



Immersion: Parts 1 and 2: Misery and Trial and Error

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Part 1: Misery

Section 1

Chapter 1: Cale

In the Beginning, the Source created the Earth, and the Earth was a place for Man. And the Source Bloomed, and Man was on the Earth, and the Bloom was in Man. And it came to pass that Man Connected himself to the Source, and the Earth also Bloomed. And from the Bloom of Earth was life, and the life was good, and the life came from the Bloom, which was out of the Connection of Man to the Source, which is Life, and Light.

- An excerpt from the Writings of the First Man, found and preserved during the First Age, the Age of the Dragon

Cale was in Brandon's office after work. He usually didn't go asking for the time to simply talk with anyone at all, but this was an exception. Besides, Brandon had always been a kind fellow, and seemed to have a soft spot for Cale; he would listen to him for a while sometimes before prompting him to go home. But this was different, and much too important.

Brandon looked up from the computer on his desk, which was surrounded by tall stacks of papers, and leaned back in his chair as he listened.

“... and the black man with wings turned in the air and took off toward the break in the clouds,” Cale finished, trying hard to keep the excitement from his voice.

The dream that Cale had the night before was fascinating. It involved a woman named Lucena and a man named Sandred. Apparently, in the dream, Sandred was escaping from Lucena and her cohorts, rescuing a little baby only a few months old.

Cale's heart fell heavily as Brandon stifled a yawn, checking his watch. The big man quickly moved his pudgy hand up to scratch his head when he saw Cale's dismay at his indifference. Although he could tell Brandon did it reflexively, it still hurt that he didn't seem to care. To Cale, it wasn't that the overweight, balding man wasn't really listening. He desperately wished that he had someone there who *wanted* to listen, who would actually care. Someone he could trust completely.

"So, did all the wolves die, then?"

"Well, no, I don't think so. There were too many of them." Cale frowned. Brandon was clearly missing the point. Was he really so dense, or was he just indifferent?

"Oh, okay. So, did the man with the baby live, then?"

Cale sighed, hiding a scowl behind his hand and pinching the bridge of his nose in annoyance.

"Oh, I guess not, then."

Cale knew Brandon could tell he was upset. The middle-aged man wiped sweat from his brow, trying to recover.

"So, was that the entire dream?"

"Yes," Cale sighed resignedly. People never understood.

"All righty, then."

Brandon stood and walked around the desk, keeping his sizable belly from knocking over the piles of legal documents. He surely had other important things to worry about before the night was over. But it wasn't any consolation to Cale. No one could relate to him. There was no one he could connect with anymore. The last person who got close was gone. Out of his life forever.

"I could take you home if you didn't –" Brandon began.

"No," muttered Cale, "I drove."

“All righty, then.”

That seemed to be his favorite phrase. Cale would sometimes count the number of times Brandon said it. It could drive a man mad. But instead of letting himself get angry, he turned and strode briskly out of the building, but not before he saw Brandon plop back to his desk, typing away madly at his computer. Back to work, as if he’d only gotten up for a moment to swat a fly.

Cale didn’t even try speaking to the people he passed on his way out. Although his story might have sounded very juvenile to Brandon – a strange dream with flying men and mad, frightening wolves certainly must have seemed crazy; and it was, of course – he still often felt that he functioned on a level so much deeper and more complicated than everyone else that no one would even try to understand when he wanted to talk about *anything* important to him. If only people would listen – *truly* listen, and not just stare blankly at him, as Brandon had – then perhaps they could relate at the very least. Carry a conversation that wasn’t completely one-sided, with only him speaking, or the other person. Like today with Brandon.

He knew he needed to share things with people. He knew he needed connections with others on a deeper, more personal level. He knew he needed to trust, and to be trustworthy, but somehow every conversation he ever had turned out to just be about him, or, more often, only about the other person. But being homeschooled by a genius didn’t help his lacking communication skills. He felt resentful of the need to be social. It made him feel lonely and weak.

Shoulders slumped, Cale shuffled out to the parking lot of the Sean-Johnson law firm. His mind wandered freely as he shut the door of his car and drove home. He decided to use manual pilot instead of automatic this time.

His thoughts wandered as he drove. Why couldn’t people understand? They always seemed overly sympathetic, like people do with cancer victims and their families, or people with prosthetic limbs.

Stupid as it sounded, it was all fake to Cale. They didn't see – *wouldn't* see – or understand just how much he could contribute to society. They didn't *really* care about what he thought or what he wanted to tell them; in their eyes he was some pitiable, stupid, naïve kid who didn't understand the world. He wished they could see more than that.

Cale owned the large Smith & Smith Technologies, the leading company in technology and energy in the entire United States, Canada, Western Europe, most of China, and was working on contracts with some areas of China, India, Africa, and the Middle East. When Smith & Smith Tech. reached those areas, Cale knew that no other competing company with any technology or energy – even nuclear or solar energy or nanotechnology – could ever compete. But Cale didn't care much about that.

A great deal of things that Cale used around his highly advanced home – things a lot of businesses now used – were developed by that company. But they were useless and meaningless to him, now. It had been Cale's father who started the company. He'd married Cale's mother, who had been the primary inspiration for Smith & Smith Technologies. But she died when Cale was too little to remember her ...

Cale hated thinking about that. It made his eyes sting and his heart fill with emotions he wasn't familiar with, so he just pushed them away, drowning them out. But he hated doing that, too. It made him feel like he didn't care. The problem was, Cale obviously didn't care. Not like he used to. Not anymore.

His dad had nearly survived a devastating car accident a few months before. He was on his way back from China. He had flown in a plane across bodies of land and water, deadly close to war zones, just like he always had. And when he thought he was safest – when he finally made it to the land of the free and the home of the brave – was when he was rear-ended by some drunk fool. Failed air bag. That's what they told Cale. His father, one of the most brilliant

minds of the age, Cale's closest friend, mentor, father, entrepreneur of one of the largest businesses in the world ... and the greatest man Cale ever knew was snuffed out like a candle in a strong wind. By a failed airbag. Cale smacked the steering wheel, gritting his teeth. His vision blurred for a moment before clearing again.

If he had looked in the rear view mirror, he would have seen a man standing on the side of the road. His clothing seemed like a flashback to the Victorian era, but he was talking on a cellphone madly, a pair of binoculars trained directly at Cale's car. Cale would have been able to read the man's lips as he spoke.

“... stupid boy will finally get what he deserves, after all he's done in his life. If we can just trap him outside that house ...”

But Cale didn't look back, so he didn't see anyone.

He arrived home almost by muscle memory. It seemed like the only thing that got him there; knots of emotion twisting in his chest drained him of all energy. He slammed the door in the driveway, and let the automated system guide the car back into the garage.

“Welcome – home – Cale,” beeped a robotic voice as Cale shuffled to the front door.

“Hey,” he mumbled despondently, twisting the door handle and pushing it open.

Normally, he wouldn't have said anything at all, but the system required voice recognition to let him in. He hated the computer's interface voice. He forgot to change it from when he was bored the other day and started changing the settings. He could have chosen a different one or returned it to default when he walked in. But he didn't care. What was the point.

Newspapers littered the coffee table in the spacious front room, which had a couch and comfortable chairs centered perfectly in the room, but he didn't look at them. He passed the elevator hidden in the wall and into the kitchen. He slumped into a stool at the island

in the large, pristine kitchen, leaning on his elbows against the stone counter, and stared at the clock on the stove across the room. Five-thirty. He blinked. Clasping his fingers together, he stared at the floor. And sat.

He watched the light from the sun shining through the window above the sink move slowly across the kitchen. He looked at the clock a second time. Seven-fifteen. He blinked. Seven-thirty.

The doorbell rang. He took his time getting to the door, shuffling his feet. When he saw who it was in the monitor hidden in the wall by the door, he immediately threw iron walls around his heart. He did *not* want to talk to anyone. Least of all Susie.

“Hey, Cale,” said Susie when he reluctantly opened the door. Financial secretary to the local office of Smith & Smith. She had two kids, and her husband worked for the local hospital.

“Hey,” he mumbled back, leaning against the door frame, arms folded across his chest, eyes looking anywhere but directly into hers. She gazed at him with what was clearly sympathy. Inwardly, he huffed. Sympathy? How could she understand? How could she sympathize? She didn’t know his pain.

“I’ve brought you your check from S and S,” – her voice was too sweet – “for fixing Hubs for the law firms, the military base, and the Pentagon last week?”

Inwardly, he smirked, and dark thoughts oozed his sarcasm and anger at her. *Was it a question, Susie? * he thought cynically. *Am I a simple child to be babied and patronized?*

Hubs were among the many inventions of Smith & Smith Tech. It was an electric generator that could wirelessly power any battery, or anything that required electricity. They lasted for a lifetime, but the converters and distributors often needed maintenance – usually about once a week. That’s what Cale did, sometimes. He didn’t have to, but it gave him something to do other than stare at the clock all day. Every day. It seemed to be the only thing he wanted to do lately.

He took the envelope from her with a sigh.

“Why do you bring it to me, Susan? You know you could just ...”

He looked at her with what he knew she must have thought was a blank stare.

“Cale.”

When she said his name, it was as if she were saying it for the first time. Her tone completely changed – in his ears, at least. She sounded ... like she understood him. Like she cared about him. Cared about *him*, not just what he was going through. Maybe she wasn’t such an idiot, after all. He could feel the wall around his heart shrinking, crumbling, exposing the soft tissue beneath.

That tone of voice – *that’s* what Cale wanted. People to treat him normally, like he was okay, not as if his father had died a few months before. His heart sank with guilt for thinking poorly of her when all she really wanted to do was to be kind to him. He looked at her directly in the eye for the first time, hopeful. She took a deep breath.

“Cale, you really need to get out.”

He slumped back with a sigh. Maybe she really didn’t understand, after all – she wouldn’t lecture him if she understood.

“You need to be with people and do things. Mr. Smith, your dad,” – Cale’s eyes glazed over at that. The walls around his heart were back – “he wouldn’t have wanted you to just –”

“Okay, thanks, Susan.” He started shutting the door.

“Wait – Cale!”

He stopped in mid door slam. She grabbed it, peering into his face. Pleading.

“I know it’s only been a year since your dad’s accident, but you’re smart and talented!” – *Uh, yeah*, he thought sarcastically – “You’re only nineteen, you live in this great house, you own this enormous company your parents left you –” inwardly, he flinched, but showed

no outward emotion, “— you know things about this technology that no one else in the world –” he looked away, not knowing what he felt. Embarrassment? “— no one *in the world* knows about, Cale.”

He looked at her in the face. She was enthusiastic, and she meant what she said. She was smiling.

He held her gaze, searching for something. After a moment, he saw it, right there, directly behind her brown eyes. Sincerity. The walls around his heart started crumbling again, along with something else. What *was* that feeling?

Long pause. Ten seconds. Fifteen seconds. Twenty. She shifted her feet, clearly almost ready to give up and leave. *Why does she do this? * he thought. Then he gave in.

“I ... I put out an advertisement last week,” he said quietly, “in the paper.”

Susie perked up at this dull announcement, turning her head to the side, nodding, smiling, looking intently at him, clearly pleased. He glanced up at her, a small smile at the corner of his lips. A genuine smile?

“Great, this is good! So, are you renting out the guest house, or the basement? Or maybe the third or fourth floor?” Her skin seemed to vibrate with happiness.

It hurt a little to think about it in this way, but she seemed to remind Cale a little bit of a – his heart throbbed – a mom. One he’d never known.

“Depends on if it’s a guy or a girl.”

He really did smile that time. Of course a girl would go in the guest house, but he also knew how it sounded. He glanced up at Susan ... or maybe he should call her Susie ... who smiled back, too. She obviously understood what he meant. The walls crumbled a little more.

“Well, that’s great, Cale.”

She looked at him wistfully. Her eyes seemed to glaze over for a moment. He noticed her faraway look. It irked him. What did she mean with that look? It must mean something, surely. His eyes turned hard again. Why did she do that? She seemed to go from kind to judgmental in the same sentence. He started turning to shut the door.

“Well, thanks again ...”

Her smile fell at his sudden change. She turned to go, waving goodbye before getting in her car. At that wave, he suddenly realized that she didn’t mean any harm. He shut the door softly, gazing at her through the window. Confused feelings fought within him.

“... Goodbye ... Mom,” he whispered. The walls crumbled a little more. But, watching her leave, and feeling the loneliness creep back again flared his temper back to boiling.

He resisted the urge to open the door again and slam it with all his strength with difficulty. He returned to the kitchen, shuffling his feet.

“Cale,” beeped the automatic voice.

“What is it, Foster?”

“Ha – ha. Very – funny – Cale. A – foster – home.”

Cale growled quietly.

“Switch to natural voice, Harrison, you sound terrible.”

“Ah, yes, thank you sir – what a relief.”

The system took on a male British accent, one from a movie Cale had liked from ... better days.

“Sir, I must inform you that your blood sugar levels have been steadily decreasing –”

Cale circled the large island in the kitchen, staring listlessly through the window above the sink.

“— would you like leftovers from yesterday, or would you prefer me to call for takeout?”

He didn’t answer right away. Harrison waited patiently.

“A mango would be fine, thanks, Harrison.”

Filling a glass of water, his eyes were blank, staring.

“Absolutely, sir. We have plenty of fruit in stock. Would you like electrolytes with your water, sir?”

Lifting the glass, he took a sip.

“No, thank you, Harrison.”

The fruit appeared on the counter next to the sink.

“Do you see anything amusing out the window, sir?”

Cale didn’t answer.

If Cale had been looking out his front window he would have seen the man in a black suit with a high collar, a blue waistcoat with a gold pocket watch chain, and a white shirt with a black cravat tied at his neck. He would have noticed that the man was staring through the window, willing Cale to come outside.

Susie, however, would not have seen the man standing on the road as she backed out of the driveway. She would never have seen the man through her rear-view mirror, either. In fact, Susie would never be able to see the man that stood like a sentinel transported from the past standing in front of Cale’s house.

But Cale would have.

Susie’s family

Susie drove home. She worried about Cale. She worried about her kids, Jessica and Rebecca. She worried about what would happen to Cale. He had been so full of life only a couple of years before. The

death of his father hit him really hard. She treated him like a son because she knew he needed that, even if he wouldn't admit it to anyone, including himself. His mother died when he was little, his father – his only support and friend in the world – was gone, and she hated seeing him suffer. She and her husband Bryan had spoken together about it many times, and they shared the same concern. Cale was in trouble; they needed to do something to help him. He was alone in the world, and Mr. Smith had been so kind to her family ... she felt obligated to return the favor.

She could tell that Cale felt misunderstood, as if the pain he was feeling was something no one could share, or that his pain was too *terrible* to share. She wanted desperately to be a comfort to him, to help him through his grief. She wished she could just throw her arms around him, and he would feel better – that somehow, she could take his pain away. It was awful to see him so dark and lonesome. And something was terribly wrong with the way he was dealing with his pain. He was shutting himself away from people – which would *not* help him heal. It was likely he would need talk therapy. But not with her – most likely, he needed a trained professional. And perhaps even anti-depressants.

She stopped her train of thought, breathing deeply.

“Enjoy what’s around you, Susie,” she said to herself. “Try to think about happy things. The bad stuff doesn’t go away, so accentuate the positive.”

She looked out the window. The evening sun was beautiful, with orange and yellow streaking through the sky. There was one cloud that had a blue lining across the top and orange highlights at the bottom. The fields whizzing past were green and beautiful, the trees looked great, and the homes were full of people going about their business. Plus, her day had been relatively stress-free. Well, as much as a work day can be, with the usual complaints ... but she'd even gotten less of that than usual. Overall, her day went well. At least she got to *talk* to Cale, even if he seemed like he wanted to curl up

somewhere and die, poor thing. Maybe he felt something good from her visit. She *prayed* he felt something good. A little ray of sunshine in his darkness, hopefully. Just knowing that she might have done something good for him comforted her a little.

She pulled into her driveway. Her job was good, and it paid well. Her husband was loving and had a steady job that he liked. She pulled into the garage, got out, closed the garage door, and went inside. She was greeted by squeals of joy. She smiled. And, of course, she had two wonderful children at home. Susie had much to be grateful for.

“Mom,” Jessica said plaintively. Susie couldn’t resist a smile. “I need help with this math homework.”

“Oh, you know I’m good at that. I would love to help you!”

“Hey, Dad, Mom’s home!” yelled Rebecca from downstairs. Jessica was seven, and Rebecca was seventeen and due to graduate in just a couple of months. Only two years younger than Cale.

“Hello, Mom!” said Bryan, Susie’s husband, sweeping enthusiastically through the kitchen, picking her up gently and setting her down with a tender kiss.

“Got home about an hour ago,” he said softly. “How was your day?”

“Hey! Don’t take her away from me!” whined Jessica. “She’s helping me with math!”

“Oh, it’s okay, Sweetie, he’s just helping me untie my brain so I can help you,” said Susie. Coming home wasn’t always so calm, but a positive attitude did help make things better. Her smile widened.

“So, how is Cale?” Bryan looked concerned. Susie sighed.

“I think today’s a really bad day for him. He really needs people in his life.”

“Do you think he would accept an invitation to come here to eat for Sunday?”

“Maybe, I’m not sure,” she said as Rebecca rushed in from her downstairs bedroom.

“Mom, I was just talking to Dad about Cale.”

Susie looked up admiringly at her older daughter. They had discussed Cale as a family before, trying to think of ways to help him. Susie was glad her family responded so positively to someone else’s need.

“I looked up his symptoms on the internet –” Susie and Bryan shared a look with a smile “— and Dad and I both think he has depression. It’s written all over everything. He has really big crashes, right? He has a LOT of apathy about, well, everything, he doesn’t sleep right –”

“Whoa, there,” said Bryan with a playful grin, “I said he *might* be suffering from depression. We can’t diagnose without professional help.”

“But you’re a professional, Dad,” said Jessica from the table with a “duh” expression on her face. Susie and Bryan held back a laugh.

“No, Jess,” said Rebecca, trying to keep back an exasperated tone, “he’s a Physician’s Assistant. He can’t actually make any diagnoses like that yet. He has to get through medical school, first.”

“Yes, well,” Bryan sighed, turning to Susie with a look, “that would be a while in the making, wouldn’t it?”

Susie reached for his hand.

“You do fine, Papa.” She lifted his hand and kissed it.

“Yeah, Becca, he’s just as good as any old doctor,” Jessica protested. Everyone chuckled at that.

Rebecca sat at the table as Susie laced an arm through Bryan’s before asking, “Do you guys think it would be okay if we have Cale here for dinner on Sunday?”

Jessica tapped her chin. Susie hid a smile. Jess was so precocious.

“Day after tomorrow?” she asked.

“Sure, why not?” Rebecca shrugged. Her face changed and she leaned forward, folding her arms on the table seriously. “I think he might really need professional help, and really soon.”

Susie and Bryan shared a grave look.

“Yes,” said Bryan as Susie fought back tears. Bryan took her hand. “He might need all the help he can get.”

The Dreams

Cale slumped on the couch, tired, but not sleepy. He lay on his back, gazing at the ceiling, but not seeing it. His dreams. Those dreams he was having more and more frequently – they symbolized something important. But what?

“Harrison? Look up swords online.”

“Do you have a specific one in mind, sir?”

“No, not to buy, to identify one.”

“Can you describe the sword to me, sir?”

“It’s about three to four feet in length, blunt on one side of the blade, but sharp on the other. The point is curved slightly at the end, sort of like a knife. Area of origin is unknown, but definitely not Middle Eastern.”

“I believe the sword in question – according to research from several sites – is probably a falchion, sir. Used in Medieval times, but most often by common men. Some falchions resembled meat cleavers or knives, as you say sir, and were never used by knights, nobility, or professional fighters. Would you like me to search for a falchion in stock for purchase, sir, or do you have a specific one in mind?”

“No, Harrison, thank you. Just a dream I had.”

Cale yawned, turning to his left side, facing the back of the couch. Sandred was apparently a common warrior, then; his sword was a simple falchion. The dream about Sandred, the baby boy, and the flying man definitely were important somehow. But how could it be important? How can dreams affect reality? He fell asleep, his mind swimming with question after question.

Chapter 2: Hunter and Emma

The Stenson Farm lay on a hill overlooking the village of McIntyre. From Emma's vantage point at the old well at the edge of the farm, the scene was breathtaking. The rain season was nearly over, and the plants flourished in vibrant greens and nearly overwhelming hues of early summer. The purple and pink flowers, the white blossoms from the trees, the blue sky with white, fluffy clouds captured her in with the wonder and magic of nature. She sighed. The colors were so vibrant, the air so crisp and clear from the morning dew, she couldn't help a smile of happiness creep up her face as the sun peaked its shy light over the distant mountains to the east. With early morning chores done on the farm, what was there better to do than rest next to the old well, take in the pleasant scene, and smell the morning summer breeze from the west still wafting spring's sweet aroma? It made her feel content with the world, and her soul glowed with joy.

Emma sighed and lifted the wet bucket into her lap, gazing pleasantly over her shoulder to the hidden sun, its juvenile light casting the eastern sky in a light orange hue as it chased away the dark blue night.

She paused, still entranced by the magical scene. It was always an experience without words to her, taking in the beauty surrounding her – when she had the time. It thrilled her with a sense of adventure and purpose. She gazed over the family farm, a light shining within her eyes as she recalled the years of work she dedicated to the land with her brother and father. The Stenson Farm was consecrated ground to her.

She stood, relishing the pleasant breeze through her hair. As always,

a small smile lifted her lips as she passed the fields, the jug balanced on her hip. Gazing contentedly toward the mountains in far distance to the east, she padded quietly, almost reverently, toward the farmhouse on the southern border of the fields. The wheat was already nearly to its size, and rolled in great green waves in the wind. Between the rows she saw her brother Hunter hacking at weeds as he patrolled the wheat. Bolburs, or boil tubers, would often sprout alongside the precious crops, but were particularly deadly to the helpless wheat since the weed would spray toxic liquid in all directions once its bulbous stem matured. Emma admired her brother's strength and his determination to see the job done, and it brought her memory to some six years before, when they both had been much less eager to work the farm than they had been with playing and imagining grand adventures ...

Using hammers and hoes, they squeezed the bolbur pus into buckets and uprooted them. The process was often arduous, but they found ways to make it more interesting.

“How about we fly you to those mountains!” said Hunter at ten years old, wonder shining in his face. “I’m sure there are all kinds of magical creatures there.”

Emma giggled.

“Oh of course I’d like to go to the mountains someday, but I can’t leave you and Pa behind.”

Their mother had died years before, shortly after Hunter’s birth. Emma couldn’t remember her at all, being only two years of age at the time. Their father, Darren, had been taking care of them alone since then.

Hunter looked excited, enjoying his childish fantasy as it unfolded in his mind.

“Oh, but we could come with you! And if we could do magic, then we’d have all the food we need, and never get sprayed by a bolbur again.” He kicked playfully a nearby bolbur sprout for punctuation.

“Yeah,” said Emma, shivering with excitement. “With magic we could make food out of thin air, like in the stories Dad tells us, you know, about goblins and wights, and Celebar the Great and his deeds in the Great War.”

They continued weeding the field, chattering happily about what adventures they would have if they were only like Celebar, with magical powers, grand steeds, with fair maidens to rescue and wondrous places to explore. When they were tired, they threw themselves on the cool grass by the old well.

“Do you believe in magic, Emma?” said Hunter, picking grass and piling it on his sister’s hand. “Do you think we could take the Adventurer’s Oath, like Celebar?”

She giggled as the grass tickled her skin, and made her own pile on Hunter’s face. He playfully tried to blow it off without moving his head as she answered. She grew serious.

“Well,” she said, “actually, I don’t know.” She threw one more fistful of grass on his face absently. “I love the stories Pa tells us, but ... stars, Hunter, I don’t know! I wish it were real.”

She watched as her brother tried to blow the grass off his upper lip, only succeeding in blowing it up his nose. They laughed together for a moment, Hunter sneezing and laughing at the same time as he shook the grass off his head. She picked a piece of grass out of his hair gently, thinking.

“But, Hunter, if magic were real, don’t you think Pa would be able to do it, too?”

Hunter nodded seriously. Emma suppressed a laugh. She was confident the girls in the village would all be mooning over her brother soon – he was so cute.

“Yes,” he said slowly, “I think Pa would have told us how to do it if he knew.”

Emma opened her mouth to reply, but paused instead. She hadn’t thought of the possibility that her father would have withheld the information from them. Why would he? Perhaps he might have thought they were too young ...

But her pa wouldn’t have kept *that* from her, she decided. Her pa at least would have told *her*, if perhaps he decided to wait until Hunter was older before revealing the secret to him as well. Surely, he would have told *her*.

“Yes,” she said sadly, “I think magic is just part of those stories Pa tells us.”

She thought about the adventures of Celebar. Born as a stable boy, he grew to a strong and mighty man during the Great War. He fought in many battles, single-handedly slaying hundreds of foes, surviving against impossible odds, and even was promoted to an officer at a young age.

But it wasn’t enough. The forces of evil were too great. So Celebar searched the land for something that would enhance his power, and enable him to defeat the enemies of his family, home, and nation. He discovered the Mount of Promise, which sprouted up out of the sea when he sailed to it in search of the lost secrets of magic. There he discovered a great master who taught him of magic and its uses, and how Celebar would be able to use such power against his enemies.

The story told of how Celebar knelt before the old man, and took the Oath of Adventurers, of how he rode the waves of the sea back to the battle, and took the light from the stars and the lightning from the clouds, smiting the enemy before him as he flew high above the earth. The thunder that pealed from his powerful lightning was so great that it caused the earth to quake, mountains to fall into valleys, and valleys to stand up into majestic mountains. Then Celebar rode away triumphantly in a chariot of stars, sailing over forest, plain,

desert, and sea, to view his new world. His chariot carried him into the sky, becoming a part of the mystery of the heavens forever.

Emma thought about the story for a moment, the thought giving her excited chills. It tickled her sense of adventure, dreaming about Celebar and of becoming like him. It certainly would be wonderful, enlightening, and freeing to be like the hero, but he was just a legend. Pa would tell her if magic were real. Of course he would.

Jumping to her feet, she and Hunter dove into a game, chasing one another up and down the path next to the field, laughing and giggling merrily.

Pulling herself back to the present, Emma sighed as she carried her pitcher to the house. Unfortunately, Hunter wasn't the same boy he had been. He had changed a great deal. He had grown more sullen and silent, even distant over the last few years. She wished she could play with him like they used to, dream like they once did about Celebar and magic, or even have a decent conversation that didn't end in a quarrel. She sighed. Such things could not be. Hunter was secretive, sneaking away sometimes to do only the stars knew what. She felt distinctly that he was pushing her away. And it hurt.

The woes of any teenage boy or girl were intense, but didn't Hunter know that she was feeling changes, too? Didn't he know that she needed him to be there, too, just as she was willing to take him and accept him, no matter who he was or how drastically his emotions may have changed? Didn't he know that all she wanted was to be happy and content, and not have contention between them? She felt utterly betrayed by his lack of trust.

But as always she walked with her head high, hiding the weighty burden she bore. Besides, to smile and laugh, to dream of going to the mountains in the east and to remember better days was better than to shut herself in her room and cry, like she wanted to. Despite

her pain, her contented smile faded only slightly as she walked into the house and set the pitcher next to the old oven in the kitchen.

Opening the door to the farmhouse behind her, her father walked into the tiny kitchen with a wide smile on his tan face. The muscles under his shirt rippled. Her father was a very mighty man. If anyone would grow up to be like Celebar, he certainly would be Emma's first candidate. Although he was only a farmer, he was a natural leader, extremely talented at everything he did, and he was Emma's hero. It was his smile and his strength that gave her permission to be strong and to smile, too. They rarely talked about Hunter and the struggle he fought, but they found other ways to support each other.

"Good morning, Starlight," he said warmly. It was the name he had called her for most of her life. He said it referred to the way her eyes glittered when she smiled.

Taking the heavy pitcher from her and setting it next to the basin on the counter, he gave her his good-morning hug, wrapping his strong arms around her shoulders. She loved the smell he had after chopping wood and working in the small forge in the back. She supposed the smell of fresh sweat might be unpleasant for most people, but it reminded her of everything her father meant to her. Security. Love. Warmth and kindness. Hard work. Strength ... and not just the strength of his arms. They parted. Emma turned her face away for a moment to wipe a tear and clear her throat before she spoke.

"I finished milking the cows, Father, and Hunter is nearly done with the mature bolburs. We cleared the canal together earlier this morning. I think we're ready to try watering with the new pump, if it's ready. The canal is full – we only need to open the floodgate."

The watering of a farm was an immense task. The little community of McIntyre depended mainly upon farming for trade and to subsist, so watering was paramount to the survival of their livelihood as well as their crops. The mountains to the west stole most of the

rain, and there was enough rain during the summer to feed the forests higher in the wild foothills, but not enough for the fields. One peddler came to the village years before with a solution: an invention made by people from the Glass Desert. He called it a pump.

So, Farmer Stenson set about building his own pump. It was an enormous project, taking the better part of two years to complete, but it saved the poor blacksmith, Radus Lancaster, months of extra work. Moreover, it was an excuse for Farmer Stenson to hone yet another skill. He was excited and passionate about his work, and his skills and knowledge in forgery had improved greatly. Whenever he spoke excitedly about the pump's progress it always made Emma smile, no matter what dark thoughts about Hunter might snuff out her good mood.

"I finished it!" he exclaimed happily. "And I already tested it – it seems to work well! Between that and the pipes, why, the east wheat grass field should be much easier to water this summer. Where is Hunter now? We'll need his help."

Emma made a surreptitious gesture in the direction of her brother, whose curses could be heard traveling on the breeze. He had stepped on a bolbur plant, and apparently it leaked its awful, burning toxin on his foot.

"Lightning and cursed thunder!" he growled loudly, wrenching a towel from his pocket to wipe away the burning liquid from his boot, more profanities streaming from his mouth.

Emma exchanged a worried look with her father. Hunter was getting worse, and the people he spent his time with in the village didn't improve his attitude or his language. Cautiously, they approached him, both walking on eggshells.

Hunter hadn't been happy when his father and sister asked him to come help them install the pump in the wheat grass field, but he came with them anyway, trudging behind. His father carried the

pump in a large rucksack over his shoulder, and together they were able to heft four long pipes to the canal. Hunter cursed under his breath when he felt the skin on his hands getting hotter. He would have a blister on the center – on the thunder-blasted center! – of his wretched *palm* by the end of the day. His hands were rough and calloused in all the right places for shovels, hoes, pitchforks, and cattle goads, but the pipes rubbed his hands in a completely different way, and they were heavy – oh *stars*, they were heavy! But he didn't complain when he saw his father sweating under the weight of the pump in addition to the end of two pipes.

They spent the day figuring out how to distribute the water evenly through the field. Hunter did what he was told, his mind mainly on the thing that troubled him greatly, completely absent from the work. His eyes were dull whenever he was asked to do anything, and he completed his tasks, his mind utterly elsewhere. The young woman in whom he had been very interested for many months was betrothed to another man since birth, and she had not told him so – after months of an intense relationship – until one week ago. Ada Hayes was a beautiful young woman who lived in the village with her parents, working in a tavern, Savine and Owls. He and Ada had gone to primary school together when they were younger, and had started spending much more time together five months back. It made him happy, being with her without his father or sister knowing. It was exciting, thrilling even, to meet her secretly in the woods to talk ... and to kiss. Just on the very day he was going to tell her he wanted to make their relationship public, she told him she was betrothed to another man. The news crushed him. They had parted in anger and pain. Already in the midst of intense feelings he did not understand – besides hate and anger – this sudden change was devastating.

Bit by bit, day by day, he began pulling himself away from his sister and father even more than he already did, feeling that they would not understand, and that he would be rejected and judged. And not just by them, but by the village – by people he had known all his

life. He was certain he would be an outcast, doomed to be judged and tormented by the people of the village wherever he went.

He had tried everything he knew to help himself feel better, but found no relief from the pain of the broken relationship. He turned to spending time in the village taverns with some of the men a few years older than him. He told himself his drinking and gambling habits were nothing to worry about; he could stop at any time. It was also fun to gamble, and the amber drink took his mind away from the awful ache in his heart. It tore him away from the feelings he once had with Ada, and the memories of their time together that still tortured him.

Hunter allowed his mind to drift away from his work and dwell on the chances he had at the gaming table that night. He was so wrapped in his fantasy that he hardly even noticed Emma's worried glances, which would normally have irked him terribly. He felt she was foolish in getting so worked up about the pump and how well it worked – thunder, it was just a bunch of metal.

Once chores were finally finished with the pump he tried to dismiss himself, but his father stopped him before he had the chance.

His father took him by the shoulder, pulling him aside. He braced himself.

“Hunter, I’ve noticed how hard it has been for you lately.” His father’s hands were on his hips, and Hunter avoided his gaze. He could tell he was going to be told off, but he could also feel the awkwardness in his father’s voice.

“Hunter, I … I just want you to know that you can come to me about anything. I am always available to you if you need it. I am your father and I –”

“All right, I get it! I’ll work harder next time!” Hunter growled, sidestepping his father’s arms and racing away. He ignored his father’s calls to him, tears streaming down his face as he ran. It was his most shocking outburst yet, especially since his father was

extending an olive branch, but he just couldn't deal with that today. Not now. He could feel his father and sister's eyes on him as he went, could almost feel their shock course through their veins. And their hurt. He didn't look back.

The Newcomer

The tavern's tables were somewhat empty that night, but Hunter plopped down on a chair beside one of the young men, who seemed to be trying to drown himself in ale.

"Belby, yer - *hic! * - late again," the man slurred. Hunter grinned. "I'm not Belby, Pires," he said brightly. "I'm the man going to strike your stars to kingdom come at dice tonight!"

Somehow, the swearing made him feel better and worse at the same time. But he pushed those thoughts away.

"Shuddup, Belby," belched Pires, "I - *hic! * - don' wanna shovel ..."

He belched again, this time a mouthful of liquid coming up out of his mouth back into his mug. Hunter cringed, sidling away from Pires. He seemed likely to fall over and spew more onto him.

A serving girl seemed to notice and came bustling over to their table. Hunter looked away as Ada, scantily clad, slid past him smoothly – without so much as a glance in his direction – and took Pires' mug.

"Oh, now Pires, look at you! You've gone and drunk too much again. I'll have to ask you to leave, I think ... No, Pires, *stop, no! *"

She jumped away as, embarrassed, she tried to pry Pires' groping hands away from her.

"Come here, priddy liddle thing, you. *Hic* – come on, now, don't be so prudent ..."

She slapped Pires away.

“Pires, I am betrothed to your *cousin!*” she whispered fiercely. “How do you think he’ll react if he finds you … doing this?”

She scurried away with the mug without so much as a hello, a glance, or even a smile at Hunter. He was sure he would have been happier if she had even spit on him; it was better than being treated like this. *Oh, sure, I don’t even exist now*, he thought bitterly, watching her leave. *We’ve only been lovers for months. Go ahead, see if I care what you do, or with whom you do it! *

His mind slipped away from the painful thoughts and memories as he thought about what he planned for that night. He checked his purse. He didn’t have the money to both buy a drink and gamble yet, and Pires was already slumped sideways in his chair, unconscious and drooling. He didn’t have to wait long, however, before a group of five men several years older than Hunter swaggered into the tavern and slid around a table on the other side of the room.

Hunter grinned and hurried to their table, past the waitresses with short skirts and low necks. He hardly glanced at any of them, too focused on the excitement of playing the game. Besides, he was feeling rather hostile toward women at the moment.

As he approached the men’s table, he slapped on a grin.

“Can I join you in your gaming?” he asked as brightly as he could. It sounded more sullen than he’d wanted.

None of the men replied, and only lounged into their wooden chairs, each man hiding from his gaze under a hat or high collar, or keeping his head turned from Hunter.

Moments passed, and Hunter’s palms began to sweat. One man, clearly the eldest of the group, sucked on a pipe – huffing out a plume of green smoke – and dealt out cards, flipping an extra one in Hunter’s direction. The tension eased almost audibly, and the men resumed their talk.

Excited, and eager for their acceptance, he fetched a chair from a

nearby table and squeezed between two of the men just as retching sounds came from Pires' table. The men guffawed loudly.

"Idjit," said the dealer around his pipe. "If'n 'e keeps doin' that, they'll trow 'im outta ev'ry thundered tavern from 'ere to the Capital."

Hunter had some difficulty understanding the man's accent at first, especially since it was thicker than he was accustomed to, and since the man had to spit the words around his thick pipe. Swiping his cards off the table, he wondered absently if the man was new to the area.

As the game began, Hunter tried to read the players. He got almost nothing from the dealer with the pipe, other than he was obviously a traveler from further south. But then, most visitors were from the south.

One man tried to make conversation, talking wildly about a farmer who boasted of clearing and planting on an entire half acre at the Roots, which were what most folk called the steep, wild foothills of the Grey Mountains to the west. The other men shushed him with denials and guffaws.

"No such thing," one man said dismissively. "No one can do that. Them woods at the Roots is much too dangerous fer the work clearin' them trees. Them trees're too big fer that."

"Lies," another agreed.

The man shrugged with a defensive, "Just tellin' ye what I 'eard."

Hunter felt the man was a fool, and wanted to be accepted, so he joined in the mockery.

"Yeah," he said darkly, "flamin', star-blazed savine tripe, by thunder. Go back to the flamin' blasted cities where you belong, you –"

He grumbled a nasty name.

The other men seemed to still at his vehemence, as if a fight were about to break out. The man he'd insulted stared at him in shock for several moments.

After a long, awkward pause, the newcomer spoke, taking his pipe from his mouth.

"Sharp words for such a young lad," he growled. The other men shot Hunter a worried, sidelong glance.

"Go back to your momma's milk and apron, boy," whined the man he had insulted. Hunter grunted angrily.

"Mother's dead," he growled behind clenched teeth, hiding his face behind his cards.

Silence. Even the whiny man he'd insulted said nothing. The other men hid their own faces, no one apologizing.

But the newcomer tapped the stem of his pipe softly on the table, staring at Hunter with eyes smoldering as hot as the ashes in his pipe. He replaced it in his mouth and drew deeply, clamping it firmly in his teeth. The stunned silence dissipated as the newcomer dealt the hand, although the man's eyes still glowered in Hunter's direction. He glared back as he glanced at his new card.

It was a crown of spears.

Trying to hold back his amazement, Hunter smoothed his face and laid his new card face down on the table, waiting impatiently for the other players to take their turn as the game began.

The game was fairly simple. There were five suits, a combination of numbers and faces. Two through fifteen, three of each of the five faces: fool, raven, spear, sword, and noble. The face cards were three pearls of varying values, two crowns to every face – a king and queen – and either one or five stars to every face, depending on the game. The worst cards were the black caps and the jesters.

Each player would be dealt five cards, and would build their hand by laying cards face down on the table. A player's turn would

consist of either laying on the table or discarding. The dealer would give each player the same number of cards he laid or discarded. When one of the players laid five cards, each player would get one more turn, in which they had to have only five cards remaining in their hand.

Then the chance would begin.

Each player would roll a pair of differently-colored dice. There were several things that could happen on a roll. The player could be forced to bet on his hand or fold out of the game; forced to pass the dice on to the next player without betting but still be in the game; given the choice to bet, fold, or pass; or – most unfortunately – a player could be forced to fold, even if he could produce coin. The most likely roll was to be given the choice to bet, fold, or pass, while the least likely roll was to be forced to fold, which was called a hard force fold.

The game would eliminate all the players until only one player was left. Any of the other players could trump the winner of the roll if they had the better hand, forcing a reroll between the two of them. If the winner won again, he or she would win the entire game.

Hunter waited impatiently for his turn to come immediately after it was over. He had very little coin in his pocket to bet on his hand, so he hoped no one would mind his little copper pieces once the betting started.

Soon however, Hunter started wondering if he would need any luck at all. Each time he received a new card from the newcomer, who dealt the entire round, he received one of the crowns. Without fail. With such a large deck, it hardly seemed possible.

Hiding his face behind his cards, Hunter tried to read the newcomer, but the man's face was utterly impassive behind his pipe and the green cloud of smoke hovering around his head.

So Hunter decided to change tactic. He didn't want to be the first person to lay five cards down. It would look too suspicious, and he

didn't relish the idea of trying to explain to these characters why he'd gotten five so quickly. So he began laying his lower cards down. Seven of spears, three of ravens, twelve of swords, and – although he cringed while he did it – a black cap. Soon, however, he was out of low cards to discard.

He shot the newcomer a look when he received the second crown of swords, trying hard not to gasp. * He had it*. He had his five face cards. It was the best hand he ever had in his life. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and he hoped the players would interpret it as nerves for a bad hand. The truth was, Hunter was terrified that the other players would find out that the dealer had been cheating, which would put a large amount of suspicion on Hunter.

But fortunately, the newcomer was the first to lay five cards.

Hunter's palms sweat even more. If the newcomer was cheating, why would he be doing it in Hunter's favor, and not his own? Or, did he plan on producing the five stars – the highest valued hand in the game? What would he have to gain? Was he a rich nobleman who enjoyed stealing from poor farmers? Was Hunter a chess piece to be manipulated?

He didn't know. He tried to forget about the newcomer as the rolling of the dice began. But the man made it difficult to forget him. Each time Hunter cast the dice, they almost always seemed to land on a force pass, where he would be allowed to stay in the game without betting. Other than a hard force fold, it was the least likely roll of the game. It certainly was impossible, and he began to suspect that the newcomer was manipulating the dice as well, somehow.

The newcomer's motives were certainly sinister. But what could Hunter do about it?

Once the dice had been passed twice completely around the table, Hunter was shocked to see the other players being forced to leave the game. He never had seen so many players roll a hard force fold. And yet, each time the dice came to him, he was either given the

choice, or was forced to pass. The odds of it were impossible, and yet none of the other players contested it. They simply left, one by one, to the bar, grumbling in disappointment as they went.

Soon, there were only two players left on the table. The newcomer smiled as he gave the dice to Hunter. He returned the man's gaze with a glare, then cast the dice. He was shocked to see that they landed on the choice. He laid one of his copper pieces on the table already laden with coin. He was afraid the newcomer would scorn his tiny amount of money, but he didn't.

Time slowed to a standstill for Hunter as he watched the man swipe the dice off the table, rattle them in his hands, and cast them across the coins. The dice seemed to take an eternity before they finally stopped. A pair of ones stared up at him from the table. Hard force fold.

Hunter's forehead was sweating worse than ever now. He glanced nervously up at the bar.

"I didn't blast the dice," said Hunter quietly. It was a vulgar way to say that he didn't change the dice with trick ones of his own. The man shook his head. He knew? Did he blast the dice himself, as well as strike the deck?

Hunter laid down his cards, all five crowns glinting in the light of the pipe-lighter candle. The newcomer smiled, and laid five pearls from his hand. Hunter heaved a nervous sigh. It was enough to get him and this man killed, but he still won.

Hunter opened his purse, sweeping the money into it. He feared it wouldn't be big enough to hold all the coins, so he quickly put the remainder in his pockets.

"You have a good hand there, lad. Where do you get your luck?" The man was smiling wryly as he stuck the pipe in his mouth for another deep puff as if he hid a secret. Hunter sniffed.

"You dealt me that hand, didn't you?" he whispered. The man's smile widened.

“Just your luck, I think,” he said quietly, leaning back in his chair. Hunter stared at him.

“So, why did you? You blasted the dice, too, didn’t you? But why in my favor and not your own?”

The newcomer ignored him, gathering the cards together as the other men dropped from the bar and joined them again.

“I didn’t blast the dice, boy,” he whispered to Hunter through the corner of his mouth. “I used magic.”

Hunter stared blatantly at the man, then a growl rose in his throat. He didn’t need to be lied to. Was he a country bumpkin that some traveling nobleman could push around? Was he nothing but a fly on the wall the man could squash, taking all the money back, just to excite his power lust? Well, Hunter was certainly not going to be treated like a serf. Magic? What stupid, obvious lies. He was no starry-eyed kid anymore. He cut his growl short as the men fell into their seats again.

“So, who won?” whined one of the men as he sat down.

“I did!” said the newcomer around his pipe. He took an enormous purse from his pocket and shook it. It rattled loudly. *Perhaps he really is a nobleman*, Hunter thought.

“What was your hand?” gurgled a man whose face was turning purple from too much drink. “I suppose there’s no chance of a reroll?”

“Three crowns, one of fools and two of spears, a star of swords, and a ten of ravens,” said the newcomer without flinching.

Blazing lightning, the man can lie fast, thought Hunter. And convincingly, too. ... Or he could have planned the lie from the beginning. Either way, he was clearly seasoned at the game of deception. The men grunted and nodded, seeming satisfied with his answer.

Hunter stood, careful not to rattle his coins and give himself away. He was no rookie. He would not stand by and be squashed by this noble, or gentleman, or whatever he was.

“Well, gents, I’m off,” he said offhandedly. “Out of money, already! Thank you for the rousing game.”

“Oh, but let me at least buy you a decent drink before you go!” said the newcomer, getting up quickly and circling the table.

“But I –” Hunter stuttered. The man cut him off in his thick accent.

“Oh, but how could I thank you properly otherwise? It was a game well played, my boy, well played, indeed! You nearly gave me a run for my money, and no mistaking that.”

Hunter didn’t believe him. He had seen the man’s huge purse. He clicked his tongue in annoyance.

He took Hunter by the arm and steered him in the direction of the bar, bought him a beer, and showed him out the door. His grip was a vice; there was no struggling out of it. Fear rose in Hunter’s throat, but the other men had already begun a game of dice and were hardly paying attention.

The Adventurer’s Oath

When they were alone in the street, Hunter tore his arm away from the man, nearly spilling beer on his boots.

“What do you want?!” he hissed. “Am I some card you can deal in your nobleman schemes? Do you plan to kill me and run off with the gold?”

The man raised his hands in a sign of peace, chuckling at Hunter’s vehemence.

“Calm yourself, lad, I only want to talk! If I wanted all the gold, I would have fixed the game to win for myself, not for you. Not to

mention that I just protected your win from those men, who would have crushed you to a pulp. You have the gold, now I want you to listen.”

Hunter shook his head resignedly, stamping his foot in impatience, his arms folded angrily across his chest. Crushed like a pulp? He grit his teeth.

But despite himself, he thought about it for a moment. The man may not be magical, but he may have some card striking tricks he could learn that may prove useful in the future. He nodded sardonically, but the man shook his head in protest.

“I know you don’t believe me when I tell you that I used magic, but magic *is* real. I have been using it for years, now.”

Hunter spat at the man, turning to march away, but the man grabbed his shoulder, turning him around to face him, holding him still with arms of surprising strength.

“Listen to me,” he said levelly, his anger clearly rising, “I was impressed by you when you came to our table. I’ve never seen a lad of your age keep such an emotionless face with men who clearly had more gold.”

Hunter stopped struggling. Well, of course he had an emotionless face! he thought fiercely. Between hating Ada and avoiding his family ...

“All right, then, stranger. Show me how you cheated, and I’ll be on my way,” he growled.

The man took a deep breath, letting go of Hunter’s shoulders.

“What I say is true, my young friend. I won the game in order to tell you that I really *do* have magic. I have been using it for several years. Among other things, I feel obligated to tell the world that the Powers have returned to us in preparation for the New Regime of magic. Magic is real, and it is coming back to mankind!”

Hunter stared at the man for a long moment. He knew he was making fun of him, trying to bait him into something. Perhaps to lose his temper, which he was very close to achieving at the moment.

“Newcomer!” he growled fiercely, “I don’t know what you mean by spinning these … these *lies* to me, but I will not be –”

He cut off when the newcomer suddenly disappeared completely.

“What the blazing light –”

He cut off again when fire burst in a solid wall around him, then disappeared completely to reveal Hunter standing in an utterly different part of the village. He was at the edge of the forest with the village at the bottom of a hill, the Roots towering behind him. His mouth was wide with shock.

“You see?”

Hunter wheeled around to see the man dressed in his black coat and high boots, smiling, arms spread regally, as if he were a lord welcoming a subject to his city in pomp and ceremony. It seemed he had appeared out of thin air.

“Magic is real. I told you it is. And I know how to use it.”

If possible, Hunter’s eyes widened even more. He tried to speak, but only gurgles escaped his throat. The man laughed.

“Yes, quite shocking, I know, to learn that everything you once thought to be a myth now stands before you. I imagine you’ve dreamt all your life of the Dragon?”

Hunter’s face was blank.

“Dareth Knight, perhaps? Or maybe your father teaches you about Daroll Hansharp, the Windslayer? No? But you cannot be ignorant of the mighty Herestripe Wakesbore. Oh, come now, not even tales of Celebar have reached your little village, then?”

“Celebar the Great,” said Hunter breathlessly before he could think.

“Ah, so you *have* heard of him,” said the man loudly, clapping his hands. “Good. Well, then, allow me to extend your education.”

The man led him into the woods. Hunter could not help himself but follow, almost staggering along in his excitement. He was feeling indulgent, curious, and hundreds of thoughts and feelings were swirling in his mind. His doubt had been shoved into his face, and this man, whatever else he claimed, could use magic. The stories and legends told that only a person of great honor and integrity could use magic. Whenever Celebar came across another user of the magical art, he would always immediately trust the man or woman, and ask them to help with the war cause, until he himself obtained his own power through the Oath.

Celebar, the man he had dreamed of becoming one day, a mighty user of the ancient art of magic. Celebar the Great, the man who could flatten mountains and tame seas with a wave of his hand.

“Where are we going?” Hunter asked as the newcomer dragged him along, his speech slurring a little out of surprise and anticipation.

“Mind your manners, now boy,” said the man as he took Hunter by the elbow to a grove of trees. The moonlight above made the scene look gray and black, colorless. “You ought to ask people their name before demanding answers.”

Hunter tore his arm away. He was not a boy, he was much too strong to be manhandled, and he was much too stubborn to allow this newcomer to order him about. Nonetheless, he decided he ought to know the man’s name if he was to learn from him, and at least pretend to be ingratiating.

Lightning and thunder, he thought nervously. *I’m already taken in by him! * But to be like Celebar the Great ... it was too tempting an opportunity to allow it to pass by.

“Okay, fine then. What is your name?”

Halting, the man smiled and flourished his coat.

“I am Kurick Edelbar of the east, traveling up from the south in search of the Lost City. It is said that King Dareth Knight of old used his magic to preserve and hide his city away from those who might find the King’s Tomes, records of the achievements of the kings and books teaching of magic and its uses. If one could obtain such records –” he shivered with delight “— one could become as great as Celebar himself!”

Hunter still felt wary of this Kurick. It seemed impossible that the newcomer could truly offer what he promised. But, still, to be as great as Celebar ...

“Prove it!” he demanded. “How do I know this isn’t some kind of a –”

For yet a third time, Hunter was cut off by an impressive display of power. Crouching low as Hunter spoke, Kurick extended his hands out in front of him, slowly raising to his feet, his hands lifting to his sides then over his head. Hunter gasped audibly and fell to his feet as he watched, amazed, as the waxing quarter moon became completely full and brightened, turning into the sun. It blazed above them as if it were noon-day, filling the small grove with light. Hunter fell to the ground, flat on his back in complete shock as the flower petals around him burst from their stems and flew around him in small eddies of air, creating a river of flower petals and bits of grass through the grove. He shielded his eyes against the bright sun, blinking stupidly. Air swirled around him, and he watched in wonder as a rainbow sprouted from the ground directly in front of him and stretched high above their heads, bending toward the Grey Mountains.

“Behold!” boomed Kurick’s voice imperiously. “The power, and the wonder, and the might, of magic! This is the power which Celebar used to defeat the foes of his people!” – Kurick pointed at Hunter – “*This* is the power which will bring honor to you, and to your mother’s memory. Her eyes shall smile upon you from her place among the stars! And when you return to her, she shall embrace

you in her love, together forever in the wide!"

As Hunter's eyes adjusted to the light, he stood, regarding Kurick. A gleam grew in his eye. Power. He had always dreamed of being like Celebar, striking enemies down to the abyss, blasting foes with the power of lightning, flying into the heavens on a chariot of flaming stars.

"Teach me," he begged. "Show me how to do this. I want to be great. I want to be like Celebar. Show me. Teach me."

His mind felt strangely fuzzy, as if he had been drinking all night long. He did not realize at that moment that he would have done anything Kurick asked him, even if it was to run off the side of the mountain. But he did not care; his mind was too filled with the prospect of glory and might.

Kurick gave a regal nod, letting his arms fall slowly, majestically. As he did so, the light, the rainbow, and the floating flower petals all disappeared, plunging them both into the dark night once again. Kurick stepped closer to Hunter through the pressing darkness that enveloped them, the waxing quarter moon overlooking them like a cat's glowing slit of a pupil.

"Kneel," he said in a commanding voice, "and take the Oath of the Adventurer!"

Hunter knelt.

Cale awoke suddenly, almost jumping up from the couch. The dream had been so vivid, so real. It felt nothing like an actual dream at all. Even the most realistic dreams Cale ever had still felt much, much less real than the dream about Hunter and Emma. He had even tried lucid dreaming before, and this ... this was much different. It was filled with meaning, and he certainly never had such emotionally complex dreams before.

The dream felt odd. It seemed to somehow be set in a world similar to but completely different from Earth. Magic was real in this world, and it also had a strange culture. There was no way at all that it could have been on Earth.

He wondered how this dream could possibly be related to the first he had – the one with Lucena and Sandred. Emma was not the woman in the castle from the first dream; that was certain. He had a strong feeling that the castle was in the same nation or country where Emma and Hunter lived, though. As if they lived in different states of the same nation.

He rolled out of the couch, massaging his head.

“Sir,” said Harrison, concern in his voice, “I am afraid that your hydration levels have decreased significantly. Would you like me to prepare a cup of ice water for you?”

“Yes, Harrison. That would be nice,” Cale croaked.

He went to the kitchen and sat at the bar, taking the cup when it appeared out of the counter. He thought hard about what he had seen. There was definitely some kind of significance or meaning to what he had seen. But he supposed that it could mean different things to different people. What could it mean for *him*, though?

He sipped his water, thinking about the dream, trying to relate it to himself. There had been an entire poker game. Obviously, Hunter was a very troubled youth, and his older sister, Emma, was a concerned sibling. He wondered why Hunter did not simply speak with his sister about what troubled him. Cale was certain she would be understanding – she seemed like a very kind young woman.

He understood Hunter’s pain, however. It reminded him of his own, somehow. Both Hunter and Cale’s pain was something neither felt he could share, something both knew no one would understand. Of course, Hunter was also going through the throws of puberty and feeling an intense internal struggle with which Cale no longer identified.

He downed several glasses of water as he thought, accepting a drug of some kind for a headache from Harrison. He asked Harrison to tell him some bad jokes. For some reason, that helped him fall asleep again. But this time, he took the elevator to the second level of the house to his bedroom, falling asleep almost immediately when his head hit his pillow.

Chapter 3: Jesse and Stett

Jesse knelt for a moment in the dirt, surveying the rows and rows of corn that were approaching their height, with occasional weeds among them near the roots. The Master hated weeds, and Jesse hated the man in return. Lourne Wixom. Jesse almost spat the name. He stood, disgusted. Beatings were not rare, particularly for Jesse, but they were far worse when weeds – especially bolburs – were allowed to grow too large. Wixom obviously felt that Jesse was a liability. He often would wander off to the far fields, looking for wild mushrooms along the forest's edge, or cause trouble with Stett, his friend and closest resemblance of family he had. Wild mushrooms were a delicious meal by the handful, which made them all the more valuable since food was often withheld from him as well. However, he was always sure to skirt the wheat fields to make sure that he didn't hurt the plants. Otherwise, if he crushed or disturbed them too much his punishment would be severe, indeed.

Jesse sighed and padded to the weeds in the corn rows. Year after year, time after time, season after season, doing the same things, seeing the same results, getting the same treatment. Slavery was not actually legal, strictly speaking, but there was no prevention from beatings to serfs, no limit to how little they were paid, nor how cruelly they were treated, short of murder. Serfs did not change employers, they changed masters. A new master would be required to pay a certain arranged amount to the old master in exchange for the serf, called a tax fee. It was intended to be compensation for the loss of a servant, although sometimes a previous master would not replace a sold servant. Like property. Like livestock, they were sold from one man to another, slaves in everything but name. A free man was one who could go where he liked, do as he wished, and with no one to tell him what he ought to do, or how he ought to act.

Particularly in the Nobility of Hurst, a man becoming a serf was a simple transition. A man who could not pay taxes was either sent to debtor's prison or sent to work for nobles – or gentlemen hired by nobles – as serfs. In the case of Lourne Wixom, he was commissioned by the High King to create and maintain a plantation in the Nobility of Lord Hurst, located in the northwestern part of the kingdom. To the north was also the mill, where many of the yearly crops were taken for processing, then would be shipped to the city of Hurst for purchase and shipment throughout the several Nobilities – lands owned by the Earls – of the Kingdom.

Jesse hoped very dearly that he would be allowed to go – just for once – to the mill to bring the winter wheat harvest to the city of Hurst, like so many of the other servants and serfs who were trusted enough by the master to make the trip at least once a year. Jakob was the one who helped decide which of the serfs would go and which would stay, but one of the Wixoms would always have the final say.

Jakob was not a serf servant like Jesse, but was a hired hand. He had been like a brother and mentor to Jesse since his arrival on the plantation years before, virtually raising him since being taken into Wixom's plantation as a small boy. Jakob was renowned amongst the servants as the kindest man any of them ever met. Jesse found his lessons to be unforgivingly direct, his demeanor marred by a stubborn liking for every aspect of the human nature, no matter the human in question, his work ethic to be exhaustingly thorough ... and he was Jesse's best friend. In truth, Jakob was indeed the best man Jesse had ever known, and often wished he could have Jakob's talent for kindness and intelligence.

He uprooted a bolbur, allowing the juice to spray into a wooden bucket he carried with him. He liked to think of the bolbur as Wixom's head when he was angry at the man. Sometimes, he would uproot a smaller bolbur, knowing the toxin would spray into the ground through the roots, poisoning the plants as they soaked it

through their own roots, just as a rebellion against Wixom. Of course, he was always careful to ensure no one saw.

He wished every day he could simply run away. The almighty problem with being a serf was that running away was futile, since a man was required to present identification at almost every city and in nearly every shop or other establishment that might provide employment, which included a signature of either the knight, noble, or gentleman with the authority of the Lord of that particular quarter of the land. A fact which the Wixoms constantly reiterated to the serfs in every creative injunction they could invent, when the serfs' spirits were high enough to warrant it. There was no hope of obtaining such a letter, either; Jesse could not have paid the tax fee for a serf, and did not know the name or location of the knight in control of this part of Lord Hurst's land, even if he had the money for the tax fee. No; escape would be futile, indeed. If only he never had become a serf in the first place.

He recalled bitterly the faraway memories of his childhood when he had been found by a man, and taken from the streets to stand, shivering – and only about seven or eight years old – before a judge or a governor of some sort. He hadn't understood anything the man said, for he used large words, and spoke in a strange accent. He remembered being roughly carried from there into a wagon with iron bars, sitting next to another young boy. They rode in silence with four other men until they reached rolling hills covered in gold, which he only later learned was wheat. He remembered the men leaving the wagon, leaving him and the other young boy together, who he later learned was named Stett, forlorn and lonely. They had driven the rest of that day and into the night, with lanterns hanging from long, curved hooks to light the driver's path.

Jesse remembered, spitting on the ground in anger, how he and Stett had been dragged from the wagon and thrown immediately into the service of Lourne Wixom, who insisted they call him Master or Lord. They were forced into his service on his plantation with few

daily respites, malnutrition, terrible living conditions, beatings, and a world of pain.

Those first several years were horrible memories for Jesse. When he was first learning to care for things inside the Wixom home as a lad of perhaps seven, including tending fireplaces, scrubbing chimneys, and washing dishes, the chores themselves were not so horrible – it was the man who taught them who made the memories so painful. His teacher, the man servant or butler of the house at that time, would constantly mutter threats under his breath, along with a perpetual stream of profanities, criticism, complaints, constantly keeping Jesse alert and attentive. But those memories were blissful compared to when he was old enough and strong enough to wield a shovel and a hoe, when the nightmarish scenes that continue to haunt him in every waking moment; carrying tools, fighting with bolburs and being sprayed by their noxious toxins, harvesting with an enormous scythe much too large for him to use properly at perhaps twelve or so, learning to drive wagons while terrified of being pushed under the wheels if he did not do it right, and hundreds more memories, were the only ones Jesse had of that horrible time.

The only redeeming moments in his childhood were those with Stett and the little adventures they would have together when they could steal a few moments of freedom. Some things they did were downright dangerous to themselves as well as others, but they never cared. It helped to take the edge off the pain of their pitiful existence to risk their lives occasionally. The thrill helped take their minds away from their beatings, helped keep them sane, it seemed. Stett was often even wilder than Jesse, and had nearly killed himself more than once. There was one wagon that should never be put on one particular horse, because the horse was likely able to break a pin connecting the harness to the old wagon and take off with Stett still holding on – or, more likely, tied – to the reigns. It was a sturdy thing, the old wagon, but the pin, in Jesse's opinion, was a terrible error in its design. A horse with enough spirit could break the pin

easily, and Stett was much too reckless to take care of such a minor detail.

Of course, Stett's foolishness was often just as entertaining as his jokes or comments. There was more than one occasion when Stett claimed he wanted to strap his feet to wooden slats, tie a rope around his waist, and let one of the horses drag him along while he balanced upright on the slats. Jesse always laughed the idea down, saying he would sooner break his neck than successfully execute such a daring and idiotic feat. Of course, Stett would never actually do such a thing. Although, Jesse thought with a mischievous grin, it would be a sight to see, and probably fun to do, if he could do it without killing himself in the process.

Jesse spent all that day hoeing weeds, bursting bolburs, cursing his master, dreaming fondly of what other ridiculous adventures he and Stett could dream up for themselves. Perhaps they could find a badger and let it loose in the farmhouse. Or, better yet, a skunk, which was more likely to be prowling about, scavenging for food around the home garden. A skunk cannot spray if its feet are not on the ground, not the kind from that particular part of the country, and seeing Mistress Wixom scream, and seeing them tortured, even for a moment, for what they had done to him, would be worth the trouble and even the consequent beatings, if they couldn't get away with it.

He jumped when he heard the sound of someone running behind him. He relaxed when he saw it was Stett. A small smile brightened his face, just as it always did when Stett was near.

“Jesse!” yelled Stett as he halted next to him.

“What is it?” Jesse asked in a teasing tone. “Did you get the hornet’s nest into Wixom’s bedroom?”

Stett was about to respond seriously, but then doubled over and burst into laughter. It was a contagious laugh that rarely went without several others joining in with him, even if it was only to

mock his mirth.

“No,” he said, straightening with a grin after a moment, “but I’d love to see their faces if I did!”

He fell into a fit of chuckles before continuing. Jesse smiled widely. It was memories like these that kept him going.

“No, actually, Jakob says he needs someone to drive the last of the winter wheat into town! There are warehouses ready for us at the mill, waiting to be emptied. Jakob’s trying to convince them to let you go this time! It might actually happen!!!”

Jesse clapped his hands together, throwing his head back with a, “*thank you, stars! *” before slapping Stett on the shoulder.

“Finally!” Jesse exclaimed. “After all this time!”

Stett nodded excitedly.

“Yes, I think it’s long past time you got to see the city. It’s just a delivery, so it won’t be too long, but at least you’ll be away from this thunder-forsaken place for … well, for about a week or two, I’d say.”

“Who will be overseeing? Wixom? I hope not,” Jesse asked anxiously.

“No, it won’t be him,” said Stett, casually sticking a long piece of grass in his mouth, slipping a finger through his belt loop and plopping to the ground. “I think Jakob said it’ll be one of his sons. Baltazar, I thought he said, only he could have been talking about Botolfe.”

Botolfe was the surname of the man servant and butler; one among a lucky few trusted even remotely by Wixom. His first name was Thaddeus, but both names were so ridiculous to Stett and Jesse it didn’t matter which they used – either was as good for a laugh as the other.

“Botolfe?” laughed Jesse, incredulous. “That brainless weasel?”

Stett shrugged dismissively.

“I don’t know, and I honestly couldn’t care,” he picked dirt out of his fingernails studiously as he lay between the corn rows. Jesse snorted.

“Couldn’t care, my foot! You want to go as badly as I do!”

Stett sighed.

“Ah, yes,” he shook his head with mocking ruefulness, hiding his smile with the grass stem in his mouth, “but what can a lowly serf do, when his master thinks he put beetles in his soup.”

“And termites in his wardrobe!” Jesse laughed.

“Or mice in his bed,” Stett sighed, pretending to sob while actually hiding a snort. “Oh, Miss Wixom’s screams were music to my ears. I would pass up a bard’s song to hear that melodious tune.”

They exchanged a look, then burst into open laughter, Stett pounding the ground and hooting, and tears springing from Jesse’s eyes as he doubled over, nearly choking with laughter. They enjoyed their mirthful memory until they heard rustling, instantly falling silent, Stett jumped to his feet quickly, grabbing the bucket of bolbur pus from the ground, and Jesse wrapped his hands around a bolbur plant, pretending to be hard at work. But instead of seeing one of the Wixoms at the end of the corn row, they were surprised and pleased to see Jakob.

“Oh, Jakob!” Stett cried loudly, bounding to his feet and grabbing the foreman’s hand in both of his own, shaking it vigorously. “A delight, nay a wonder to see your smiling face!”

“I hope you’ve come to join the bolbur club,” Jesse snickered, half sardonic, half hopeful. He liked working with Jakob, especially if Stett was there to add a little ray of sunshine.

“Oh, jolly smashing to have you with us!” said Stett in a ridiculously jovial way and shaking Jakob’s hand all the more vigorously, forcing

gales of laughter from Jesse and Jakob. Releasing Jakob's hand and spreading his hands wide, Stett added a bow with a poorly executed flourish, then pretending to slap a gentleman's hat on his head as he straightened.

"Jesse," said Jakob, holding back laughter, "I think Stett has lost his marbles. Perhaps you can assist him in requiring them?"

"Jakob made a funny!" laughed Stett, "You – ha ha! – w-were waiting to use – ah, ha! – that one, weren't you? Well, it's a start. How long did you take to make it up?"

"Ages," Jakob smiled, "stay up thinking about it, most nights."

"Oooh, that's nice of you to be staying up all night, thinking about me!" said Stett, struggling to keep a straight face. "But I'm afraid you're not my type, Jakob. I mean, you're not exactly Lady Hurst's Pearls, are you!"

They all burst into laughter at that, Stett rolling on the ground, Jesse gasping helplessly, and Jakob chuckling loudly. A queen or lady's Pearls were supposedly the keeper of the royal jewelry, and were said to have the power to make any man madly and intoxicatingly in love with her by the power of her beauty.

"All right, that's enough now," said Jakob, after some time, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes, "I would love to do this all day long, but I really need to give Jesse the good news."

Jesse pushed his laughter back with a delightful shudder.

"Am I –" he stammered.

"You are one of the wagon drivers for the delivery at Hurst this week!" Jakob announced with a smile. Stett danced on the spot, whooping triumphantly.

"How did you manage to convince them?" asked Jesse, incredulous. He had been beaten at least twice that week; he'd lost count, already. Did Jakob truly have that much influence over the Wixoms that they would forget about their hatred of him so easily?

“Oh, I did some sugar-talking. They always come around. Besides, it falls on Baltazar to make the decision, and he’s always been a decent fellow, even if some of the others are a little more ... ah –”

“—star-blasted?” offered Stett.

“—cruel?” muttered Jesse.

“Well, no,” blustered Jakob. “Perhaps a little more robust, you might say.”

“Robust?” Stett sputtered. “Sure, if you’re talking about the flavor of turnips. Though I suppose the Wixoms are turnips –”

“They are a very old, respected, and powerful plantation company,” Jakob said warningly. “And I would be careful about how you talk about them.”

“Come on, Jakob,” said Stett plaintively. “You wouldn’t turn me in just because they’re turnips, would you?”

“No,” Jakob said, hiding another smile. “I would turn you in for being a turnip!”

Jesse let out a bark of laughter at that. Stett pretended to be shocked, looking from Jakob and back to Jesse in mock pleading. Then they all turned serious and returned to work, just in time before Caye Wixom, one of the sons of Lourne Wixom, passed, patrolling the fields for slackers. Once he was gone, Jesse heaved a sigh of relief. He could not afford to be punished again, or Baltazar might change his mind about letting him come with them to Hurst. He could just as easily choose someone else instead of Jesse.

The three of them exchanged looks, knowing Caye would be back. Caye could be an extremely hard taskmaster, and Jesse did not relish the thought of trying to explain to him what he was up to. He snatched the bucket from Stett with a look, then returned to uprooting the bolbur.

That evening, all the serfs and the servants lined up together in front of the farmhouse, a huge white building with three stories,

slats on the side, and whitewashed crosses forming the panes of the windows. White beams held up an overhanging roof above an enormous, deep porch facing the fields. Thaddeus Botolfe walked up and down the lines of men and women, a riding crop in one hand which he used mostly for intimidation. Jesse and Stett stood at attention in the second row from the man as he paced before them, making speeches as he always did, bellowing at them unnecessarily.

“The yield of your work is terrible –” he cried.

“—in the outhouse,” Stett muttered so only Jesse could hear, just as he always did. Jesse fought hard to keep his face impassive, but Stett’s face seemed naturally straight and emotionless.

“—four months from now, it will be much worse for most of you!” Jesse’s face turned red.

“If this rabble does not improve –” Botolfe waved his riding crop vaguely at the serfs.

“—your baking,” added Stett.

“—action will be taken –” he said, straightening his back

“—to stuff your thumbs up your nose.” Stett finished.

Botolfe paused in his speech as he paced before them, an angry look on his face. He periodically smacked his riding crop into his hand through the silence. Jesse pursed his lips to stop from laughing at the image of Botolfe stuffing his thumbs up his nose with the same serious look on his face. Botolfe continued, his riding crop behind his back.

“Weeds in every field –”

“—of study.”

“—punishment, resulting in –”

“—your ugly face.”

Jesse could tell that Stett had to frown harder to keep a smile from tugging his lips this time.

“Absence without leave once more –” Botolfe glanced in Jesse and Stett’s direction, as if words were directed at them, “will result in –”

“—your Great Aunt Fanny’s birthday cake in your bed.”

Jesse turned a laugh into a sneeze, getting a sharp glance from Botolfe. The man turned away from them for a moment before speaking again, so that Jesse and Stett could only hear part of what he said.

“—cellars full, without –”

“—your big bolbur butt.”

Stett almost broke his expressionless face at that.

Finally, they were able to break ranks, Jesse and Stett keeping their faces set without laughing, even walking with straightened backs until they reached the inside of the servant’s houses, where they fell about in gales of laughter.

“Your Great Aunt Fanny!” choked Jesse. Stett simply pounded the ground, breathless with laughter. They eventually got to their feet to eat what was left of dinner, made by some of the serfs. Serfs and servants were ordered to eat separately, and had separate quarters.

Stett, to Jesse, was the only reason he did not try to run away and learn to live on his own in the woods, or try to pass himself off as a full citizen somewhere in one of the villages. McIntyre lay to the northeast, and Breckenridge to the east. North would only bring him to the Grey Mountains, based on what Jakob said. He had told them that Hurst was through a pass in the Grey Mountains further to the north, standing at the edge of the ocean – built near the edge of a cliff.

Jakob was different from the serfs, since he could go where he pleased. He had specific hours he needed to work, usually just before dawn to sometime in the mid or late afternoon before returning to his cottage in the woods. Jesse sometimes wondered

why he hadn't married yet. Apparently, some people lived that way – out in the woods, working someone else's land – rather than own their own farms, or building their own trade through skill of some kind. It was Jakob's business, what he did, and Jesse felt no reason to press him about it when he saw him there.

This far west and south, the woods were thick enough to be nearly impossible for anyone to farm properly. It had required great teams of horses, mules, oxen, and men to shave away the trees from this part of the country to make way for proper fields and planting tender crops. Here, there was enough water for planting everything from corn to wheat to wheatgrass or alfalfa, cotton, barley, and more, without the worry of watering problems. They even had the license to brew their own beer and sell it in McIntyre, Breckenridge, and Hurst.

The fact that the Wixom family was commissioned by Lord Hurst to plant and sell crops was not necessarily advantageous for them. A specific percentage of money raised by the Wixoms was always directly given to Lord Hurst, and a percentage of the crops raised were shipped directly to Hurst after processing. There were several such plantations scattered throughout that part of the country.

But the much more and interesting aspect of their work, in Jesse's mind, was clearly the travelling opportunities which harvesting promised. Not every serf was allowed to go. Since Jakob was a sort of overseer or foreman for the land workers, and Thaddeus Botolfe was something similar for the house workers, it fell upon Jakob to choose which of the serfs would be allowed to drive the wagons full of grain and other produce to mill for processing, or to Hurst or one of the other villages for sale and delivery.

Jesse was certain the entire business of sale and processing was quite complex and involved, but he looked forward to driving the horses before him, the wind in his hair, his eyes seeing villages and people, sights he had never seen, the plains where the McIntyre village nested among the rolling hills, surrounded by farms of all kinds,

Breckenridge atop a hill surrounded by cattle and sheep, pigs and goats grazing lazily all day. Jesse shivered with excitement at the idea. To finally be rid of the mundane schedule – rise, work, meal, work, more work, speeches, sleep, repeat – would give him immense pleasure. The opportunity had been denied him time after time, when Lourne found reason after another to strike Jesse's name from the list of potential serfs with the skill and responsibility to drive the teams to and from their various destinations without complaint or question. Stett, on the other hand, had been permanently struck from the list of serfs from which Jakob could choose to accompany any of the Wixoms due to his "lack of respectful silence" when one of the Wixoms spoke in their speech-giving way during the expedition. Everyone who knew Stett well at all understood what the vague sentence meant. Jesse felt he would likely need to watch his own tongue during the trip.

On the other hand, it had been Caye in charge of that particular delivery. Perhaps it would not be quite so horrible for Jesse. It could be that Baltazar asked for Jesse's presence during every delivery he made, if he proved himself a worthy worker. He was sure that would be difficult, since he despised the name of Wixom and every thunder-struck man or woman bearing it. Caye, Eayllesander and his wife Bridget, they all were horrible to him in one way or another.

The laws of serf servantry were not knew, though the announcement that they were still in force came from Hurst every several years. Each time it came, Bridget Wixom would gather all the serfs together, stand on a box above them, and read the declaration that serf servantry was in force, and that any person caught entering a city or village without the proper identifying papers signed by the – blah, blah, blah. She would drone on and on in the most monotone voice she could muster. It was positively maddening. The tension was only released by Stett's timely jokes between the sentences. His comments had become increasingly interesting and creative, particularly with the announcement of the serf servantry laws, which were always worded in exactly the same way every

single time without fail. Jesse sighed as he readied himself for bed. Life was extremely difficult, especially since he needed to be on his best behavior.

The next morning, Jesse had a terrible headache when he awoke. His dreams were filled with thoughts of driving wagons to exotic new places, involving him accomplishing amazing works of driving the wagons, of Baltazar exclaiming how impressed he was with Jesse's superior work. But the dream had been interrupted by the sudden appearance of tall stone walls, thicker than the length of two men and many times his height. He had been running away from something, and hadn't been able to stop himself in time, flying off the wagon as the horses stopped of their own accord, sending him flying headlong into the wall. He gritted his teeth, cursing his pounding head.

It was difficult to work that day due to the headache. He half closed his eyes in pain, stripping off his shirt and wrapping it around his head to stay the sun. When he was in the far fields sometime before midday, he surreptitiously checked to make sure no one was looking, then stole into the woods at the edge of the fields where he knew a creek with cold water. He dunked his head into it, sighing as the refreshing cold soaked through the shirt and cooled his pounding head. He wondered if his headache came from working all day long day after day, and whether his blood wasn't starting to boil. He sucked the clear water thirstily, not realizing just how dry he was until that moment. He knew he shouldn't drink too much cold water on a hot day like this, and he stopped short, but he was left wanting more. He contented himself in dunking his head under again, feeling the blood pounding in his temples. He wished he could stay there at the creek, even follow it up to its source at the river and swim in it. He didn't care that he was fully clothed, he just wanted to get off that plantation. Standing with an oath that he would not stay on the farm for too much longer, he returned to work, his shirt soaking wet and dripping onto his bare skin. He looked up to the sky as he returned to his row, picking up his hoe

he had dropped. The sky was dark with clouds. He hoped it would hurry up and rain. It had looked horrible for days, filling the air with water, making the warm summer even hotter. They could use a cool wind and rain. With a sigh, he returned to work, wondering if the day would ever end.

When the water bucket came around, he slurped water greedily, planning to go back to the creek later to satiate his thirst.

Clouds gathered overhead, dark and black, threatening to spill their contents over them in buckets. Jesse kept working, hoping it would be an excellent downpour. If it was severe enough, they would be forced to change their working strategy. Flooding was a dangerous possibility, and the safety of the Wixom family was first priority, and it was a large family, indeed. It required the help of all the servants to gather the family into wagons and whisk them to higher ground while the serfs would pile the family's possessions into wagons and follow after them. Four trusted serfs were required to watch the river. If it swelled to a certain height over a specific amount of time, then a signal had been devised in which a serf would shoot an arrow with a whistle instead of a metal head. The arrow would sing as it flew through the air loudly enough that those waiting for it would hear before it struck. The falling of the arrow signified that only about a few hours remained for the serfs and servants to gather the family together. The maximum time was three hours. The point at which the arrow must be fired was noted with a stake in the ground. If the water reached the height of the stake, the serf would fire the arrow in a specific direction, which was also signified using stakes of wood driven into the ground.

Jesse hoped that the Wixom farm was completely destroyed in a flood. He kept working, feeling drops fall from the sky, slowly at first, then more rapidly until the air was cooled with a slight drizzle pushed to one direction then the other with a cool breeze, probably coming from the ocean. Jesse continued digging, hopeful that the rain would begin and he would either be allowed to stop working

or be part of the group waiting for the water to rise, or the group waiting for the arrow to fall. He wondered how far he could make it if he got a head start...

He shook the thought away like water off his skin. He could never leave Stett to a fate he himself abhorred so much. He was sure they would be separated if it came to dividing the serfs into groups to prevent the destruction of the Wixom family. That lesson had been learned many years before.

Jesse recalled how he and Stett had schemed plans of escape together when they were younger. They had made several attempts over the years, becoming more and more successful with each attempt. The first time they didn't make it as far as the edge of the property. Thaddeus Botolfe was not in the Wixom's service at the time, but a man named Incente Ainsworth was the master of the house servants, and was given charge over the two boys. The man had a bad knee, and was forced to hobble after them as they ran, panting desperately. He caught them just before they reached the road leading to the ravine bridge, picking each one up with a strong arm, his injured knee notwithstanding. He had dragged them, kicking and screaming, back to the house to keep working.

Jesse spat bitterly. He also recalled when they first had arrived on the Wixom plantation, forced, shivering, into the servant's quarters...

They sat together on a hard wood floor, both young, both frightened, keeping apart and staring at one another. Jesse was particularly shy, while Stett was a little bolder.

"My name is Stett," he told Jesse, his voice shaking with nervousness and fear. "What's yours?"

It took several moments for Jesse to respond.

"I'm Jesse," he said unsteadily. Stett smiled, then stuck out his hand to him.

"It's good to meet you," he said kindly.

Jesse stared at the hand, never having learned what it meant. Stett cocked his head, smiling wider.

“Don’t you know how to shake hands? It’s what people do when they meet for the first time.”

Jesse stared blankly at Stett’s left hand for a moment before sticking out his right and shaking it back and forth. Stett shook his head laughing.

“It’s a start,” he said.

At that moment, Jakob walked in, two plates of food in his hands.

“Hello!” he said brightly. “I am Jakob, the foreman here on the Wixom plantation. I oversee things around on the land.”

He handed each boy a plate.

“I can’t stay long, but you can eat those while I am gone for a little while. I’ll be back to talk more.”

He gave them an encouraging smile before turning to leave.

Jesse wanted to cry, wanted to call for Jakob to come back, wanted arms to wrap around him and tell him that everything would be all right, but he was too hungry for that at the moment. He shoveled the food in his mouth, wanting to appear brave for Stett. He didn’t want to give a bad impression even before they knew each other. Stett began eating as well. He cleared his throat before speaking to him.

“So ... Stett?” he said, gulping down tears. But his voice was still shaky with all of the emotion of being ripped suddenly into that strange place, lonely and uncomfortable. Stett looked up from his meal. Jesse gulped again.

“Where did you come from?”

Stett took a moment before responding. Jesse thought he saw tears in the boy’s eyes.

“Well,” he said, his voice also wavering, “I’m from an orphanage in Breckenridge. They say … well, they say I’m too old, so they sent me here.”

Jesse wrinkled a brow.

“So...” he said slowly to Stett, “how old are you, then?”

Stett puffed out his chest.

“I’m ten,” he said proudly. “I’ll be eleven in six months.” He held up several fingers, counting each one.

“One, two, three, four, five, six ...” he counted happily. Jesse gaped. He wasn’t sure if he could count that fast. Or that high – eleven!

“So, where are you from?” asked Stett, confidence rising in his voice. Jesse stared at him for a moment, trying to gather his emotions before responding.

“The cottage,” he said quietly. “The woman and I live in the cottage.”

“The woman?” Stett laughed. “Wasn’t she your mother? That’s what you call the woman who gave birth to you. She’s your mom. Don’t you know that?”

Jesse shook his head.

“No. I thought she was my mother, at first. She … she said my mother was far away.”

Stett’s expression changed completely. Sympathy filled his eyes. He nodded, understanding perfectly. Then he related parts of his own story.

“They taught me letters and reading and such. Well, a little. I really didn’t pay much mind to Mistress Burke when she tried teaching me. She says I’m too squirmy to learn.” He gave Jesse a smile.

At that point, Jesse broke into tears. He folded his arms in front of his face, trying to hide his embarrassment and tears from Stett. Seeming awkward at first, but standing up to sit next to him

anyway, Stett sat with Jesse, wrapping an arm around him. They tried to comfort one another as they both began to cry, rocking back and forth. Jesse sang a song the woman used to sing to him.

The Woman

Rain fell on Jesse's head as he hacked away at a grass weed that was springing up near the cotton field. He wiped his eyes furiously, telling himself there were no tears mixed with them. Wiping the water from his face was as effective as suppressing those painful memories. The more he wiped his eyes, the more water fell from them. The more he pushed away his past, the more it pained him. He looked around him, noticing that Jakob sent someone to have men plod through the fields to where the ravine began. The river had been redirected away from the ravine years and years before. If it flooded, the ravine would fill quickly, and the house would soon be underwater.

Jesse pushed more thoughts of running away and worked as if doing so would make his anger go away. He allowed himself to fall back into more memories of his past.

Jesse sat on the woman's lap as she told him a story. It was about a man who rode chariots made of stars, and of the evil beings he fought. Jesse could understand little about the stories, and could barely pronounce the hero's name, but he enjoyed sitting with her.

She told him how the hero had a mother who loved him, but who had to send him away against the evil foes to protect their country. She loved her son very much, and wished he didn't have to go away. He looked up at her.

"I love you, Mamma."

Sorrow spread across her face. It made him sad, too, looking at her.

"No, Momma, don't be sad, don't cry." His heart sank, seeing her face so down, and he also began to cry. He did not understand, and

he did not realize what it was that he did not understand. All he could see was that his Momma was sad, and he did not want her to be sad.

“No, Jesse, don’t cry, now,” she comforted him. “I’m not sad. It’s just that … well, I’m not your momma.”

Jesse stared at her. He had no idea what she meant.

“She’s a long ways away from here,” she explained. Jesse remembered what she said, and understood what it meant later, but still didn’t quite understand.

“But … can I still call you Momma?”

She smiled.

“Of course, you can!” She tickled him and kissed him on both cheeks.

Many weeks passed in this way. They celebrated his birthday with bread and a chicken they caught. They gathered firewood, making it into a game. The memories blurred together, some with snow outside, others with green leaves, still more with brown and orange leaves.

They were playing, jumping into the fallen leaves, when barking dogs and shouts of men reached their ears. Jesse watched as the woman’s face changed from playful to fearful, then smoothed to a calm grace.

“Come with me, Jesse,” she said.

She guided him back into the house.

“What’s wrong, Momma? What’s happening?” he asked. Where there others coming to play with them?

The woman did not answer for a moment, gathering bread, cheese, jerky, and some candied fruit into a cloth bag. She fetched a water skin and slung it around his shoulders. She knelt in front of him, fear coming clearly in her face, now.

“I need you to take these things, and I want you to run as far as you can.”

Her fear gripped his heart and made him also begin to panic.

“What’s wrong, Momma?”

Her face was hidden behind her hair for a moment before she tossed it back and looked him in the eyes.

“There are bad men coming, Jesse. They want to hurt you.”

She led him to the front door, turning his shoulders to the right. She knelt beside him, whispering into his ear.

“I need you to go in that direction, okay? Run that way as far as you can. When you get hungry, eat the food. When you get thirsty, drink the water. I will be coming after you, okay?”

He trembled as the sounds of shouting came nearer as a bird cooed overhead.

“But, Momma, I’m scared. What will happen? How will I know the way?”

“Do you see that dove?” she asked, pointing to the white bird.

“Yes,” he whispered back.

“He will show you the way. Just follow the bird, Jesse. He will show you which way you need to go. I will come for you, Jesse.”

She gave him a nudge, the sound of dogs barking and men yelling drawing nearer.

“Be brave,” she whispered in his ear.

“Like the heroes,” he whispered back.

He ran toward the bird, never taking his eyes away from it. He looked back for a moment, and she waved him on.

Turning back, he followed the bird into the forest.

He ran for hours, the sun setting. He stopped to drink water and eat, turning back, hoping to see Momma behind him, but she was not there. Looking ahead, he only saw the bird, waiting for him to continue. He saved a candied strawberry with a nut in its middle for last, along with a little bread and cheese. Those were his favorite, so he wanted to make them last longer. He stood, looking back. He began to cry, feeling lonelier than ever.

As the tears fell from his cheeks, he cried for someone to give him a hug. The bird hopped down from its branch, landing on his shoulder. It nestled its feathered head against his cheek. He closed his eyes, and began to dream. ...

He saw a man standing before him in the woods, his hand outstretched. He had tears in his eyes, but a smile on his face. Jesse ran to him, wrapping his arms around the man, who knelt, hugging Jesse tightly.

“You are safe,” said the man into his ear. “I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

As he hugged the man, he felt warmth and peace flood through him. The word that came to his mind was Papa. All his fear, all his loneliness, all his worry washed away as he hugged the man. He felt warm and safe.

The man did not break the hug until Jesse was ready to go again. The man looked down at him, his face serene, smiling. Jesse smiled back.

“I am ready,” he said.

When his eyes opened, waking from the dream, the bird was still on his shoulder, the sun was down, and it was beginning to rain. But Jesse felt comforted, and prepared to continue on. The bird flew ahead, and a glow seemed to come from it, lighting Jesse’s path with each step.

He ran all night long, feeling a warmth and a strength as he followed

the bird. The cold could not freeze him, nor could the darkness quell him, so long as he kept his eyes on the bird.

When morning came, he still ran until he came to a village with dirt streets. It was still early morning, he thought, so Momma must still be on her way.

He wandered through the streets, calling for Momma. He looked in the alleys, but could not see her there. He looked in windows, and down the streets. He called for her over and over, even when the sun came over the tops of the trees, but she never came. The loneliness and cold, along with fear and uncertainty crept in. Where was Momma, and why would she not come?

Jesse recalled the memories with a heavy heart. He realized later that the woman he called Momma was no older than a teenager. He had also realized that the men were coming after her, or him, or both, and that the men most likely found her and did not allow her to live.

He picked up his hoe and threw it bodily over the field and into the woods with a bellow. He fell to his knees, tears streaming down his face, sobs racking his body.

He did not hear the footsteps behind him over the rain, which was pounding, now.

“Jesse?”

He turned sharply. It was Jakob and Stett. He let out an anguished sob, letting his body sag as the rain came down.

Stett came to him, throwing an arm around his shoulder, just as he had when they were boys. They rocked there together in the mud, Jakob kneeling next to them. They knelt in a circle arms wrapped around one another, Jakob kneeling beside them, his face showing his fear and concern.

“We’ll get out of this, Jesse,” said Stett, his voice tight. “We will be free one day.”

And the rain came down.

Cale sat at the table, thinking about the dream of Jesse and Stett from the night before. These dreams were not dreams, he decided. They were filled with much deeper significance. But he could not tell what that was. Were they things which he, Cale, needed to know? Or were they things that applied to everyone? He did have the feeling that Jesse was even more significant and applicable to him than Hunter and Emma, despite his obvious difference in lifestyle from Jesse's.

He felt compassionate toward Jesse's pain, but he also wondered at it. What if Cale had not been in the position he currently was? It made him feel grateful that his own father had stayed around long enough to teach him and show kindness to him. Jesse lost the only semblance of family he had at the age of seven. Cale could not imagine such a thing.

He took a long drink of orange juice.

"Rough night was it, sir?" asked Harrison.

"Yeah," said Cale somberly, hanging his head.

"Would you like to talk about it, sir?"

"No," said Cale, swinging off the bar. He let Harrison take his empty cup, watching it disappear into the counter. "Thank you, Harrison."

Later that day, Cale walked down the street. He enjoyed a pleasant walk now and again, and the wind gave pleasant relief to the burning sun.

He thought about his father, and wondered if Jesse's way of coping with the stress and grief of losing the only person he considered family was a good method. Humor.

“It’s hot today,” he said to himself. “In fact, it’s hot enough to fry an egg on my face!”

He sniggered at how idiotic his own joke sounded. He could almost hear Stett’s voice from his dream saying with a laugh, “Well, it’s a start!” He laughed. He liked Stett a lot.

Cale saw two young women his age walking down the sidewalk in his direction. Without realizing it, his back straightened, and he unconsciously patted his hair down, immediately stopping when he realized what he was doing. The girls were maybe twenty yards away. What was he going to say? They seemed deep in conversation, maybe he shouldn’t interrupt them and say hi? Ten yards ...

“Hello, there!” he said as brightly as he could. They looked at him, and the one who was not speaking glanced up at him.

“Hi,” she said without a pause.

He smiled and waved at them as they passed by, then stopped, turning to watch them go, frowning. He sighed. Why couldn’t he say anything right? He *hated* trite language. All the “how do you do’s” and the “why, you look lovely, today’s” and the “hey, wutssup’s” and on, and on, and on. He hated the empty, worthless conversation. He wanted something *more*, craved acceptance and deep connections with people. There was very little he would not have given to simply have a comfortable, friendly conversation with one of those girls. Disappointed, he finished his walk, hanging his head.

Later that day, he returned home. He sat at the bar without stirring. For hours. He stared into the kitchen, accepting food and water from Harrison whenever his alerts would rouse him from his stupor, and he watched as the sun’s light from the window crept up the kitchen wall before disappearing completely.

Wiping a tear from his eye, Cale half walked, half fell up the stairs to his bed. He let Harrison turn off the lights.

Chapter 4: Borin and Fernand

The dark figure wreathed in black that wound its way slowly through the cobblestone streets could have been a woman.

Limping as it went, the black figure's breath rattled from its mouth and echoed through the empty streets. The moon glowing overhead cast its frail light over her shoulders, and the wind tugged at the midnight-black shawl wrapped around her head. Bent almost double, the woman wheezed in pain as she cursed the wind that pierced her to the bone and shielded her face from the moon as if its light burned her waxy, pale flesh. Her moan was like the primordial groaning of the earth, but it was an unnatural sound that seemed to cause the very stones to quake with fear as she passed them.

A claw-like hand wrapped her shawl more closely around her hunched form as she entered the square. The moonlight reflected off the clean-swept stones of the empty square and made the large fountain at its center glow almost majestically through the veil of night. The streets that spilled into the square from the north, south, east, and west whispered the silent screams of the steely wind as it swept through them and into the square.

On the north border of the square sat the grand cathedral that stood like a beacon above the city. Towers reached to the sky from its four corners, and tallest of all was the bell tower jetting up from the center of its steep roof. At four stories high, and every level supported by grand stone pillars topped with buttresses decorated in intricate, hand-carved designs, the building was majesty worked into stone. Angelic statues sprouted from round balconies, their wings spreading heavenward benevolently and protectively over the smaller buildings of the city, other figures were more warlike,

with arrows or spears ready to protect the people over whom they stood vigilant, while still more statues either knelt in worshipful prostration or stood looking out over the city, their stony eyes a reminder of what was right and true.

The edifice seemed to glower down at the woman as she cowered from its gaze near the edge of the square. She seemed to be trying to get as far as possible from the cathedral while still completing her sinister task. Crawling away from the watchful eyes as if she had lost all strength, the woman hid her face with her shawl as curses streamed from her mouth at the angelic stone. Somehow, they knew what she was and what she was about to do. She could almost imagine their voices and what they would say.

“Monster ...” they seemed to whisper. She could almost hear their stone voices echoing through the square like a hiss on the wind. *“Beast of the abyss ... monster ...”*

Finally, she slunk into a dark alley, away from the statues’ eyes, and knocked on what must have been a servant’s door. No one answered, but the door swung open as if of its own accord. Once inside with the door closed, she straightened slightly, pulling her shawl down from her head to reveal her terrible, twisted features.

Her pallid skin, waxy and drooping, almost seemed to creak with age as she moved. The deep lines of wrinkles on her face began at her eyes and spread out like spider’s webs across her skin. Her white hair stood out in wisps on the top of her yellowing, liver-spotted head. But worst of all was her eyes. Instead of a pair of eyes, the woman saw the world with a pair of black pits sunken into her head. Where eyes should have been, twin holes sucked all light into them. From the depths of her eyes there was nothing. No soul, no heart, no blood, and no sign that the creature had ever been human came from the twin depths.

Standing in the pitch dark, the woman twitched her head up and down and side to side like a reptilian bird as she inspected the room, her twin abysses absorbing everything. When she moved across

the room, it was as the wafting of smoke in frozen air. A presence floated along with her wherever she walked. Her horrible, rotten hands slid smoothly across the surface of almost everything as she drifted like a vaporous snake through the darkness. Veritably, she was more a creature than human.

Moving silently between tables and chairs, the creature reached a secret servant's bedchamber entrance she somehow already knew. Without so much as a squeak in the door hinge or a creak in the floorboards, the creature slipped into the narrow stairway beyond.

Many children – and even some adults – throughout history have been frightened by the dark. The space beneath beds or the darkness in empty closets have frightened young people for an age. Deeper within that fear is what all humans – children and adults alike – avoid with every ounce of intellect and strength they possess. When the fear of death grips the hearts of men, only those who have felt it in its sheerest, most horrible form, or who have seen it in friends or comrades understand the power it gives the mind and limbs. Tiny bodies have become capable of enormous strength in the face of it.

But there is a fear even greater than the fear of death. A nightmarish terror that grips the heart, steals strength from even the strongest man, and will destroy the weak souls unfortunate enough to cross its path.

No scene so hideous or fearsome ever matched the moment the terrible creature that was the old woman, with the careful, measured steps of a predator stalking its prey, crept up the dark, narrow stairway and slid through the door at its end, with the gaping, black holes in its head sucking in all light and hope in its wake.

With the slowness of the creeping moon, the creature opened the door silently. First her lank hair appeared into the bedroom, then the rest of her gradually grew to reveal her awful head. The moment the creature's awful eyes emerged from the hallway, her head snapped directly to the man lying in the bed in the center of the room, staring with her lidless eyes. Every creeping moment ticked by like

an eternity, but as her twisted body gradually appeared into the bedroom, her demonic eyes never wavered, but stared, piercing the man lying asleep in the bed. Had he been awake, not even the fear of death could have given him enough strength to move, call for help, or escape. He would have frozen, staring, his entire body shivering and convulsing uncontrollably in fear, and watched as the creature glided across the room, her twin pits fixated on him as she knelt beside him and reached into the dark folds of her cloak.

If the man sleeping in the bed had been awake, his mouth would have been open in a silent scream of sheer, primordial terror as she drew her claw of a hand from her clothes with a ball of something black and oily clutched between her twisted, knobby fingers. If he had been awake, every nerve in his body would have shouted at him to run, or to scream, or to stop the woman as she slowly – ever so slowly – reached beneath his bed and set the oily black ball on the floor directly beneath his pillow. But the man was not awake. And so he did not move as the woman completed her insidious task.

In the same manner she arrived, the woman stood and drifted from the house. Even as she stepped through the darkness, down the stairs, and through the kitchen to the servant's entrance, here lidless eyes never ceased to stare at the man lying in the bed. As if her evil eyes could pierce through wood, iron, stone, and flesh, she stared upward through the entire building as she gradually left the house and into the alley beyond.

Unknown to the woman, a window across the square was open, and someone within looked out to the night sky, admiring the way the moon shone on the cathedral. When she slunk back into the dark alley, a pair of eyes watched her hunched, limping figure as she became one with the darkness.

The morning began as it always did. No one in the small city of Gerwynsted suspected that anything sinister or mysterious might

have occurred the night before as they began the day. The streets filled with people, some walking with their wares while others called out to passersby what goods there were to buy and why it ought to be bought at that moment. Soon, the square was full of men and women hustling and bustling in every direction.

Gerwynsted was owned by Master Gerwyn Butler, brother of Sir Edwyn Butler. The city had been officially granted to Master Gerwyn about fifteen years earlier. It had been especially ruffling for the people when Gerwyn came and began to change everything. He declared that Gerwynsted would no longer be called Gerard's Hill as it once was, and that the Council – the governing body of the city – would have Gerwyn Butler's man, Paul Ferrin, at its head to ensure that everything worked according to Gerwyn's wishes. Many of the people had been so vehemently opposed to the changes that the city was in serious danger of falling apart in revolt and riot. It had been Sir Edwyn Butler's small but well-trained army of soldiers that made the transition smoother. Although the people continued to chafe against Gerwyn's knew rule, they eventually calmed.

The last fifteen years had passed without incident. The people slowly became accustomed to the way Paul Ferrin ran the city in Gerwyn's absence; it was as if nothing drastic had actually changed about the city. The Council continued to run as it always had, and trade and all other commerce continued as the people expected it. So, the change became more bearable.

Just as an enormous mansion depends upon the support of its beams to keep it erect, the residents of Gerwynsted depended on several individuals for their intelligence and influence – beams in the support of society - during the transition and also throughout many other times of personal or general crisis. These men and women had been instrumental in the smooth transition, speaking with the people when they became so angry that a riot was imminent, calming tempers, and generally making peace. Mobs had been

disbanded, and Paul Ferrin's life had been spared on more than one occasion because of these pillars of Gerwynsted.

Men and women across all nations and among all people have met similar individuals. These men and women are the salt of their communities, and their range of influence can affect the fate of nations. Many people may believe that such respected persons are to be found on the backs of war horses, clad in shining armor as they race into the arms of battle, or that they are found at the head of governments. Such individuals are believed to have incredible power and hegemony because of the strength of their mind or their arms. But these individuals are not so.

Fernand, the humble old preacher, walked through the streets of Gerwynsted on that fateful morning, clad as he always was in a brown preacher's robe. He went about his humble business as he always did, his eyes, manner, and character were all smiling, loving, and kindly to all with whom he spoke. No one left his presence without feeling uplifted, appreciated, befriended, and loved. It was not the strength of his arms, nor was it the power of his mind that convinced the people that the humble preacher was a soul they could trust to guide them in the way they should go. It was the kindness of his heart, the purity of his soul, the wisdom in his conduct, the service that he rendered selflessly, and the love in everything he did that earned Fernand the respect he had among everyone who knew him; and he knew every resident of Gerwynsted by name. Because they felt his love and care, he also knew their troubles and sorrows, their misdeeds and their deepest fears, and their hopes, aspirations, and greatest dreams.

Fernand did not have the broadest shoulders, nor did he have the glamor and glory of a victorious warrior returned home from battle. He did not give empty promises or coerce or convince others to believe or follow him. Never did he vilify or condemn others to rise in respect and power, neither was he defensive when asked difficult questions or when others posed difficult problems to him; he was

always calm and wise in everything he did. Indeed, the power of the preacher came from his love.

If kings, rulers, presidents, magistrates, senators, mayors, or any other ruler or government throughout the ages had half the power of humble old Fernand, whose white head bent with age, whose joints creaked beneath his wrinkled skin, and whose frail and wiry figure certainly posed no physical threat, such a ruler would have been given the entire world in an instant; every war would have ceased with nearly every problem solved. People trusted Fernand because they knew that he had their best interest at the forefront of his mind, and that he gave everything of himself in order to help them with their troubles. He was honest, he was hardworking, he was selfless, but above all he was humble and loving.

When Fernand entered the streets every day he always brought things in his pockets to give to the people. Rarely was it ever money – he had very little left of that to give. It was usually either bread or some other morsel of food, or candy that he would give to children as they came to him, their bright little faces smiling up with their pure love.

Some may believe that such an individual with such tender qualities is weak and inefficient. But meekness in love and wisdom is not weakness. Indeed, when Fernand was stern, or when he gave a command, he was neither weak nor uncontrolled, even for a moment. When the moment required a firm hand or a stern word, Fernand set an example for any leader.

As Fernand went about doing good among the people he loved so well, others were also only waking and preparing for the day's business. Borin the carpenter came out of his carpentry shop, yawning and stretching as he readied himself for the day. He busied himself with adjusting the signs outside his little shop before returning inside to straighten things together.

Borin Yewlight was new to Gerwynsted. And, when he had only just received the title of master carpenter, he was commissioned by

Master Gerwyn's master carpenter to move from his little village a few miles away to live directly in the city and assist in a massive project Master Gerwyn began the previous year. Borin was excited to accept the opportunity to live in the city. It would give him the chance to grow his carpentry skills and to build a reputation as a master carpenter.

Apparently, Master Gerwyn had taken a keen interest in the old cathedral. No one knew exactly why, but the man began a massive undertaking to restore the great building, involving hundreds of workers for miles in every direction in the project. Women worked on new tapestries with complicated patterns. Teams of carpenters worked on various furniture, ancient carvings, and other elements of the ancient relic. Stone masons worked to restore or replace grand designs inside and outside the magnificent structure. Nearly half the city had been banded together for the great undertaking of restoring the old cathedral.

Much of the internal designs apparently had worn out or grown faded; some of the stone angels on the exterior had lost wings or their radiant features had been worn by sun and weather; and some of the ancient furniture in the building had fallen apart from age. Borin had participated in the restoration of what felt like hundreds of feet of ceiling and floor moldings and building new tables and chairs with impossibly complex designs carved into every inch of their surfaces.

But the time he had spent laboring inside the cathedral had given him time enough to become closely acquainted with Fernand, which Borin considered to be a great blessing. The old man reminded him of a grandfather he never knew ... and the father he had lost years before. The old man was uncommonly kind, bringing fruit or a plate of bread and cheese to the workers whenever they came.

"Bless you all," the charming old man would say when he saw them at work. "Bless you all for bringing this old place back to her former

glory!"

The preacher seemed to say and do the kindest things simply because he enjoyed seeing them brighten when he did it. Goodness and kindness poured from him naturally and easily, like a heavenly waterfall. His wife Winifred was just as kind as he was, though Borin didn't know her quite as well. She always seemed to be somewhere in the city running an errand whenever he was working inside the cathedral, which Borin took to mean she was finding some way to help others or do some kind deed or other. Being around the old preacher or his wife gave Borin a full feeling in his heart ... almost as if he were coming *home* whenever he was around them. He missed being inside the cathedral and seeing Fernand's smiling face. Unfortunately, other projects took him out of the cathedral and less time with Fernand.

Currently, Borin was working on an enormous, round table, about twelve feet in diameter and four feet tall, all made of hardwood, and all made entirely out of a single piece, rather than several pieces fit together. Its legs were curved outward and covered in beautiful designs, which had taken many hours to carve as well as many tools, which blunted quickly under the tough wood. Every inch of its surface was supposed to be covered with intricate carvings; he had even spent most of the night working on its underside. He didn't exactly see the point of carving on the underside of a table, but apparently it needed to exactly match a specific pattern he had been given by Master Gerwyn's architect. Borin didn't know how much time he had spent pouring over the plans he'd received from the architect, comparing the drawings with his work, but he would be glad to be done with the impossibly difficult task. He was nearly finished with the underside and would begin work on the table's legs before moving on to the tabletop. It had cost him two weeks and most of nearly every night to accomplish so much. And, frankly, it was beginning to wear on him in more than one way.

Although Borin had lived in the city for several months already,

he knew very few people. Fernand was a kind man, but he was nonetheless distant somehow. He was more of a patriarch than a close friend. He didn't know his neighbors very well, who were also artisans, and he rarely had any time to do anything but work on Master Gerwyn's endless projects. But, despite his work-induced seclusion, Borin still managed to find people his age he enjoyed as friends. Or rather, there was one special person he particularly enjoyed as friends.

He met Helen when she came to remove a tapestry from a wall while he happened to be working on the opposite wall. Apparently, the old, decrepit tapestry had somehow fused itself to the wood, and a small team of women had been asked to help remove it from the wall. In his boredom and desire to make friends, he and Helen had struck up a friendship during their work. Since then, however, he had been forced to begin work on the table, and had felt terribly about not seeing her as often as he wished.

Sifting through the equipment he had piled in the front of his shop to make room for the massive table in the back of his shop, Borin returned outside, hoping to do a little shopping and get a breath of fresh air. Stepping out into the square, he put his hands on his hips, taking in the clean air. He watched the people as they milled about with their wares for a moment before he turned to set off toward the stonemason shop. He would need a new whetstone before the day was done ...

At that moment, he saw her. Helen came walking through the square. To Borin, it almost seemed that she floated as she went, as if she had transformed into a living version of one of the angels from the cathedral. All the other people disappeared from his view as she glided toward him as if on silver wings. Heat coursed through his veins as a fire bloomed like a hot, white rose in his chest. Helen was a beautiful woman, certainly, with all the physical characteristics of an attractive female. But it was her nature that made Borin's heart pound. He had seen her treat all around her with kindness and

respect. He loved the way she spoke to others who needed her help, and how compassionate she was. His heart swelled as she stepped in his direction.

“Hello, Borin,” she said as she came nearer. Heat rose in Borin’s ears. “My goodness, you look as if you’ve been awake the whole night through. I hope you aren’t ill?”

Borin could hardly take his eyes off the young woman as he shook his head.

“No. But this table is a beast of a project – I’ve been at the underside of it most of the night. You know Harald wants it in two weeks? I don’t know if I’ll be able to do it so quickly.”

Borin loved the way Helen’s eyebrows dipped in unbridled empathy.

“I’m sorry it’s such a hard project, Borin,” she said, patting his arm. Borin tried to stop the hot red from traveling down his ears and into his face, but he couldn’t. “I’m certain Harald will think your work is beautiful! I’ve seen you work. I’m sure you’ll get it finished.”

Borin’s hand twitched involuntarily, itching to place itself into Helen’s hand. But he held it back. Although it might have been difficult for him to admit to himself normally, there were rare moments when simply could not hide his affection for her from himself. The way her smile made her look, the way he knew it would shine on the faces of people who were either less fortunate or in need of kindness, and especially the way she could brighten the faces of even the less deserving or highly fortunate made him glow with pride to see her excellent qualities. He could no longer deny his feelings or his heart.

They had spent some time together. They could joke and laugh together. The time they spent apart over the last two weeks after nearly a month of seeing one another every day made Borin realize that he was ... fond of her. More than fond, in fact.

He tried to find the right words as they stood side by side, watching the people sidle past. As they spoke lightly about their lives, he searched his feelings, seeking their depths, struggling to pull words from the mountainous, bright emotions that swirled inside him, but it was like trying to wrap his arms around a tree and pull it up from the roots with his bare hands.

So he glanced down at her from the corner of his eye. He hated playing the game of struggling to decide if a woman liked him or not. Reading a message that had been smudged all over the paper, soaked in honey, burnt in a fire, then buried in a swamp for months would be easier to read than trying to correctly interpret the meaning of a woman's hints.

There were no words that properly described how he felt, and he had no idea if she reciprocated or whether she simply saw him as a friend. He knew he wanted to come to know her better. He wanted to *understand* her, know what she thought about the world and see it through her eyes. He wanted to share in her feelings, and ...

He sighed inwardly, then decided there was only one thing to do. He had wanted to do it for some time; he was simply afraid of what might happen if he tried it.

Turning toward her, Borin opened his mouth to ask Helen the question in his heart ... when a bone-chilling scream cut through the air, raking up and down Borin's spine like a saw. The entire city jumped in shock at the noise, just as a woman ran screaming from the mansion house of Paul Ferrin. Her white apron was clutched between her balled fists so tightly that the skin across her knuckles was nearly whiter than her apron. Everyone watched as she charged into the crowd of people blindly, whimpering and crying out wordlessly.

But her screaming went on, and people began whispering nervously. Women clutched their children as they wailed along with the woman in sympathy; men steered their wives away from the

scene as the poor woman collapsed to the ground, her mouth open wide as she sobbed in terror.

Borin glimpsed Fernand as he streaked through the people toward the woman, the old man's painful, creaking joints obviously forgotten as he knelt beside her, taking her hand and speaking softly.

When he heard people gossiping under their breath as they walked past his shop, it made tongues of hot anger lance through Borin's chest and erupt out his eyes.

"How indecent," whispered one woman to another as they carried bars of fabric between them. "What on earth is the matter with her? Why doesn't she stop –"

"Paul Ferrin is dead!" the sobbing woman screamed over the shuffling, murmuring crowd. "H-his skin is a-all turned black, a-and ..." Tears poured down her face as Fernand helped her to her feet.

"It's true!" the woman bellowed as the dense crowd shook their heads. "I came up to his room to give him his breakfast when I found him ... stone cold ... black as death ... eyes bulging out of his head ..." her entire body shivered uncontrollably as she screamed over the crowd.

"He's been *poisoned*, I tell you! There is a killer among us! ... *Poisoned!*"

She shrieked and fell to her knees again, sobbing uncontrollably.

The entire square fell deathly still. A hush spread until it seemed that the very cobblestones of the streets craned to listen as the woman's voice faded to a whisper. Every eye was trained on her. Not a soul made a sound in the entire city.

"He was lying there on the sheets ..." she whispered, her face turning stark white, her eyes wide and staring at the horror only she had known. Her head shivered, quivering back and forth. "... eyes were bulging out of his head ... never seen – I can't bear ..."

The woman was about to go on, but Fernand shushed her.

“Come on, now, my dear, let’s get you some rest. Come with me now, Karra, that’s it ...”

Fernand took her by the arm and gently guided her through the crowd, but her body was stiff and her eyes were slowly turning bloodshot. Without warning, she screamed again as if she could see the entire, horrible scene before her eyes once more. Then her body crumpled to a heap on the cobblestone square.

People backed away from her in surprise as several men bent to their knees and lifted her in their arms and carried her to the cathedral at Fernand’s petition for help. The people watched in shock for several moments, staring after her as she was carried away toward the infirmary in the cathedral. Then murmuring broke out. Women fanned their faces, men wiped their brows, and the square filled with the sounds of people wondering to each other what possibly could have happened.

Before he knew it, Borin was swept away from Helen by the press of the crowd and pushed through the square. Without realizing it, the two of them had come closer to the weeping woman, drawn in by her awful suffering, and were now at the mercy of the swarming crowd. He craned his neck to look over the heads of the people, but he couldn’t see Helen as the press of bodies separated them.

Wondering to himself if what the woman had said might be true, he found his way through the jostling people and down a street in the direction of the stone mason. Crawling through tight alleys, leaping over barrels, and weaving his way through the streets, Borin thought about what had happened. It hardly seemed possible that a man as healthy as Paul Ferrin could have died so suddenly. He was as active as ever only the day before. The Council met as usual, and there hadn’t been anything strange ... But then ...

Suddenly, Borin remembered what he had seen the night before.

Walking into the stone mason’s shop, he tried to keep his face casual. It would be difficult convincing Master Erdmut that he

wasn't troubled. He knew it would show on his face. He hoped dearly that the stone mason had heard the news already, and that the man would understand the terror in Borin's eyes as shock from what had happened to the woman. He was relieved when Erdmut spoke first.

"Did you hear what happened in the square this morning?" the big man asked gruffly. He was struggling to seem tough and disinterested, but Borin could tell he was enthralled. "But you were probably there. Is Paul Ferrin really dead? Did you see what happened?"

Borin shook his head.

"No, I only heard his serving woman running out, screaming." He took the new whetstone from Erdmut and turned to go, but the man's enormous, hairy hand tightened around it.

"You be careful, master carpenter. Do you hear?"

Borin nodded, waiting impatiently for Erdmut to let go. The mason shook his head sadly.

"Don't know this city anymore," the man growled. "Once knew it like my own shop. It's all gone strange now ..."

Borin didn't wait until Erdmut was finished before calling his thanks over his shoulder and sprinting out to the street. His memories of what he had seen the night before all rushed back to him. It hadn't seemed important at the time, but now ...

Depositing the whetstone in his carpentry shop, he stopped for a moment to think. Who would he tell? Who would listen to him carefully ... without laughing or mocking his story? There were few he knew well enough to trust with anything at all, let alone something that might be as important as this. His thoughts went immediately to Helen, but he pushed the thought away. He felt doubtful that telling her would accomplish anything but make her more afraid, adding mystery to the already frightening prospect of Paul Ferrin's untimely death. There had to be someone better ...

Making his decision, Borin spun on his heel and went directly toward the cathedral.

Rumor, Myth, and Legend

Borin approached the old cathedral with reverence. It never ceased to amaze him how awe-inspiring the sight of the grand building was. With its highest tower standing at least seven or eight stories above his head, the balconies swooping outward over the streets, and the angels with their outstretched arms and wings gazing down at him from far above, it was striking. And yet, there was something comforting about the way the structure hung poised overhead like a protective eagle soaring high above in watchful silence, or a towering, regal tree standing firmly to shade the weary soul. Whenever Borin came to the cathedral he felt peaceful and safe.

Its first level was especially unique from the other buildings of the city because the archway bent over the road, allowing the road to pass directly through the center of the building. The structure was so massive that it hardly mattered. The entire chapel – which could fit at least a quarter of the city's inhabitants at once – filled the east side of the first and second floor, while the west side contained a sort of infirmary and a large kitchen. It reminded him of the castles from the legends and myths his mother used to tell him.

With one last look at the angels above, Borin pressed his hands on the tall oak doors on the east of the cathedral and stepped inside. He entered the foyer to the chapel. The stain glass in the windows cast colorful lights through the room. Tapestries and pictures hung along the walls depicting humble travelers who made their way through deep forests and dangerous paths to finally find a light, where the travelers knelt in humble reverence.

Beneath the paintings sat various furniture. Borin had spent so much time studying the old tables, footrests, and chairs that he

almost didn't need to glance at them to know what they looked like. Mainly decorative, they were covered in beautiful patterns that swirled and interlocked continuously. The pattern almost made it seem as if the furniture were one continuous object. But it was the walls and tapestries behind the furnishings that brought out the effect.

The walls and parts of most tapestries were covered in similar designs, carved deep into wood or stone. The pattern in the tapestries was so detailed and intricate that it gave even more depth to the pattern.

Borin was so lost in the scene that he jumped when the doors opened behind him and Fernand hobbled inside.

"Well, hello young master!" said the man brightly. "It's been some time since last we saw one another!"

Borin nodded.

"Yes. I miss this beautiful old place."

Fernand's smile was wide. He fingered the designs thoughtfully before speaking again.

"Well, young master, how can I be of help to you?"

It always surprised Borin just how strong the old man seemed. Very few men his age were likely to have the energy of Fernand. The preacher seemed to be filled with it no matter what he did. Borin smiled warmly before speaking.

"Actually, I was hoping I could be of help in a small way," he said, taking a seat across from Fernand as the old man gestured for them to sit.

"I don't know if ... well, I just thought I ought to say ... but I don't know if it will be of any help ..."

Fernand's eyes were kind as he listened.

"You are concerned about Karra, Paul Ferrin's maid."

Borin nodded.

“Yes.”

Borin proceeded to tell Fernand what he had seen the night before. He had been working on his table late into the night. He had been getting ready for bed and decided to look out his window to admire the cathedral, when he saw a hobbling figure that looked something like a frail old woman walking out of the servant’s entrance in the alley beside Paul Ferrin’s manor house. He had seen her clearly from the window of his room.

Borin watched as Fernand’s face grew from interested to concerned, then slid into a nearly inscrutable expression of concentration.

“I see,” said the old man. But he didn’t sound anything like his cheerful self at all. He sounded somber, even grave, as if he had heard the worst news of his life. Borin hoped he could be helpful.

“I hope this can help catch whoever caused this to happen. Whoever killed Paul Ferrin ...” His voice trailed away as he saw the concentration deepen in Fernand’s old face.

Fernand hand fingered his lips thoughtfully, his elbow resting on his knee. He eyed Borin thoughtfully for a moment. Borin still couldn’t read the old man’s expression. But slowly, the man got to his feet, gesturing Borin to follow him.

“Come with me,” he said. Borin could hear the gravity in his gravelly voice. “There is something we must discuss.”

Turning, they went into the chapel through one of the four sets of double doors leading to its back. Borin admired the enormous and magnificent stain glass windows set into the east wall. Erdmut had assisted in their restoration, and they shone beautifully as ever in the morning light.

They went through a small door behind the pulpit at the chapel’s front. It led to a tightly winding stone staircase that Borin knew led to a large library above the chapel. When they reached it, Fernand

went quickly to the shelves, carefully selecting books and setting them on a table.

With a smile, Fernand gestured to the chair, and Borin sat.

“Now, Master Borin,” sighed Fernand as he sat. “Have you ever heard the tales of the Dragon?”

Borin was confused.

“Yes ...” he said cautiously. Why would Fernand want to tell him children’s tales?

“Well,” said Fernand, lacing his fingers together on his stomach and leaning back into his chair. “Some things in myth and legend are, in truth, actual history. Some things are lost through time and the telling, but it is time now that the record was corrected. When fact mixes with rumor, and the stories of the great deeds of the past become legend, we can forget the lessons that history tries to teach us. We must not make the same mistakes as our ancestors.”

Borin listened intently as Fernand unfolded history.

Two thousand years ago, the Dragon was born among men. He lived as a man, but his power was great. He discovered that the powers of evil had found its way in the hearts of men, and he found a way to destroy the evil.

The Dragon rebuilt the world with his power. With nothing but a thought from his mind, he caused that darkness should be separate from light, and that only men and women with true goodness in their hearts could obtain true power. He Sealed men away from the powers of goodness so that they could only use power for good.

The years passed, and the Dragon died. Good men lived and died in peace for many years. But the powers of evil found their way into the hearts of men again. Suddenly, there arose a new race of men who could accomplish mighty deeds with nothing but a thought from his mind, and they could do incredible works. Then, the land became divided. Those who had the power of the Dragon opposed

those who were evil. The men who were truly good and pure in their hearts could see that the evil men used dark powers. They could see that the dark powers were envious of the Dragon and his descendants, and tried to copy his power, resulting in a twisted, flawed abominable imitation of the powers of good.

The descendants of the Dragon tried to teach the world what was right, and that the evil men had only the powers of darkness, and not the power of the Dragon. But many people were deceived by the evil men, and began to follow them.

From among the evil men arose horrible creatures. The descendants of the Dragon gave them names that revealed their blasphemous nature. Witches, Maerwulfs, and hundreds more roamed the earth, seeking to capture all into their snares.

It took many years, but the Dragon's descendants were finally able to hold back the powers of evil from the hearts of many men. By their doctrine, the earth was cleansed again.

"But," Fernand held up a finger, "this history has been lost through the ages. There are few who believe it now. For many years it has been widely believed throughout our kingdom that the Dragon was the only being ever to have any type of magical power, and that he Sealed all mankind from ever being able to use the power again.

"It is believed that magic is evil, and that anyone who uses it is a witch, and does so in blasphemy."

Fernand leaned forward, looking directly into Borin's eyes.

"What do you believe?"

Borin thought for a long while. Thoughts swirled around his mind in confusion. Why would Fernand be telling him this? The history sounded somewhat familiar, although it sounded more like his childhood bedtime stories or legends than actual history. Was Fernand telling him this because he himself was a witch?

Borin shook the thought away. He didn't believe Fernand was capable of doing such a thing. It was impossible.

He tried to gather his thoughts. He had been taught that magic did not exist. And, of course, it didn't. But that was not Fernand's question. He asked whether he believed magic was evil or not. It was a much more difficult question to answer.

"If magic existed," said Borin slowly, "I suppose ... I suppose it would be something like a human. We are capable of both evil and good, so I think that magic, if there is such a thing, would have potential for both evil and good."

Fernand leaned slowly back in his chair, an impressed look on his face, along with a kind smile.

"That is an excellent response," he said, and a fire lit his eyes as he looked Borin over with pride.

"If I had told that to anyone else in this city, or had asked that question ..." Fernand shook his head sadly, "they would have burned me for blaspheming."

Borin's mouth fell open in shock.

"No! But ... magic doesn't exist, anyway, does it?"

Fernand sighed.

"Borin, what I am about to reveal to you will frighten you. You may run from this place thinking you've gone mad." Fernand reached across the table, a beseeching look in his eyes. "Please believe me when I tell you, Borin. Magic is real."

Borin sat back in his chair, gazing intently at the man. His eyes were filled with wisdom and light. He had heard the old man countless times say the most kind and benevolent words of love and comfort. He was a sage voice, a voice of wisdom and purity.

It was difficult for Borin to do it, but he looked directly into Fernand's eyes, and although something inside him begged him not to do it, he nodded.

Fernand nodded back. Leaning forward, he held up his hand in the middle of the table, his palm open and his fingers relaxed.

Fire burst from the middle of his palm.

Borin yelled and nearly fell backward off his chair. Steadying himself, he stared at the flames that licked around Fernand's skin. It looked just like any other fire, except that it sat in the old man's hand, licking at the space between his fingers and dancing upward.

With the fire still in his hand, Fernand spoke.

"Borin, I was born with the ability to control fire. I cannot be burned by the sun or by any other fire, no matter its heat. I can cause fire to burn without a candle or wood. I was born this way, Borin." The fire in his hand extinguished. Fernand leaned forward.

"Am I an abomination?" he whispered, his eyes honest and his voice earnest. "Am I a blasphemy, or a heresy?"

Borin didn't know what to say. He couldn't keep his eyes on the old man's face, which shone alight with passionate fire. He remembered the old preacher when he came to the workers with trays of food, a smile glowing on his face. He saw Fernand's kind eyes in his mind when he remembered the way the kindly man gave food to the poor, comforted the family of someone who had died, and the way he went about doing good things simply because he loved the people.

Fernand seemed to read his expression and leaned back into his chair.

"When I was young, just a small lad, I would visit my grandmother," he said quietly, turning his head to stare out the window. "She would sing to me and we would play with the fire together. She could use it, as well."

Borin knew his face was full of shock, but he listened intently.

"She told me the stories of the Dragon. She told me the true history of magic. She assured me that I was not an abomination." He let

his chin fall down to his chest for a moment, and Borin thought he could see a tear trickle down his face.

“She taught me how to use my gifts properly, and promised that all people would be able to use them freely one day.”

Fernand turned to look directly into Borin’s eyes.

“The King hunts those who use magic. Anyone caught in this blasphemy will be considered a traitor. Such a person will be executed.”

Borin gulped hard.

“Why are you telling me all of this?” he whispered.

Fernand nodded, looking out the window for a moment before bringing his eyes back to Borin’s.

“Paul Ferrin is not dead,” he said. “He is sleeping now, and all his color is returned. But what happened to him was no natural malady.” Borin held his breath. “He has been poisoned by a witch.”

Fernand flipped through the books he gathered on the table.

“I know almost nothing about witches,” he said calmly as he stroked the pages. “But I do know that the witch will use potions and poisons to gain absolute control over her victims.”

He looked up.

“I know this is too much for you to take in all at once, Borin,” he said, his old face bursting with sympathy. Borin couldn’t mistake the tear that rolled down his cheek.

“You are in danger, my young friend. It is possible ...” he splayed his fingers over his books, his eyes scanning them calmly. “... it is possible that she may try to gain control over you. We must not let that happen.”

Borin hung his head, staring at the floor. He felt numb. Fernand was right; it was much too heavy for him to take it all in. Witches

and blasphemy, magic ... it was all real, according to Fernand. Apparently, some people believed it to be heresy, or blasphemy, or abomination, or all of them at once. But yet here Fernand was with his ... ability – a perfect antithesis to that belief.

He asked Fernand to show him the fire again, just to be sure he wasn't imagining it. The hearth at the end of the room burst into flame with a wave of Fernand's hand. With a wink, he made all the candles in the room burst into light, then made their little flames jump from one candle to another, changing color as they went. He spelled Borin's name in fire in midair with blue flames tinged with gold at the edges.

Borin hardly felt it could be possible. And yet, there it was, directly before him in the clear light of day. He wanted with all he was to believe Fernand, but there were several questions that still puzzled him. He turned to Fernand, who extinguished his magical flames immediately.

"There are some things I don't understand," Borin said slowly. He cast about the room, looking for the right words. "How do you know that this ... woman I saw was a witch? I mean, she could have been anyone, couldn't she?"

Borin stood, his arms wrapped around his chest, pacing as he spoke. He tried desperately to keep all his thoughts in order as hundreds of questions spilled through his mind.

"Why would people try to kill you if they knew you have this ... power? I've never heard of magic being a blasphemy before. This power should be ... I don't know ..."

Fernand took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before responding.

"It might be possible that the smaller villages throughout the kingdom – especially those this far north – would not have heard the declarations or seen the drawings. So it is little wonder that you have not heard of witch hunts."

Fernand reached into a book, pulling out a folded paper from its pages. He held it out to Borin. When Borin opened it, the paper revealed awful drawings of an old hag, bent and hobbling. An inscription beneath it made his mouth open in shock.

Public Service: Announcement

Magic user seen wandering the streets of Hansgaard.

Considered Highly Dangerous; Kill On Sight.

Borin looked up from the paper.

“I have never seen anything like this,” he whispered. Fernand nodded sadly.

“As for your other question, I know that the woman you saw was a witch. When those lads took Karra to the infirmary in the cathedral, I went to Paul Ferrin’s bedroom straight away.”

Fernand shook his head, closing his eyes.

“It was terrible. He looked very dead. But when I looked, I found something under his bed.”

Putting a hand into the deep pocket of his robe, he pulled out a wooden box the size of a man’s fist, setting it on the table. When he opened it, Borin let out a gasp.

Within the tiny box was a black, oozing ball. Its oily surface didn’t allow the light from the windows to reflect from it, but absorbed the light, snuffing it out. The ball pulsed as it sat in the box. It was as if a tiny, black heart was beating, thump, thump, thump. Borin looked away as bile rose in his throat.

Fernand closed the lid.

“What is that?” Borin whispered.

Fernand shook his head. He lifted the box carefully, then tossed it into the air. Borin reached for it with a yelp, but before he could

touch it, the box burst into white flames that held it suspended in the air.

The old man's face was sad as he stood from the table. He turned and walked away from the burning box as it floated in the air, burning until nothing was left to burn.

"Only something evil, like a witch, would use potions and poisons like that," said Fernand as he returned to his seat.

Borin sat down as well, fearing he would fall over in a dead faint if he didn't.

"What do we do?" he breathed, still staring at the spot where the black thing had hung burning in the air.

Fernand shook his head.

"I don't know," he whispered back. "But one thing is certain."

He took a book from the table, pushing it in Borin's direction. He pointed to a paragraph for him to read. Borin said the poetic words aloud.

*From wind and moon it turns with fright,
and yet it's power burns dark in night.

With Poison it will turn the sun;
your soul, now hers, shall end in one.*

*Fear to hunt this creature black;
though brave you be, yet wisdom lack.
For none can turn from its dark eye,
for all who face a witch shall die.*

Borin shivered when he finished the passage.

"Tonight," said Fernand, his gravelly voice low and grave, "you must be careful. If the witch knew you saw her, she may try to overtake you as well. Be on your guard."

“What will I do?” Borin whispered shakily.

Fernand’s eyes softened.

“The passage says that her powers are dark at night.” He sighed with a worried expression. “I do not know what will happen. But I think you should not sleep tonight. With her powers stronger at night, she may try to overtake you. Your greatest chance to live will be to stay awake.”

Borin looked down at the passage.

“*... none can turn from its dark eye ...*” he read.

Fernand gazed at him, looking weary and old.

Oaths

It must have been hours later when Borin left. Fernand had promised him that he could stay in the cathedral for safety. When the young man began to turn pale with worry, Fernand sent him to his shop to keep his mind occupied on his table project.

He spent nearly the remainder of the day in the library searching through all the books about witches and evil magic. They were mostly very old stories and songs of the legends of the Dragon or Herestripe Wakesbore as they battled the powers of darkness. There was very little in the books about how evil magic worked or how to overcome it. He wondered whether such books ever existed, or whether the king had destroyed them years before.

He poured through the books for most of the day, binding bundles of notes on witches together in a small book he could carry in his pocket, just in case he wanted any of the information in a hurry.

When he finished, he stared out the windows sadly, thinking about what this would mean for the city. He thought about the people he loved so well, and how much this would affect them. He thought of

the people whose fear would destroy them if they knew, or if they fell victim to the witch's power. He pictured the faces of mothers hunching protectively over their children from a hulking, black figure coming closer and closer to them in the darkness. He thought of the men, young and old, who would either cower at the witch's cruelty or rise to face it. He knew that the witch could likely destroy them all.

It was probably among them, hiding in the shadows. It most likely could change its physical appearance; otherwise, they would have all been eradicated long ago ...

Unless, Fernand realized with a jolt, a witch could be *created*. His breath caught in his throat. Is *that* what it wanted? Did it want to make more witches out of his people?

He imagined wives crying and babes wailing as fathers were ripped from their arms and forced to do the witch's bidding. For one awful moment, he could see Gerwynsted in flames, crushed under the power of the evil creature that lurked somewhere in its dark corners.

Fire rose in Fernand's heart. It burned hot and furious in his chest. He would defend his people. He would risk everything – even death or worse – so that the people he had labored with for so long would be safe. Their faces flashed across his mind, and tears spilled freely down his cheeks. If he had to die in order to take the witch down with him, so be it.

"I vow that I will do everything within my power to defend the city of Gerwynsted from the powers of evil."

The words came unbidden from his lips, but he felt them with every fiber of his being.

"I will use all the power I possess for the good of these people. And I will defend them from this monster that seeks to destroy them."

As the last syllable left Fernand's lips, something happened. It felt as if he were being lifted off his feet and carried away by an enormous,

strong hand. The library around him disappeared, replaced by a peaceful, white fog.

*Am I dying? * he wondered. He certainly hoped not – his people needed his help, and he couldn't bear to think what would happen if he wasn't where he ought to be to protect them. His candle had time more to burn; he couldn't leave Gerwynsted defenseless.

He watched as the library and everything he knew was shrouded from view by a dense fog.

The fog lifted, and Fernand found himself standing in a meadow.

Looking around, he saw that the sun hung overhead but seemed somehow dimmer than usual – it glowed no brighter than the full moon. But although the light was dim, the meadow was still beautiful, nonetheless. Surrounded by trees on every side, the grass swayed in a gentle, warm breeze. A small stream gurgled its way happily through the grass before winding its way into the trees.

“Hello, Fernand.”

Whirling around, he faced the person who had spoken.

The man who stood before Fernand was dressed in white from the collar of his neck to just above his bare ankles and feet, and his wide sleeves reached his wrists. He was handsome – his dark hair was well-trimmed and obviously well groomed. They stood at the edge of the meadow, with the tall trees standing straight as sentinels behind the man in white.

“Hello,” said Fernand brightly with a smile. The man smiled widely back.

“My name is Charles. Welcome to Andreverden!” The man raised his arms, his smile wide as he looked around him in admiration of the landscape.

“You have been sent here for a very specific purpose, Fernand. A few moments ago you were standing in your library, and you

made an oath. You promised that you would defend the people of Gerwynsted from the witch and the evil it spreads.” Charles’s smile widened. “Here in Andreverden, you will be given skills and powers that will help you in this fight. As you learn to make your way through Andreverden, you will learn what you must know to help in your fight against the witch.

“Andreverden is very different from your world,” he continued. “All those who come to this place must have with them the keys that allow them to come. Otherwise, you will not find your feet, and you soon will be lost forever here, never to return to your own land.”

The man stepped closer to Fernand, gently pressing something into his palm. It was the most beautifully crafted artifact which Fernand had ever seen. It looked something like keys on a ring, but they were made of some sort of very fine material that he never had seen before. It was almost like glass, but it was ... purer somehow. The ring was perfectly transparent and harder than the best steel, and the keys it bore were connected to it through a hole at their tops.

The first key was shaped similarly to the skeleton key Fernand used to lock up the cathedral. It had a round shaft with a square end that was cut into a complicated pattern for its teeth. Gold lettering was embossed across its shaft that read “Andreverden.”

The second key didn’t look anything at all like an actual key. Its surface was nearly crystalline, like the ring and the key to Andreverden, but it was more opaque, almost white. Unlike any other key Fernand had ever seen, its surface seemed to change even as he watched it. Its shaft seemed to mold simultaneously between a mixture of square and round, and its head somehow was both smooth and toothless while also bearing spiked, protruding teeth that jutted straight out of the shaft. The teeth somehow seemed to be there at one moment, then appeared to rotate around the edge of the shaft’s end, then disappear. It was rather like watching steam rise; one moment it would be there, the next it would move away

and vanish. Like the first key, its surface was also embossed with gold lettering, reading “The Eye.”

Although the ring bore no other keys, somehow Fernand felt he could sense that the ring was meant to bear more keys, as if there was more to what he saw than he could even comprehend. Gingerly, he placed the keys to Andreverden and The Eye in his pocket, unsure of their meaning or which doors they might be meant to open.

“Thank you,” he said happily to the man in white. The man smiled back.

The scene was extremely odd. One moment, Fernand was standing in the library of the cathedral, thinking of ways he could defeat the witch, and the next he was in a strange land, speaking to a man in white.

There are moments and times that may come during the lifetime of a human being when the feeling that came across Fernand then comes to them. Some people never feel the feeling quite so poignantly as Fernand did at that exact moment. The feeling has a name, as all feelings do, but no words can adequately describe the sense of serenity, calm, understanding, and peace that wafted gently through his mind, like the calming waves of the sea lapping on the shores of his heart.

As tiny babes, every human being has been comforted by someone – a mother or grandmother, father or grandfather, or another caregiver. Some unfortunate babes never have the privilege to have a caring parent who imparts this incredible feeling. It is beyond a sense of security, more than serenity or calm; it is deeper than love, and is freer than the soaring clouds. Peace. Peace is the name of the emotion, but there is much deeper and more profound a meaning to the emotion Fernand felt. It was as if he were a child again, and his mother or grandmother of his childhood was pressing him against her bosom, offering the best comfort she could provide.

To Fernand, it was as if a great intelligence had granted him with the understanding that all would be well, and that the man in white was someone to be trusted.

It would have been utterly confusing and even unnatural for any bystander who did not feel the same emotions experienced by Fernand to imagine themselves doing what Fernand did at that moment. It would have felt strange, as though they were walking off the edge of a precipice. And indeed, as Fernand began taking in the scene of the meadow, and began to feel a sense of respect and trust for the man dressed in white whom he never met previously, he was, in a way, jumping off the edge of comfort.

But Fernand knew, as he took a great risk and trusted that all would be well and that the man in white was trustworthy, that jumping off the precipice of comfort would not end poorly. Somehow, the incredible feeling of peace assured him that he was not falling to his death from the precipice of comfort, but that Fernand would find stable ground again, unharmed.

To Fernand, it was a familiar emotion, but one he had not ever felt quite as poignantly as at that moment. Peace filled his heart and lifted his spirits, and he felt more alive and healthy than he had in years. Somehow the tiny weight of the keys in his pockets lifted something of the burden of age from his shoulders, and he felt the way he had when he and Winifred were just recently wed many years before.

He studied the man in white for a moment, calm.

“What is your name?” He tried to ask it as politely as he could, but his confusion was obvious in his voice.

The man didn’t seem to mind, smiling widely.

“My name is Charles,” he said kindly. “I will be your guide here in Andreverden. I am sent here to teach you many lessons you must learn as you proceed. These lessons will help you in your life that you live in Gerwynsted; they will help you defend your people

against the witch that you have vowed to fight, and they will help you find your way through Andreverden."

"Well then," said Fernand brightly, the warm peace in his heart glowing brighter, assuring him that he was making the correct decision. "Let us proceed."

Charles taught Fernand that he could not travel in Andreverden as he could travel normally in the real world.

"If you try to use your feet, you will travel very far from here," Charles explained, "and I won't be able to find you for many years!"

Charles taught him to imagine that a gigantic pair of hands were lifting him at the waist and carrying him from one place to another. It took what felt like hours of hard work, but Fernand finally was able to master the ability.

At Charles's instruction, Fernand was able to drift around the entire meadow, his toes skimming the tips of the grass. He could lift himself high into the air and soar like a bird over the tree tops. It made his heart lift and nearly sing in glorious joy.

Time seemed to change while Fernand was in Andreverden. He used his gigantic Hands to pick wildflowers and make a lovely bouquet, one he knew Winifred would have loved. The smile spread across his face was so intoxicating that he felt as if his entire body was beaming.

It might have been several years or only a few moments. Charles and Fernand flew across the landscape together, enjoying what little beauty could be seen in the dim light. Vague thoughts drifted across Fernand's mind. He thought Charles might have seemed familiar somehow ...

Finally, they took some time to lie in the grass in the middle of the meadow, looking up at the sky and watch the dimly lit clouds drift by.

Fernand closed his eyes, imagining himself drifting up there among

the clouds – not like a bird, but like a wisp of cloud floating over the earth. For a moment it nearly felt as if his body were actually about to drift upward and onward ...

“No, Fernand!” said Charles’s voice from far away. “You’re drifting away from me. Come back!”

Fernand’s eyes snapped open, and his body seemed to slam back into the earth.

“What happened?”

Charles explained calmly, losing none of his serenity. Whenever the man spoke, Fernand could tell that there was a certain ancient wisdom within the man, as if he had lived over a million years in over a thousand lifetimes. Charles seemed unaffected by the strangely intoxicating peace and happiness that seemed to pour from every inch of Andreverden. Fernand felt certain he would have been lost long ago if it weren’t for Charles.

“You were drifting away from me,” he said patiently. “When you fall asleep in Andreverden, you go to a place Between this world and your world, a place called Sonyestad. Sonyestad is a very dangerous place, a place I cannot follow you. Here in Andreverden you are safe with me, for Andreverden is a place of learning and instruction. Here, you can be lost, but you cannot die. In Sonyestad, your soul could be killed, and you would be lost forever.”

Charles got to his feet, reaching a hand out to Fernand to help him up. Fernand was surprised to feel that his bones did not creak or protest in pain as he rose.

As if Charles could understand what he was thinking, the man pulled a mirror from within his white robe, turning it to Fernand’s face. In surprise, Fernand saw that he was young again, perhaps no older than twenty-five. His skin was smooth, and his back was straighter than ever. He smiled at Charles, who smiled back as he returned the mirror to his robes.

“Here in Andreverden, there is no age, there is no death, and there is no disease. We simply live. All who come here to Andreverden are equal. Those who come with the keys, as you have, are given the right to be guided through Andreverden as you seek to learn.”

They stood there for several moments, Charles politely enjoying the scenery while Fernand processed everything. He looked down, and discovered that his body was also covered in a white robe, though it didn’t shine quite as brilliantly as Charles’s.

After what must have either been seconds or hours, Charles finally spoke again.

“Your time here is running short, my friend. There is one more lesson you must learn before you return to Gerwynsted to fight the witch.”

Fernand nodded – he remembered the witch. But it felt almost like remembering a dream that he had hundreds of years before.

“When you return to your own land, no time will have passed, so you needn’t worry.” Charles gave a reassuring smile, which made his entire body glow a little brighter. “By the time you return, you will have learned the skills you need to learn and travel here in Andreverden, and you will learn how to return here from your own land, if you need it. You will also be able to use the power you have gained here in the battle against the witch.”

Fernand nodded, but he didn’t quite understand. Charles continued.

“This one last lesson will teach you how to go to the place called the Spare. The Spare is a place inside of your own mind. It is also a place of discovery, learning, and also memory. When you leave here, you will be able to access the Spare from Andreverden or also from your own world.

“When you travel to the Spare, you are falling inward,” Charles went on. “The Spare is a place inside of you.” Charles drifted behind Fernand. “I will place my hands on your shoulders, and you must allow yourself to fall back.”

Fernand nodded as he felt Charles's hands on his shoulders.

"One ... two ... three!"

The dim world of Andreverden seemed to disappear as if Fernand were falling backward into a hole. He seemed to be falling far away from it, the hole leading to Andreverden shrinking smaller and smaller before disappearing completely. It was strange to see the dim light of Andreverden replaced by a much brighter light as Fernand fell backward.

As he looked around him, he saw that he was standing in an enormous garden, with hedges cut into amazing shapes, and trees of every color of leaves and flowers blooming all around him. He stood in what must have been the center of the garden on a grassy, stone path that wound its way between rows of hedges, clumps of flowers, and every other kind of beautiful vegetation. The light above him was much brighter than the dim sun of Andreverden, and the colors were so much more vibrant.

Fernand looked around to see Charles standing behind him, beaming. Fernand smiled back, joy filling him with every passing moment. He laughed and walked along the path, the trees and hedges bordering his way.

Every plant was cut into a different design or animal. There were bushes that looked like lizards, the side of a tall hedge that had goats cut into it in the middle of their play. Another short hedge was cut in the shape of the shore of the sea, with the waves lapping up onto the beach. One tree was cut into the shape of an enormous eagle in flight, with the tree's trunk reaching through one wing tip and sprouting out of the other, as if the eagle were soaring in a deep bank. Another tree had a herd of horses in mid stride, while turtles almost seemed to come alive in a bush below it.

Suddenly, Fernand wondered if he could still use the Hands Charles had taught him to use in Andreverden. To his delight, a gigantic Hand wrapped around his waist and lifted him high into the air.

Fernand laughed in excitement as his sight showed that the garden was endless in every direction.

Beaming with joy, Fernand faced the sun and shot toward it. Somehow, he didn't need to shade his eyes. As he got closer to the sun, he realized that it wasn't a sun at all, but a gigantic chandelier floating high above the garden. The structure was magnificent, with completely transparent, teardrop-shaped crystals floating, unsuspended in the air. Each crystal floated independently; no wire connected them together. The light the chandelier exuded came from no candle; it was as if each crystal had a tiny sun at its center, and together they shone brightly.

"The gift of light," said Charles, floating beside Fernand. "Within each of us is a gift from the Source – a light that guides our way, and is naturally given to each of us. Your light is very bright, Fernand."

Fernand turned to see tears filling Charles's eyes. Admiration and the pride of a parent for his most obedient child shone through Charles's face. Had Fernand seen Charles before?

Together, they drifted back down to the garden's center. It filled Fernand with so much happiness to see all the animals cut into their bushes or trees that he couldn't help but laugh out loud again.

This time as he laughed, the creatures cut in the vegetation sprang to life. The soaring eagle on the tree swooped in place, and landed on one of its own tree branches. The horses cantered to a halt in another tree, staring down at Fernand in regal curiosity. The goats in the middle of one hedge jumped and played, sometimes disappearing completely before reemerging with their head or rump poking out of the bush. The ocean water lapping on the shore of one hedge washed crustaceans and little starfish onto its shore, and leafy water dripped down its sides. The lizards of one plant scurried off their bush and into the safety of a large spruce tree, hiding in its dense needles. The bush that the lizards vacated was repopulated immediately by a bale of turtles, each no larger than Fernand's fist,

with their leafy little shells decorated with pink, purple, orange, and red flowers.

Fernand laughed as he ran, almost feeling like a schoolboy again as he watched the animals run among the branches and leaves from bush to tree. None of the animals were made of anything more than branches, leaves, or flowers, and none of them could leave the domain of the bushes and plants, but it made them no less real to Fernand. He watched fish swim from hedge to hedge, deer jump from tree to tree, birds fly from bush to bush, and he even saw what must have been a whale jump out of leafy water from a grove of trees a short distance away from where he stood.

Soon, Charles came to him.

“It is time for me to leave,” he said sadly. “Since this is the inside of your mind, no one can come here without your permission. Everything here is within your power to control or change, if you want. But I cannot linger long, and we must return to Andreverden, so you may learn your one last lesson.”

Fernand nodded, and they returned to the center of the garden together.

“The Spare is available to you whenever you wish it. The time you spend here in the Spare will also pass in your world. An hour here is an hour there. While you are here, however, your body will not be found anywhere in your world until you return. You came here by Falling Backward, therefore you may return by Falling Forward.”

Fernand nodded. He could almost feel his newfound ability to enter and exit the Spare, as if it were a part of him all along that he only remembered how to use once again.

“Now you much learn to return to Andreverden,” Charles went on calmly.

Charles showed him how to put the Hands with the palms facing Fernand’s sides with the fingers together and pointing straight toward the sky. Then Fernand placed the Palms on his sides.

“Now,” said Charles as he moved to Fernand’s right. “I will place my hands on your right shoulder, and I want you to use your Hands to Step Left into Andreverden.”

With Charles’s help, Fernand watched as a sort of oval hole opened at his left, revealing the way to Andreverden. It was an odd moment as he looked into the dimly lit meadow through the oval hole, then look back into the Spare and watch the animals frolic upon the plants. Then he and Charles pushed, and Fernand Stepped Left through the oval opening.

Although the light was dimmer in Andreverden, the feeling of peace and joy was even more palpable than in the Spare. Fernand awaited calmly, looking over the meadow and enjoying the peaceful feeling before Charles spoke behind him, and he turned to face the man.

“You have learned everything you have come here to learn!” said Charles happily, his body glowing brightly with joy. “You have the skills to need to return to Andreverden, enter the Spare, and return to your own world. Also, if you look in your pocket, you will find another key added to your ring.”

Fernand almost forgot about the key ring Charles had given him. He pulled it out of his pocket, surprised to see that a third key was attached to it.

The key was unlike anything Fernand had ever seen. It looked almost as if a piece of waterfall had been trapped inside of a glass vial. Something that might have been silvery water flowed from the end of the key where it attached to the ring, through the round shaft, and to its end. Instead of teeth at its tip like the other two keys, this key’s end twisted and curled in a complicated pattern, ending with a slightly rounded tip. Even when the tip was held toward the sky, the silver substance – Fernand couldn’t tell if it was on or in the key – flowed from its end to its tip. Along the shaft, written in golden, connected, flowing script, it read “The Flow.”

“These keys will help you in your fight of evil, Fernand,” said

Charles. For once his face dropped, and Fernand thought Charles might have been sad that their time together was coming to an end. “These keys are yours, and no power, nor man, nor beast, nor evil being can take them away from you.

“Before you came here, you were standing in your library. You made a very sacred oath to defend your people from this witch.”

Fernand nodded; he remembered making that oath.

“It was that oath that brought you here, Fernand. And now you will leave here equipped to defend your people from the evil that they face.”

Tears were filling Charles’s eyes. As Fernand looked closer, he could see that Charles’s face was filled with that parental admiration and pride again, along with a bit of worry.

“It is time for you to return,” said Charles, his voice breaking.

Fernand’s eyes filled with tears as well as he raised his hands, placed them on his sides, and watched an oval opening appear to his right.

“Charles?”

The man in white smiled in response.

“Is any of this real?”

Charles nodded.

Fernand Stepped Right, through the oval opening and back into the library.

Touching the keys he had replaced into his pocket, he slid through the oval opening and back into Reality. He felt peaceful and serene as the hole closed beside him. He felt into his pockets for the extraordinary keys, wanting to study them in better light. They were gone.

The Graveyard

Borin's day went by in a blur after he left Fernand's library. He hardly noticed what he was doing as he sharpened his tools for the third time and went over his inventory of supplies, plans, and other necessities for the fourth time. He couldn't stop seeing Fernand's face in his head, telling him that magic was real, or the fire as it jumped from candle to candle, or when the fire spelled his name in blue and gold flames, or when it burst into life in the hearth. He knew his life would never be the same again.

If what Fernand said was true, there were many people throughout the kingdom who knew about, despised, and hunted witches. Although the king was getting old, his young son was showing that he was not an heir apparent to be ignored. Borin knew that the young prince would follow in his father's footsteps. There would be no hope for people like Fernand. But even more troubling was his fear of what would happen if the witch found him that night.

There are moments of dread which all human beings face. Master craftsmen throughout the ages have faced the dread of informing an employer that he has not yet completed the task for which he was hired, even though he was hired to do it in plenty of time. There are many forms of dread, including the dread of a man or woman facing an angry spouse or parents-in-law. However, few people in civilized countries experience the dread and horror of waiting for an enemy to strike. Unknown to history are the stories of men and women locked in cages or trapped with no escape from the maniacal fury of the assassin or the monster. Men have bunked next to other men, waiting for the moment when the man on either the left or the right will suddenly strike with a knife in the dead of night. Few people have felt the horrible anticipation of awaiting that death. In some worlds there are prisons filled with horrors designed to call forth this awful fear in the criminals it contains. Insects crawl on the skin of some of these prisoners as they lie chained, naked, to the floor of a wet cell, driven mad by months of solitude and the steady

drip, drip, drip, of water falling from the ceiling, awaiting and even anticipating with hope the moment when the killing strike will fall and the waiting will end. Some of the most unimaginable terrors are present and living within the realm of what is capable to be done by human hands. None but the prisoner chained, naked, to the floor, with insects of all manner crawling on their skin and water dripping from the ceiling, driving them mad with the anticipation of the guillotine, the ax, or the rope can imagine what heart-stopping terror grips the man who awaits his own demise.

But none of these terrors and fears, anticipation, or physical and emotional torture can compare to Borin's awful dread that wrenched through him all that day. There are many among the human race who believe that magic is far from real, and a laughably irrational fear to harbor. But for Borin, what was irrational became rational while speaking with the preacher Fernand. He had seen with his own eyes that magic was, contrary to his own previous beliefs, real and present in reality, and a force to be reckoned with. Transcending the rationalization that he had imagined Fernand's magic, was the anticipation of the chained prisoner and the same helpless hopelessness felt by victims of torture and murder experienced by, hopefully, few in number among the human race throughout the ages.

A witch, one with power and magic beyond comprehension, was going to find Borin. And there was nothing he could do about it but keep himself awake all night long.

Jumping up from a stool in the front section of his shop, he closed the front window and door. He crossed the room, stepping around his extra benches and boxes full of tools on his way to the back room, which was filled with the enormous wooden table. He replaced his papers and other documents in a cabinet on the wall, and returned to survey the front part of the shop.

The front shop was originally meant to be a sort of vending place. It had shelves for displaying sale items lining the walls and a large

counter with a strong box for counting money. But since it was no longer used for commerce, Borin now used it for storage since the back room was larger and therefore better equipped for carpentry.

A set of stairs to Borin's right, opposite the counter, led to his room. It was a small, cramped space with hardly any room for anything other than a bed and a small chest of drawers, but it did have a fireplace adequate for cooking soup or tea, and it did have a frame for a spit – although there wasn't space enough for even a turkey. But it did its job, and the bed was soft and comfortable. The thought of going to bed was too tempting for him to resist. Besides, he had at least twelve hours of daylight left before he would need to awaken and avoid the witch.

Borin's muscles ached from feeling so worried, and his body screamed for rest. So, he climbed the stairs to his room, drew the shutters over the window, and threw himself on the bed, falling asleep almost instantly.

When twilight came, Borin had already risen and was working on his table. He felt significantly better about the witch and the magic. He still could not deny that what Fernand taught him and showed him about magic was real, but he felt he may not be in any danger at all. The woman he saw the night before hadn't seen Borin looking out his window, after all. Perhaps he was safer than Fernand thought. The old man admitted to not knowing much at all about witches – it was perfectly reasonable to think that the witch had no idea that Borin even existed, and likely did not care. He concluded that this was the case, and went on with his work on the table.

Master Gerwyn's master carpenter Harald was a strong man in his mid-thirties, and when one of the talent scouts searching for craftsmen had knocked on Borin's door in his little village some miles from Gerwynsted, Borin was only too happy to accept the invitation to work under Harald. The man had an excellent reputation, having both speed, skill, and quality in every project. Borin had heard and been inspired by the stories of Harald being capable of working on

seven heavy projects at once and being able to finish them all.

Borin's eagerness to please Harald and impress him with his carpentry was what led Borin to climb to the lofty position of assistant master carpenter. Borin had proven himself over the last several months to have gentler carpentry hands and greater speed than most of the other carpenters, which was why he was granted by Harald – and, by extension, Master Gerwyn – to live and work in the best and most conveniently located carpentry shop in Gerwynsted. All the others had to make due with smaller establishments or even work out of their own kitchens. It made Borin swell with pride to know that his work was appreciated and that all his training hadn't been in vain or gone unnoticed.

Setting to work on the table once more, he fell into a rhythm of carving, cutting, smoothing, then shaping, drawing, and comparing his work with the plans he'd been given to follow. Drawing, carving, cutting, shaping, comparing, adjusting, smoothing. Soon, all his thoughts and worries about everything else escaped his mind, and he focused intensely on the wood.

He started with the outer part of the table legs and worked his way into the wide table's edge. Here, the pattern became extremely intricate and complex, and he needed the plans in front of him constantly to be sure he was doing it correctly. The designs and their delicate intricacy and the accuracy with which he needed to carve them, combined with the depth that was required for most of the designs was only part of what made the project so difficult. Additionally, the hardness of the wood, along with the sheer size of the table made it horribly difficult to finish a project as quickly as demanded. Borin allowed his deadline to help motivate his strokes and cuts, but also allowed his enjoyment of the task to carry him off into a steady, almost listless rhythm. He became one with his tools, allowing them to become part of his hands and arms as he worked his way into a particularly stubborn knot.

Without warning, pain exploded through his head with such force

that he fell backward, cutting his hand on one of his tools as he hit the floor, hard. His head was splitting in two, as if the entire weight of his enormous table had fallen on him from a great height. He took calming breaths as he struggled to his feet. He could feel whatever was left in his stomach rising as the pain throbbed with his heart beat.

Awful pain ripped through his head again, and he fell to his hands and knees. His vision blurred. He could feel the force of his scream in his throat but his ears seemed to have gone deaf. He looked behind him, for surely someone was there with a saw, hacking through his skull. He staggered on hands and knees toward the front shop where he knew he could find water. Perhaps that was all he needed – a cup of cool, refreshing ...

His head surely must have been ripped open through the bone, and must have shattered to bits as what must have been lightning struck his brain and coursed through his entire body. His throat was raw from screaming, but he couldn't hear it; his sight was completely gone, replaced by an endless blackness that surrounded him on every side.

The pain ceased.

Borin looked around, but he could not see anything. He was surrounded on all sides by deeper darkness than any he had ever experienced. He thought he could have reached out and peeled a handful of the blackness out of the air, it was so palpable. It was like walking through thick stew.

Feeling his way through the darkness, he felt dizzy and disoriented. Have I died? he thought wildly. The pain had ceased so suddenly, perhaps the table had fallen on his head after all ...

He called out into the deep, but his voice was swallowed in the darkness as if he had yelled into a pillow. There was no echo, no returning sound. Staggering from left to right in dizziness, he continued onward.

He was afraid, terribly afraid. One moment, he'd been in his shop, the next he was here in a dark ... someplace. Suddenly, his feet hit something in front of him as tall as his knees. Stone, he thought as he bent closer to examine it. It was about five inches thick, made of something like polished marble. He thought he could feel something engraved on it, and when he realized what it was, his eyes widened, bulging out of his head, his mouth open in a silent scream, and his feet were frozen, he couldn't move. His head pounded, but not as hard as his heart. It was a headstone. A headstone engraved with his name.

Chest heaving in panicked breaths, his mind reeled. He wasn't dead, he couldn't be dead; he was just in his shop, just now. His breathing slowed. He must be dreaming ... or perhaps he was sick and delirious. He stood slowly, his breathing returning to normal.

Light seemed to be coming from nowhere and everywhere at once, though it brought no comfort with it. There was no wind, no stars, and no moon, just an eerie, colorless glow that pierced through the darkness. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he could see where he was. A graveyard.

He was at the edge of a field of headstones that stretched on for miles and miles. The field sloped down from his vantage point to rows upon rows of headstones, all differently shaped. Some were standard, only a slab rounded at the top. Some gravestones were statues, grotesquely twisted human bodies with wings or horns. Some statues had too many legs protruding out the back or chest with faces screwed into screams of pain. The panic rose in his chest again. The ground, instead of covered in grass, was blanketed with layer upon layer of black roots that twisted around one another, like a pile of snakes slithering over and across one another.

He ran from the headstone, turning up the hill to find still more graveyard stretching beyond the crest of the shallow hill to a great field bordered by black trees with wet moss that hung down from them in long gray clumps, weighing down the branches. He had

never seen such a thing. It was not right. It felt unnatural.

A dense fog hid the hard carpet of roots underfoot – he tripped as he ran, feeling a hand rising from among the root-covered ground to catch his foot – he fell, screaming. He knew he was dead, knew he would see a gnarled, twisted, skeletal hand rising out of the ground, covered in mud and creeping toward him. He kicked at the thing that had him by the foot, whimpering in panic. As he kicked it away, it broke like a dry twig. With a gasp he saw that what had tripped him hadn't been a hand at all, but an overgrown root. He laid back, heaving a great sigh of relief and calling himself every name of a fool he could think of.

He slowed his breathing as he stood and sat on a gray tomb nearly the size of his table. He sat on the cold stone for what seemed like hours, wishing he could wake up from this awful nightmare in his bed. He thought for a wild moment that if he just closed his eyes, he would disappear from this horrible place and find himself at home sleeping under the table in his shop.

Just as his eyes were about to close, a noise reached his ears, like the sound of breathing escaping with a hoarse hiss from some twisted face far off to his left and down the slope of the hill. He could hear dragging, as if someone were limping in the graveyard toward him, a maimed leg crunching the root-carpeted ground and scraping against headstones as it went. The pounding in his head began again as the breathing grew close, hoarse and slow. He could feel the panic rising like a thousand birds desperate to fly from a cage that kept them prisoner. Someone – or something – chased him.

He turned toward the trees with the grotesque moss at the edge of the graveyard and sprinted toward them, panicked whimpers escaping his lips as the fear, cold as ice and as unforgiving as stone, seeped through him, threatening to freeze his limbs and squeeze the life from his lungs.

With a jolt and a yelp, he fell as a root grabbed at his foot again. His foot twisted as he fell, and he yelled more with desperation

than pain. He struggled against the root for a moment, but when he looked upward, he saw that he sat at the edge of a gravestone statue shaped like a skeleton with bat-like wings that rose high above its head. The statue's dead jaw seemed to curl in a smile or a snarl as it watched, cold and heartless, as Borin struggled. The statue's eyes seemed to suck all hope from his heart.

"Help me, help me," he whispered over and over under his breath.

The cold cackle swept to his ears, and his heart froze. It was as if the thing coming toward him could hear him, and mocked his plea. The cackling grew louder and higher in pitch until it pounded in his ears, louder than a waterfall. The awful sound came from every direction at once. Whatever bravery might have been left in his heart, whatever thought he might have had of escaping through the trees and into the woods, and whatever hope he had to live was dashed to pieces as the cackling pressed harder all around him. The cackle continued to grow until it filled the foggy graveyard.

He fell onto his back. Hope was lost. His heart sank lower and lower until he was afraid that it would cease to beat out of helplessness. Only one thing remained in Borin's mind. *There is no hope.*

Abruptly, the cackling stopped dead as if smothered by a blanket, leaving a ringing in Borin's ears. Sitting up, he squinted nervously down the row of stones for any sign of the source of the voice, trembling uncontrollably as the icy fear bled through his veins again. The thought to tug at the root crossed his mind, but his limbs fell to his sides. Hope was gone. He was going to die. What use was there to fight?

Memories of Borin's life came unbidden to his mind. He thought of his home in the little village. He thought of his mother and how strong she was despite losing her husband early. He pictured her with her brown hair, long down to her shoulders. He could see her smiling face as if she were standing directly in front of him.

Warmth struck a match in his heart, melting the icy fear away. A

tear fell from his eye as he thought of how loving his mother had been, how strong she was. He tugged hard at the root around his foot, one last, desperate effort to escape. He recalled the lessons his mother used to teach him before he would go to bed at night. He remembered a catechism she used to tell him to help him go to sleep. His voice reduced to a croak as he muttered the chant under his breath.

Keep me safe from ill this night, as I strive to do what's right. Evil though its power may be, it cannot hurt, not you, nor me.

Somehow, it seemed to make things *worse*. If anything, he felt even more frightened and panicked, and the throbbing in his head returned with a vengeance, nearly flattening him to his back. He stopped his chant immediately, and the pain seemed to lessen.

At that moment, a dark, hunched shape appeared in the distance at the end of his row of graves. Fear almost ripped his heart to shreds in its grip, and he tugged harder at the root with a strangled yelp. He could hear the hoarse breathing coming closer, could see a pale, skeletal hand clutching a sweeping black cloak to its waist, and another, equally twisted hand at its neck that gripped a black shawl like a dark spider's web around its pale face. A face with black holes instead of eyes. The darkness around him seemed bright against the twin chasms, depths into which he would be trapped forever if he fell into them, never to return.

His muscles froze as he stared, transfixed at the figure as it walked, bent almost double, breathing raggedly, dragging a leg behind it, using the pale hand clutching its cloak to help pull its maimed foot. His eyes wide, pinned to the ground with fear, his heartbeat rose, pounding loudly in his ears. The black thing, its eyes never moving from him, cackled again, rising in pitch to a wail of madness that echoed forever in every direction, loud and long in his ears. The cackle pierced him through his skull, ate and bit at his soul, and threatened to end him permanently, right there where he cowered on the ground. As before, the sound cut off suddenly, smothered.

The creature's twin pits never wavered from him, pinning him to the ground. The figure was only yards away, limping closer and closer, but with an urgency now. His mouth wide in a silent scream, he knew he was going to die. He closed his eyes, every muscle in his body quivering. He tried to control his breathing, but it would not slow. The hoarse rasp of the figure's breath was above him now.

“*Look ... at ... me, *” it whispered between rattling breaths. His instincts screamed to keep his eyes closed, but they shot open. He tried hard to glare at the witch while shivering and shaking beneath her. She made a sound like a laugh that left her mouth in a loud, hoarse whisper. Her hair hung in gray clumps, her face twisted and pale, her face like a rotten apple whose skin had mostly dried. A trickle of greenish-yellow ooze slid down from her left temple, and what was definitely blood dripped down the corner of her left eye and the corner of her mouth, falling unheeded. He jerked as the freezing cold drop of blood from the woman's mouth fell on his arm. He half expected it to burn his flesh, but it was colder and more biting than ice. She looked him up and down, her eyelids wide, twitching her head like a bird, never moving her black pits.

Borin grasped within himself for even the most remote hint of bravery he could find. He found something inside his frozen chest, flickering like a weak flame. He pushed past the ice, finding warmth under it, and saw a dim fire wanting to escape. With a yell, he tore it free, lifting his free foot and kicking it against the woman's stomach. She flew up in the air silently. As if in slow motion, the holes in her skull glared down at him as she flew upward in a tall arch, gray eyebrows furrowed, her bloody mouth curled back in a silent snarl.

The fire licked his insides warmly, lending him strength, and Borin tore violently at the root trapping his foot. The witch twisted with elegance in midair, snarling at him, and Borin paused for a moment in shock to watch her gracefully land on the ground almost slowly, as if landing on some invisible cushion, her black eyes never

leaving him for an instant in her flight. In the blink of an eye, she disappeared some yards away and reappeared inches from his face, her knee pinning his free leg to the root-covered ground, a gnarled white hand groping to squeeze his throat. Ice threatened to swallow the fire within him again as those black eyes withered his resolve and sapped his strength. The awful, wrinkled, waxy face came close enough to touch his cheek, and the green ooze from its skin slipped onto his chin. Panting hoarsely, the woman's hand slowly reached closer and closer to his throat, her odious glare twisting her face more horribly than the scene of the worst nightmarish demons of men's imagination. For several moments, her hand crept closer to his throat as if pushing through an invisible wall. The fire in Borin's chest was whimpering piteously and seemed to shrink smaller as the witch's hand crept closer. He tried to push himself further from her, and whispered:

"Help me, please help me. I can't do it on my own."

The witch's eyebrows flew up, forcing yellow pus from her temple and more blood from her left eye, and was suddenly thrown into the air again by some invisible force. She flew skyward with a bloodcurdling screech, arching toward the upraised stone sword of a statue. Borin tore fiercely again at the root as he watched the woman's falling path suddenly shift unnaturally away from the sword, as if some unseen hand pushed her away from it and into the path again, landing gracefully with surprising strength. The root snapped as he fought with it, and he scrambled to his feet as the woman, her back to him, slowly turned her head, leering angrily with her black, rotten teeth bared at him with those mad, black holes sucking light and hope from all the world, piercing at him from over her shoulder.

Tears of desperation flowing down his cheeks, he yelled wordlessly, tearing through the graveyard and away from the hunched creature. As he drew closer to the trees, he saw that some of the branches and moss created an archway into the blackness beyond. As he came

closer, he heard the witch's scream echoing from every direction as he leapt toward the archway.

Not daring to glance back, he heard footsteps running behind, coming closer and gathering speed. He knew he must make it through that archway, or he would be captured for eternity in the depths of those eyes. He was only yards away when he felt a cold, skeletal hand fumbling for his sleeve. The witch, almost running on his heels, snarled angrily when he jerked his arm away. He yelled wordlessly, desperately running to the archway. Without a backward glance, he jumped with all his might toward it, the witch's livid screams nearly splitting his head as he sank through the shimmering silver air between the arches.

Borin thrashed violently on the floor of the front shop, his leg sprawled on a sawhorse that had been knocked down by his fall. His clothing stuck to his cold, sweat-soaked skin. He clutched his head, which had stopped hurting, feeling soaking hair. His entire body was drenched as if he had jumped in a lake. He remembered the witch vividly, terrified she might be somewhere nearby, and he scrambled to his feet, his heart still pounding as if he truly had been running for his life. The shop was dim, and one quick glance told him no one was nearby, but he checked behind the counter and among his benches, stools, and sawhorses just to be sure. He thoroughly scanned the back shop where the table was, and seeing no one hiding there, nor under the table, he tried to calm his racing heart and stay the icy fear in his veins.

Standing at the door, his hand on the handle, staring out at the dark street, he tried to calm his breathing.

"I believe you, Preacher," he whispered under his breath. He wanted desperately to get away from his house, to find sanctuary from the witch. Tears streamed down his face as he remembered the dark graveyard. Blinking, he wrenched open the door and sprinted across the dark square.

He tore through the door on the right side of the archway of the

cathedral and into the foyer with its tapestries, a pale moonlight casting odd shadows on the walls. He shivered and yelled, almost screamed for the preacher. He had no idea where the man slept. He ran into the assembly hall, thinking there might be a door to a bedroom somewhere behind the podium and pulpit, yelling hoarsely, his body shaking convulsively with fear. He collapsed, exhausted, in the middle aisle in front of the raised pulpit, shaking and sobbing uncontrollably.

He jumped when a gnarled hand gripped him by the arm and lifted him to his feet.

“No! Get away you witch!” he screamed, trying to tear away from the surprisingly strong grip, and nearly hit Fernand in the face, who wore a frightened, concerned expression. Borin sobbed with relief when he realized who it was, sinking to his knees, sobbing uncontrollably. Fernand. Fernand would know, he would help. The old man knelt beside him, a hand on his shoulder, making soothing sounds.

Borin calmed himself enough to begin recounting what had occurred. But Fernand shook his head firmly.

“Borin, there is no need for you to relive that.” He put both hands on Borin’s shoulders, compassion on his face.

“Everything is going to be all right. You are safe, now.”

Relief and calm flooded Borin’s body, starting where Fernand touched his shoulders. The fire in Borin’s chest roared to life and crackled like a warm fireplace as Fernand’s comforting peace rolled through his body in waves. He could feel his icy fear melt away with every passing wave of Fernand’s peace. His breathing instantly calmed, and he sank into Fernand’s arms.

“It’s all right, Borin, she cannot get you now.” He stroked Borin’s hair and patted him gently on the back.

“You are safe,” he whispered.

The two men knelt on the floor of the chapel beneath the pulpit in a paternal embrace. Outside, the waning moon shone protectively over the cathedral like a watchful, pale eye.

Cale opened his eyes. Somehow he had moved from his bed to the inside of his closet. He was laying on the floor, looking up at the few clothes still hanging inside it that hadn't been torn off their hangers in his sleep. The remainder of his clothes were spread all over the room.

He got up with a sigh. The last dream about Borin and Fernand had been confusing, interesting, and terrifying. He looked out the window, which was still dark. The moon, which looked almost identical to the moon in his dream, shone through his window brightly.

The thing that confused him greatly, and even troubled him, was the idea of magic. Cale felt extremely certain that Hunter, Jesse, Borin, Fernand, and Emma all lived nearby one another. It felt as though Fernand and Borin lived somewhere far to the east of where Emma and Hunter lived. And, obviously, the Wixom plantation where Jesse and Stett lived was to the south of McIntyre. And yet, the magic was completely different in each place.

Cale was intelligent enough to realize that magic did not exist. The question was what it symbolized in these dreams. But answering that question was not an easy task, since each location seemed to involve a different form of magic, and seemed to operate on different rules. Borin and Fernand dealt with some kind of magic with which someone could be born. But Hunter dealt with an entirely different type of magic. Kurick Edelbar showed Hunter that magic was able to do just about anything, but Fernand's magic seemed more limited, even archaic, somehow. It was not hard to say whose magic was more powerful, because Kurick's power of

transporting Hunter from the village tavern to the edge of the forest then transforming the night into day, was clearly more powerful and dangerous.

These dreams were not dreams at all. They were visions. Whether they were visions of things that had actually happened, he could not tell. But one thing was certain: they were not dreams created by his mind alone, and they were important, much like lessons he needed to take seriously.

He rubbed his head, plopping back onto his bed. He sighed. There was definitely a lot to remember, even with only three dreams all happening in succession. He was sure that they had some bearing on his life, or some extremely important lesson to be learned. But what was it?

Glossary of names: Section 1

Cale Cale is a brilliant young man who lives in his father's house. His father died some months ago. For some time now, he has been having spectacular dreams.

Emma and Hunter People about whom Cale dreams. Brother and sister, they live together on their farm with their father. Hunter is a troubled teenager and Emma is a concerned sister. Events: Hunter ran away from his father and sister in a surprising outburst. He goes to Savine and Owls, one of the pubs in McIntyre, the nearby village, where he finds a man named Kurick Edelbar. Kurick shows Hunter that magic is real, and Hunter makes the Adventurer's Oath, the same oath made in legends in order to obtain fantastic magical powers.

Jesse and Stett Jesse and Stett are both orphans living on a plantation owned by the Wixom family.