event. No other dragons had been seen in Jorniak or anywhere else within the kingdom of the elves. Waves of relief washed over the visitors in the tented enclosure. Their homes in the north were safe.

Mation and Spiro knelt amidst the long line of elves and humans, who gathered before the manor to catch a glimpse of Rogan's heir. The boys were giddy to be in the presence of the royal, but their rapture quickly turned to concern, as for the first time since the dragon's assault, they clapped eyes on Kirik. Appearing pale and wan, the young noble stepped forward on unsteady legs to stand next to his older brothers, who flanked Eidur as he welcomed the prince. Seeing his kneeling friends out of the corner of his eye, Kirik winked, as if to say, *I'm alright*, but there was little sparkle in his eyes.

Mation bit his bottom lip. Where was the half-elf's spirit?

Spiro clapped him on the back with a meaty palm, encouraging the pony-tailed elf not to worry. They watched with concern as Wulfric held on to Kirik as they bowed in deference to the Prince.

'You are most welcome, my Lord.' Councillor Eidur offered his hand to Warseratt. The prince looked like an elongated version of his younger brother, the same features stretched across a long face, which sat atop a lean frame. He was a good head taller than the councillor.

'Well met Eidur. I am sorry that such terrible circumstances bring me to your lands. I share your grief.'

'Thank you,' replied Eidur, whom Mation noted was clearly moved by the presence of Rogan's heir.

'Tell me councillor, can your messenger possibly speak the truth? Have you really slain a dragon here at Farsee? I cannot believe it!'

‘Aye, ‘tis so,’ Eidur replied with a great sigh. He turned and pointed to the spiralling grey plume funnelling into the sky from behind the manor buildings.

‘Its foul corpse burns even now. I will show you its head if it pleases you, for we have kept it in honour of your brother.’

‘My brother.’

A shutter seemed to close on the warmth in Warseratt’s eyes. The councillor was thrown by the distaste so clearly displayed on the features of Rogan’s first-born, though lie all the courtiers he had heard the gossip in Jorniak that the eldest and youngest of the King’s scions held no love for each other.

‘My brother,’ Prince Warseratt repeated, examining Eidur intently as if he might search his eyes for a sign of which of Rogan’s sons the councillor favoured. ‘I must see him at once. Take me to him.’

‘Of course,’ Eidur acquiesced. He bowed his head briefly and called forward Captain Okey. ‘Take the Prince to the royal enclosure. Make sure that food is delivered there immediately.’

‘My Lord,’ answered Okey curtly, turning promptly on his heel to lead Prince Warseratt to his brother. .

‘Councillor, we will talk later.’

Eidur again bowed and then Rogan’s heir swept out of sight around the manor house, his long red cloak billowing in the breeze and four of his guards marching quickstep behind.

As soon as the royal was out of sight, Mation and Spiro broke from their position in the crowd. They raced to Kirik’s side, alternately hugging him and bombarding the half-elf with questions about his well being, so that in the end Eidur had to prise them away in order for Kirik to gain some air.

‘Steady on boys,’ the councillor chided them with a smile. It was the first time he had broken the stony façade that he had borne all week. ‘You’ll have my son back in bed before long if you don’t allow him to breathe.’

The boys backed away sheepishly, but Kirik was relieved by their presence.

‘It’s all right father. I have my strength again. May I go with the Mation and Spiro for the afternoon.’

Eidur deferred to Lady Eleanor, standing a protectively short distance away on the bottom of the manor house steps.

‘It will do him good,’ she offered, the smallest of smiles bringing warmth to her features.

‘Go on then,’ said Eidur. ‘No going in the stream though, you have only just shaken off that fever.’

‘No father, I promise,’ said Kirik.

‘What did you make of that?’ Kirik asked his friends as the boys made the short walk to the banks of Taria’s Tear.

‘I tell you, I can’t believe they sent Prince Warseratt to Farsee Forest,’ replied Mation. ‘Who’d have thought it? Two of Rogan’s sons and one of his grandchildren here in the forest amongst us!’

‘I know,’ replied Kirik. ‘It just shows how serious they must believe this threat is. My dad say’s no-one in living memory has ever seen a dragon this far south.’

Mation whistled through his teeth, underlining the weight of Kirik’s statement.

‘Didn’t look happy though, did he?’ interjected Spiro, the large elf scratching absently at his thick thatch of hair.

‘Well, his brother was nearly killed and the safety of his father’s kingdom has been compromised. What do you expect?’ said Mation.

‘I expect he’s embarrassed,’ said Kirik. ‘There’s all the fuss over Prince Brawdhein to deal with as well. Makes it look like they cannot keep their own children in order.’

‘Yes, and I expect he’s smarting about Nemar as well!’ exclaimed Mation.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Kirik.

‘There’s not many people in the world that have killed two serpents, wouldn’t you agree?’ explained Mation. ‘He cannot be happy with the fact that his younger brother is going to have a reputation even larger than the one he had before. It puts Prince Warseratt somewhat in the shade don’t you think?’

‘I hadn’t thought of it like that,’ said Kirik.

‘Me neither,’ added Mation. ‘Though if my brothers and I are anything to go by, Warseratt will be insanely jealous about the whole affair. It would not surprise me if he looked to even things out a little bit by making a huge play about Prince Nemar’s wayward son.’

The boys regarded each other thoughtfully, and then fell in to respectful silence as they passed a grieving family making its way back from a funeral. When they were out of earshot Kirik broke the silence.

‘Poor father, he’s taking this whole thing to heart. He feels that somehow it’s his fault that these people have lost their loved ones. Thirty-five dead in total and as many more wounded – and he’s holding himself responsible for every single one.’

‘That’s crazy,’ said Mation. ‘How can you predict a thing like that? Your father said it himself; no one has ever seen a dragon in Farsee Forest before, and they haven’t been sighted south of the Icy Wastes in decades. Your father is no more to blame than you or I.’

‘Aye,’ said Kirik sadly. ‘But try telling that to him.’

‘And what about you Kirik? You look so sad. What grieves you so?’

‘My friend Will,’ Kirik began, but had to halt immediately, tears threatening to undermine his composure. He took a moment to control himself before continuing his explanation.

‘My best friend, Will - he was burned in the attack and I am not even allowed to visit him in case I carry infection in to his house. But worse than that, his father was killed in the attack. I’ve known Tam all my life. I just cannot believe it!’

There seemed to be no words of comfort appropriate for the moment and so the boys whiled away their time by the river lazing under the noon sun and letting the late summer heat heal the sadness that they all felt in their souls. Although Mation and Spiro did not know Will, they could share in the grief of their new friend. Eventually after a suitable period of respectful silence the boys began to chat. Their conversation flicked from Prince Warserratt, to questions about Kirik’s fever, to the funerals of the elven and human dead.

Through it all, the angry scar on Kirik’s thigh throbbed painfully, though he ignored the pain and let no sign of it show on his face. He was reluctant to share the remarkable burn with his friends. Even though he was desperate to tell them about the strange dream he had experienced during his five-day blackout, something held him back. Partly it was a belief that he had been delusional in his fever, yet something more compelling held his tongue, something he would have to explore for now on his own.

There was another topic that hung like a black cloud over the boys. The tournament had not been completed and they all still wondered privately what the outcome of the Mikraj trials might be. None of them dared raise the matter for fear of being thought selfish. After all, with so much suffering in their midst, how could they express their disappointment over the unfinished event without seeming callous and heartless? It was Spiro who eventually broke the boys’ silence over the issue.

‘So do you think Nemar will be picking anyone to take back to the palace with him?’ He leaned on an elbow as he looked at his new friends, lying in a row on the lush grass of the riverbank.

The boys, freed from the guilt of raising this taboo subject were quick to oblige him with a barrage of opinions that they had stored up since the day of the dragon’s attack. Kirik was first to offer his views.

‘I cannot believe that Prince Nemar has anything but the treachery of his son on his mind. I bet he cannot even remember what he came to the forest for.’

‘I for one agree,’ said Mation. ‘But I’ve been thinking about the whole Prince Brawdhein thing. Prince Nemar needs to save face over his son. He must feel totally fooled by him because he was up off his feet applauding him when Brawdhein was in disguise. Secretly, I think he will be delighted that Brawdhein is cut from the same cloth as himself. I think he will just select his own son to take back as the tournament hero. It’s a controversial choice, I know, but only in the sense that Brawdhein was destined for the church. This way, his son is rescued from a life of prayer and reading and Nemar gets someone to follow in his own footsteps. It might also suit him to avoid controversy. Can you imagine him trying to present a lowborn elf to his father after all the lives that have been lost this tournament? King Rogan would disown him.’

Spiro, who Mation had come to see as a bit of an older brother due to his size looked thoughtful and then gave his considered opinion. ‘I don’t know, Mation,’ he began. ‘My father served with Prince Nemar when he first put to sea. He told all sorts of tales about him, some of which would make my mother’s toes curl. But he always said that even in his drunken youth as a hell raiser, the prince was a man of principle. I think there is more to come on this matter.’

He paused then added ‘What?’

Kirik and Mation were staring at him with incredulity etched in their eyes.

‘What’s wrong?’ he repeated.

‘Your father served with Prince Nemar?’ said Mation. ‘Then how on earth can you be in the tournament if your dad was in the Mikraj? You should have a right to stand in the normal selection process.’

‘No, no,’ chuckled Spiro. ‘He was a ship’s cook. Where do you think this came from?’ He placed his hands on his belly and shook his wide girth.

The boys began to laugh. It felt good to have such a release after the terrible week they had just gone through.

‘Never mind all of that,’ said Kirik. ‘Tell us what your father had to say about Prince Nemar. I cannot believe you have only just mentioned this. What was he like to sail with? Did your father serve with him when Sethlarok was slain?’

Jovial conversation provided a much needed salve for their wounded spirits. On his way to Agatha’s cottage, Eidur noted the boys at play by the stream. For a second time that afternoon, he allowed a smile to smooth his worry-worn features. Then, as quickly as it appeared it was gone. Dark days lay ahead. He feared that Kirik and his friends might have escaped the dragon, only to be ensnared in a quagmire of subterfuge.

Chapter Four: Rift

In the shade of the royal pavilion, Prince Nemar sat with his head in his hands. Prince Warseratt was seated opposite him, taking a cooling draught from a deerskin of water.

‘It’s a black day for our family when a young whelp fit for the priesthood brings the King’s reputation to its knees!’

Prince Warseratt had wasted no time in making his feelings felt towards his younger sibling. He replaced the deerskin back on a low table between them.

‘I mean, for Lady’s sake, how could you not recognise him, your own flesh and blood?’ The heir to the throne was incredulous. Prince Nemar just ran his hands through his hair.

‘Father is livid little brother. He’s already hauled your household servants up before court to investigate how on this earth that boy of yours got out of the capital. Bostok is in custody and Rogan’s threatening to have him publicly flogged for his part in the deception. But most of his wrath is reserved for you.’

Prince Warseratt peered down his long nose at the younger royal. To Nemar it seemed that his brother was enjoying their family’s predicament a little too much. He felt for Bostok, though he was sure the servant would be wearing the mantle of martyr well; the old elf was devoted to Brawdhein and would care more about the young prince’s opinion than he would for the King’s disappointment.

‘I cannot say that I blame father,’ Warseratt continued. ‘This whole crazy venture of yours has been a disaster from start to finish, and now it has received the outcome that it deserves. I’ve had to personally meet with every member of the council, reassuring them that their birthright is not in jeopardy. You are short-sighted brother if you did not foresee the division this would cause within the kingdom.’

‘Enough!’

Prince Nemar erupted from his chair. He upset stool and table as he leapt to his feet, inadvertently sending the deerskin sliding across the grassy floor of the pavilion where it came to rest a Warseratt’s feet.

‘Do you think I care a jot for the feelings of the sycophants at court. It is their very feathers that I am looking to ruffle. Jorniak is stuffed with overfed peacocks, whose whelps are not fit to sit at the same table as half the boys who entered my tournament. Do not attempt to lecture me on this. If you have come here to do nothing other than gloat, then I would ask you to leave at once.’

Nemar wrapped his arms about himself, as if to keep them from doing something he might regret. He walked to the far side of the tent, away from his brother.

With disdain, Prince Warseratt kicked away the deerskin. He rose and stalked towards Nemar, whose thickly muscled arms tensed as his older brother drew near.

‘Do not forget yourself little brother. I will be king one day and my word will be your creed. Do not place this *affair* between us. I would hate for you to be marginalized after our father’s death.’ Prince Warseratt’s fingers twitched and his face grew puce as he chastised his sibling.

‘You threaten me, brother?’ Prince Nemar snarled back. ‘And I do not like the way you refer to my father’s death so readily. When I left the capital he was hale and hearty. He has many years ahead yet. So many in fact, that the council may prefer a younger heir to take his place when the time comes, one that can wield a sword!’

Prince Warseratt’s head shook and spittle flecked his lip as he tore at his brother. ‘You treacherous dog; be careful what you speak, for I have not my father’s knack for forgiveness. You would do well not to make an enemy of me!’

‘Aye,’ Prince Nemar spat back. ‘And you would best remember that these hands have now slain two beasts of hell. I have a dragon’s head to parade through the streets of Jorniak. You, I daresay, would balk at the smell of its piss.’

Prince Warseratt’s hands balled in to fists, his eyes narrowing in rage. ‘How dare you insult me so? I came here to nothing but good. I came to warn you of father’s position on this and to give you the chance to deal with your son in a fitting manner that might save you some embarrassment.’

‘Warseratt, *doing ‘good’* was the last thing on your mind when you came to this forest. You came to gloat and to revel in the unravelling of my tournament. Where is your compassion for the families outside – shouldn’t you be doing what Eidur is doing right now, visiting the relatives and handing out coin of compensation? You disgrace our father’s name.’

Nemar appeared as fearsome of one of the monsters he was famed for felling. For a moment, Warseratt had not a breath to respond, but satisfaction soon blossomed on his features. He had wanted to provoke his

brother's rage and now he had him at a disadvantage and could press home his real reason for coming to the forest.

'I forgive you brother,' he said with such calm as to provoke further annoyance from Nemar. 'Clearly you are not in the right mind to make decisions – understandable after your *lucky* escape. I will grant you a concession. Let me rid you of the source of your troubles. I will take that little whelp of yours and deliver him straight to the priests. There he can serve adequate penance and begin immediate service to The Lady.'

Nemar prowled on the edge of the tent, a wild beast. A little of the surety vanished from Warseratt's pomposity as he continued. 'Now, I can't say fairer than that can I? I am sure you will be glad of this favour. Brawdhein has always been an afterthought has he not? You have never shown an interest in the boy and now he threatens to upset your lifestyle for good. As for the matter of this *competition* business, rediscover your manners and loyalties before you speak to me again and it will all be forgotten.'

Prince Nemar let his arms fall to his side. He walked up to his brother and spoke through gritted teeth.

'You will keep well away from my son. He has more fight, more initiative in his little finger than you have in your entire body. I am tired of your blinkered approach to your duties. This land needs warriors; soldiers who are willing to fight to keep the Summerlands safe. If this week has shown me one thing, it is that this reign has forgotten where its true strength lies. The Summerlands are in danger from weak defences and a council that has led my father away from his old warrior instincts. I have seen this week that there are many unrecognised talents out there that can help me to defend our borders. As for Prince Brawdhein, my son will no more go with you than I will celebrate if you go on to wear the crown. Prince Brawdhein will lead the first new recruits of the Mikraj in to combat in a few short years. I will leave the religious texts to you and our pious brother Aranok. Now go back to Jorniak and leave me to clean up my own house.'

Prince Warseratt drew his red cloak about him. He regarded his brother as if he were looking at a madman. He seemed to consider a further repost and then changed his mind. He walked to the doorway of the tent, and before leaving, turned to address his brother for a final time.

'I realise there is little in the way of brotherhood between us, the distance in years and our dispositions to life being but two causes of division. Yet I had not realised there was so little love. You clearly have no regard or respect for me, and I have none for you. You are wrong in your actions, of this I am convinced. Yet for now, they are for my father to tolerate and to respond to as he wishes. I, on the other hand, when I *am* eventually crowned, will regard you as a menace. You will not be welcome in my court.'

Prince Warseratt paused to let the impact of his words sink in. Nemar appeared grave, but stood resolute in the centre of the tent.

'Fare thee well,' added Prince Warseratt. 'I will inform father of your lack of compliance.' With that, the heir to the throne of the Summerlands swept out of the tent.

Prince Nemar brooded in the shadows. His brother's words were hard to hear, but not of any surprise. A rift had been coming for years. He had not however expected to hear words of praise for Brawdhein slipping so easily from his own lips. He had amazed himself how easy he had found it to make a decision about the future of his wayward son. Now, also he knew what to do about the conclusion of the unfinished tournament. He knew exactly what to do about the selection for the King's Blades.