

Kite's Rebellion

an Honors Project submitted by

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Prologue

Bade stubbed his toe against a gnarled ash root and almost fell. The afternoon wind blew leaves across his path. He stared for a moment at the offending tree, then continued onward to crest the hill. From there he would be able to see far. He did not know what he would see, or why he wished to see it, but he had no reason to walk elsewhere. The top of this hill in the middle of the forest seemed to be as good a destination as any. The wind tasted like winter.

The Oreskil mountains rose rough and ragged behind him, but they no longer held any fascination. Life in the foothills was not unpleasant, and most everyone in the village had found some way to live there happily. Though to be fair, none of them had fallen in love with a fickle tramp. He bit down on that thought; no need to rub salt in a wound that will keep. The sun was falling to the horizon off to his right, and shadows were already stretching out lazily over the land. Trees stood over most of the landscape, boughs draped in red and gold, or barren, as the autumn approached its end. He gazed upon the leaves for a moment, then remarked, "If only we could all die so beautifully." He coughed and glanced around him, glad that no one was around to hear that little piece of melodrama.

A bird burst out of the quiet forest. Bade could see it was a kite - too far north. A murder of crows erupted from the trees, chasing the kite. The bird cut and spun, dove to skim the treetops and flared back into the sky, but the black swarm of pursuers followed tightly. His wings bit into the air, ripping left, swirling down. The crows were always there, no matter how fiercely the lone raptor dodged, ripping, tearing, slowing the poor bird down. Blood and feathers floated gently down to the treetops and disappeared beneath. The black cloud of beak and talon did not relent; after a few slow moments the kite fell. He struggled to hold his wings wide, to slow his descent. He landed in a small clearing, that Bade had not seen until that moment. The kite

tumbled across the grass, skidding to a halt amid the year's last wildflowers. Bade could see every detail; little purple petals surrounded the bloody bird. Torn feathers lay scattered between the green stems and soft clover. Blooddrops decorated the field, darkening the sweet blossoms. The crows wheeled above, shrieking their victory to the fading light, and the kite stood up.

The clearing was peaceful, beautiful, a good place to die. Bade thought the bird had chosen well. The bird disappointed him, though. The kite shook itself and glared upwards at the swirling mass of foes. Skin and blood stood bare in patches; Bade did not believe the bird had enough feathers remaining to fly. The kite opened his beak and screamed. The noise was like none Bade knew; not grief, not pain, not anger, not defiance. The scream pierced the long shadows of the trees, the soft petals of the flowers, the filthy black feathers of the crows, the leather tunic on Bade's chest; it seemed to ring off the mountains in the distance, make ripples in the river, stir up the wind - the screech ended with nothing but a bird's cry. The echoes from the mountains could make one hear strange things.

The black cloud of crows hovered over the clearing, taunting the fallen kite with caws of triumph. Each bird seemed to have an individual voice in the cacophony, savoring their prey's last few moments. The kite stood sure and brave, the cool wind ruffling his remaining feathers. The noise from the crows reached a fever pitch, and the victors swooped down to finish their meal. The kite launched himself at the sky like a lightning bolt returning home; the scream returned, and he flashed into the swirling crowd of his enemies. The crows scattered; for a moment. The kite clawed and snapped and buffeted anything he could reach, and none of the black birds wanted to be the first to engage the fury suddenly in their midst. For a moment. After a few second's fear and surprise, the cloud re-formed, this time with the kite in the middle. The whirlwind of flesh and feathers settled slowly in the clearing. The crows' voices returned to

their burning pitch; Bade raced down the hill towards the clearing. Trees and underbrush tore at him as he all but fell downward towards the fallen kite. Bade did not know what drove him to reach the bird - animals devour weaker animals, and humans devour weaker humans. But this one animal deserved more, and Bade could not let an army of crows take a mouthful each of the dark valiant bird. Bade burst into the clearing, waving his arms and yelling like a demon, his cloak fluttering around him like wings. The crows took flight, leaving behind black feathers and sour blood. Bade fell to his knees next to the corpse of the kite. It was barely recognizable; most of its feathers were torn out, and the bare patches were dripping with blood. One eye had been gashed open, and the lid was torn away. Bade detached his cloak and carefully wrapped the destroyed creature in it. It weighed next to nothing. Bade buried the bird under a lonely ash tree shrouded in his cloak, and walked on.

1. Feathers Fall

“But sir, I didn’t take anything, or damage anything. I just needed a place to sleep, out of the rain,” Kite stood facing a stolid farmer who was leaning on a rusted pitchfork.

“I don’t care if it was raining arrows, you were still trespassing.” The farmer, one Master Shaller, was not happy to find a wet, bedraggled stranger sleeping on the hay in his barn. His wide-brimmed straw hat was dripping with rain, and the torch hung up on the wall was still sputtering from being carried in the storm. Kite held his unstrung bow in front of him like a very sad quarterstaff, and tried to edge around the offended owner towards the open barn door.

“Sir, I apologize for trespassing, and I can assure you, it won’t happen again. I will

gather my, uh, things,” Kite pointed to a burlap pack leaning against the wall behind the farmer, “and I’ll be off your property. I’m sorry.”

“You said sorry already. One apology for one offense is enough, if you mean it. And you seem too out of sorts to not mean it.” Kite saw that perhaps the man was more amused now than angry, but there was no reason to get within range of that pitchfork. He circled slowly to his pack, and then headed out.

Master Shaller heaved a huge sigh, as if he had been worn down by an hour’s badgering - “Son, go back to sleep. It’s rainin hard, an you obviously got nowhere to go.”

Kite stared at the man for a moment, then laughed bashfully, “You couldn’t be more right, sir. And thank you.” Kite stood facing the man, unsure what to do next. Lying down immediately would have been rude. Master Shaller stumped back out of the barn, grumbling about vagrants and rain.

Kite lay on a pile of hay and thought about his cloak, buried under the dirt, moss, and leaves, but catching sick was one more step towards joining his namesake. Only, a cold isn’t very memorable.

Kite woke to the sound of clinking gear and horses’ hooves. The night still held strong, and Kite could see nothing from inside the barn. He crept across the dirt floor, tripping slowly and carefully over piled supplies and set-aside work. When he reached the door, he slid it open slightly with a prayer for silence, and saw a troop of the Governor’s soldiers tramping around in front of the farmhouse. There were five men, only one with any signifier of rank, and him with just a tassel on his helmet. The sergeant, as Kite guessed, was a fat man, his girth straining against his vest and coat of chain mail. The rain pattered off their rounded, close-fitting helmets, and they formed up with the four grunts making a square, attempting a semblance of officiality.

They could barely hold their formation, and they made no pretensions to silence. From the slurring of their words and the vulgarity of their jokes, Kite could tell they had been drinking, “And no small bottles,” he murmured. The sergeant straightened himself up as best he could, then marched up to the door and knocked with a heavy fist.

“Open! For the soldiers of the Governor Chaldin, demand you open . . .” the bellowing officer was interrupted by Master Shaller opening the door. “Oh, right, there,” the sergeant said. The drink made it hard to focus.

“Can I help you, sir?” Master Shaller asked. He stood up straight, and kept all traces of fear from his face, but Kite saw his hand reveal nervousness by darting over his balding head and through what was left of his hair; soldiers were rarely good news, and drunk soldiers never.

“As you are know, King’s Edict says that all citizen must quarter soldiers.” The fat sergeant stood as tall as he could, attempting to loom. His belly seemed liable to pull him off balance. But, the soldiers with him were all armed, fit, and swimming.

Thunder rumbled through the farmstead, and Kite lost the next few words. Shaller apparently offered them the barn, and the fat man hit him across the face. The farmer steadied himself on the doorframe, and left his hands clutching it; striking a soldier meant death.

“If the barn is warm and dry, I’m sure you won’t mind sleeping there!” The sergeant’s face had turned an even deeper red, and his soldiers began laughing.

“Your wife can stay with us though!” one of the men called out. Shaller glared at the man, and Kite half expected lightning to strike down the offender.

“Alright, my family and I will stay in the barn, tonight.” Shaller disappeared inside, and the soldiers moved up onto the porch, out of the rain.

The soldiers fooled around on the front porch while waiting for the luckless family.

Amidst laughter and cursing, one of the fools fell off into the mud. Guffaws burst from the five throats and the door swung slowly outward. Shaller stepped out the door, his face carved from iced stone, followed by his wife, a dark haired woman carrying a boy of about seven or eight. The boy pressed his face into her chest, and clutched handfuls of her thick woolen dress. She kept her face buried in the child's hair. A girl of around seventeen followed her mother; she too carried a child, this one a baby. She wore a stout dress over her nightgown, and tried to hide herself behind the infant. The girl's eyes were fixated on the ground as she walked out the door, but as she passed the soldiers she flashed a glare of contempt from her deep hood. Thunder boomed.

As the family stepped past the soldiers, the one who had fallen in the mud leered at the girl, and ripped her hood back as she passed. The torch light shone on her heart-shaped face, sending waves of yellow and shadow playing over her lips and eyes. The girl's hair fell down her back, catching and holding the little light that there was. For a moment, everyone was still. The soldiers eyed her in their drunken stupor, and the sergeant grumbled, "She stays."

Mistress Shaller fell to her knees, setting the boy gently on the ground. "No, please no, please no," she repeated, tears streaming down her face. The girl stood her ground and glared at the soldiers, but Kite could see her hands were shaking. The muddy soldier grabbed the baby out of her arms and tossed it to her weeping mother like a bag of meal. The infant's cries added to the cacophony of the storm. Grabbing the girl's wrist, the soldier started towards the house. He stopped mid-step and bent forward onto the blade Shaller had rammed into his stomach. The soldier fell to his knees, then to his face, with his hands clutching his own dagger hilt. Shaller had snatched it from his belt and returned it to its owner before the other soldiers even noticed him moving.

Shaller pulled the sword from the soldier's hip and turned to face the other four, all with their blades now bare. Kite pulled his bowstring from his pack and hurriedly tried to affix it to his bow, but fumbled. He had never needed to string it to save or take life before; rabbits and deer never caused his hands to shake and his heart to attempt escape. Shaller faced off against the three grunts, and they moved to encircle him, snarling like a pack of street dogs. Lightning flashes and the torchlight gave life to their swords; fire seeming to race up and down their dirty armor and dirty faces.

The girl grabbed her brother by the wrist, scooped up the baby in the other arm, and ran out of Kite's sight. The farmer's wife stared from her knees, frozen as stone in the dancing lights. The bowstring snapped into place and Kite knocked an arrow. He stood and stepped out the open door, across the yard from the combat. A strange feeling permeated him; he felt as if his blood was coursing with fire, raging through his veins with a furious heat that caused him neither injury nor pain. He released the first crow-feathered arrow; it kept pace with the lightning to strike a soldier in the chest as he lunged at Shaller from his left. As that arrow quivered to a halt in the pouring rain, Kite sent another shaft to match the first. As quickly as he fired, he drew and fired again. The soldier to Shaller's right went down with one shaft in his belly and one jutting from his throat. The soldier standing in front of Shaller blocked the farmer's clumsy swing and stepped in close, grabbing Shaller's wrist and twisting. The soldier spun Shaller around and wrenched his wrist, forcing the farmer to drop his sword. Lightning lit up the yard and Kite could see the soldier smiling with his sword laid against Shaller's bare throat.

"Drop that bow" bellowed the sergeant, and Kite saw that he had Mistress Shaller in a similar position, dagger against quivering neck. Even by the flickering torchlight, Kite could see

both remaining soldiers had sickening grins plastered on their face, and both sets of eyes were locked on Kite. He drew a deep breath. Shaller had blood running down his neck from straining against his captor. Mistress Shaller sobbed silently. The yard was silent but for the fall of rain on muddy ground. Kite held his bow drawn, straining against the tension - he knew what would happen if he set it down.

He would be tried and killed, if the soldiers didn't kill him immediately. Shaller would be killed. The farm would be either taken or burned... without Shaller to protect them, the soldiers would do as they wished with the women and children. Kite doubted that any officials would hear that there had been a family here. The neighbors would see smoke and maybe come investigate, and find a pile of burnt corpses. But if he didn't surrender, the streams of blood from opened throats would be at his feet. Kite didn't want to cause their death. He didn't want to lay awake nights seeing Shaller's face as the ruddiness drained out of it onto the ground. He didn't want the burden of knowing that he had proclaimed their fate. But, sometimes, hard decisions must be made.

The arrow flashed out of his bow through the falling rain, piercing the thunder and night, sinking deep into the sergeant's wide eye. He collapsed, making a splash of mud and rainwater. Mistress Shaller fell with him screaming, trapped by his arms, and his sword gashed her face as they fell. Kite saw Shaller smile, and then go slack. The soldier had drawn his blade across the naked throat, and his prisoner flopped forward out of his grip into the mud and blood pooling around him.

Kite howled as he saw the kindly farmer die. He sent shaft after shaft into the still grinning soldier, until his quiver was empty and his lungs could no longer scream. Mistress Shaller crept over to her husband on her knees, and rolled him over. With the torn sleeve of her

dress, she wiped the mud off of her husband's face, and hummed a song softly. The tune sounded familiar. The rain kept falling, and she wrapped his neck with her shawl.

Chapter 2. The Forest

Kite sat leaning against the barn door while Mistress Shaller wept with her husband's head in her lap. The daughter and two younger children reappeared from behind the house and walked over to their mother and father. The two children buried their faces in their mother's skirts, but the daughter looked around the yard, seeing the five dead soldiers and the drenched young man leaning against the barn. The sun was beginning to rise, and the rain was starting to slack. She knelt down beside her mother, and placed her hand on her father's pale cheek.

Kite couldn't watch. He went back into the barn, and began saddling the mare. He had to get the family off of the farm before anyone started wondering where the soldiers were. The Shallers probably had relatives close by, but anyone caught sheltering this family would be subject to the soldiers' vengeance as well.

He had just finished checking the horse's saddle straps for the fourth time when the girl cleared her throat in the doorway. "You aren't really going to steal our horse after killing soldiers to save us are you?"

Chiren's soft face was covered with tears, her hair twisted and tangled. Kite stared at her for a moment and responded with, "Huh?"

She gave him a tired almost-smile and pointed at the saddled horse he was standing next to, "I can't think that you would fight five soldiers to protect our well-being and then steal the only way we could get to a safe place."

“You have a safe place?” He stared at her, wondering at her ability to act so coolly.

“Well, a safer place than this. We can’t go to any of our relatives’ houses of course, because they will look there first. Mother is packing clothes and food, and Wek is getting father’s hunting tent. I’m going to take care of the horse and the young man.” She stared at him, waiting for him to answer her earlier question.

“Oh, I’m not taking the horse. I was getting him, uh, her, ready for you. Where is your safer place?” Kite stepped away from the horse and scrubbed his eyes. The morning light coming in through the door was bright. It backlit the girl, making him think of angels.

“Our uncle, Father’s brother, had a house deep in the Oreskils, west of here. He died years ago, but he really hated to be around people, so he built his house way out there. There were even fields enough to feed him. And he ate a lot, so I think that would be enough for us.” She walked towards him and the horse. He shied away.

“How far away is it?” He backed away from the horse, letting her re-check the saddling.

“Five days. If we didn’t have the baby and Mother, maybe three, but she is injured she says, and he will have to be carried. Wek can ride Misty, of course, but it’s just a long way. And if Mother rides in the cart that’ll slow Misty down a good bit.”

“Well. . .” Kite looked away from her eyes, “we need to bury your father quickly.”

The girl looked at him for a moment, and took a deep breath. “I was hoping you could dig the grave. There’s a spade back there.” She pointed to a corner of the barn.

“I can do that,” Kite nodded and turned his back on the girl. “My name is Kite.”

“Chiren.”

“You stay away from my daughter, young man.”

Kite sighed. This was the sixth time today. “Yes mistress, of course.” He was leading Misty up a winding mountain trail, with the Shaller family following behind. Wek was riding the horse, and Chiren was carrying the baby. Mistress Shaller was at the back of the group, and Kite was certain he could feel her glaring at his back. She had a nasty gash across her face, and he thought maybe the pain had driven her crazy. He could barely look at Chiren without seeing Shaller’s dead body in the shallow grave, the girl watching him pile dirt on top of her father. But, Mistress Shaller was certain that this vagrant boy only had designs on her daughter. Kite sighed again.

“Mother, he has barely said ten words to me. Have you taken your thistlegrass?” Chiren looked back at her mother.

“Yes, and don’t forget who taught you about herbs young lady; I need some daydaisy to make a healing necklace.” The woman began scanning the nearby forest for her remedies.

“Mother, that’s superstition. Necklaces don’t heal people, and Thiya isn’t a real goddess.” Chiren shook her head, and then Wek joined the conversation,

“That’s right, Mommy. Master Regillin taught us that the only real god is God. He said that talking about any of the others is bad, and will make God mad.” Wek almost fell off the horse twisting around to look at his mother.

The younger Shaller had shown remarkable resilience to the death of their father. There were times when everyone was quiet, and Kite knew he received a few hateful looks, because they all knew the soldiers had arrived right after he did, but for the most part they did what they had to do. And Wek seemed to think that his job was to make everything as exciting as possible. That was particularly annoying when they decided to cross the stream and he

thought Misty was drowning, though the stream was only about three feet deep. He had jumped off the horse, yelled “Save her!” and promptly gotten swept off his feet by the current. Kite grabbed him by his shirt and hauled him back onto the horse, and didn’t let go till they reached the other side.

Chiren’s uncle’s shack was not impressive. The thatch roof had fallen away in some parts, and the wooden walls had gaps enough to let in small rodents. The yard around it was covered with brush and undergrowth, but at least no trees had taken root in the fields. Brush might be annoying, but it was easier to uproot than even a small sapling.

Wek immediately jumped off of Misty and ran around the back of the house, then came speeding around the other side. “No soldiers here!”

Kite began unpacking the supplies, avoiding Mistress Shaller as best he could. She seemed to think the closer she was to him, the less threat he was towards her daughter.

Over the next week, Kite spent every waking hour either fixing the house or being underhandedly chided about taking a break. Mistress Shaller had decided that her wound kept her from leaving the house, lest it get infected. Chiren was sent out every day to gather flowers and weeds that Kite didn’t believe actually existed. Wek was told to clear the fields as best he could, and when he found a hand scythe rusting behind the shack, it was difficult to get him to do anything else.

No one spoke about what had happened at the farm; Mistress Shaller seemed concerned with nothing but the chastity of her daughter and the ordering of her new home. Chiren took hours every day to find the imaginary flowers, though Kite was fairly certain that what she brought back was identical to the weeds he and Wek were pulling up.

“No Mistress Shaller, I’m not injured. I’m just tired. Thank you for your concern.”

Kite was sitting on the lone stair to the porch of the shack, and Mistress Shaller was standing behind him in the doorway.

“Oh, I understand. Winter is a long way off yet, those holes don’t need to be patched this very minute. Have you seen Chiren recently?” She smiled at him, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“No ma’am, I think she must still be gathering that Monkwort.”

“Well, make sure you let me know the moment she gets back. I wouldn’t want anything untoward to happen to her.”

“Of course, Mistress.” Kite sighed and stood to get back to work, but she laid a hand on his shoulder. She looked down at him and smiled, truly this time.

“Kite, I don’t know why you are still here with us. Believe me, I’m grateful, but I don’t understand. What is it that makes you work so hard for a woman that gives you no peace?” She slowly sat down beside him, and her face grew sad.

“I suppose. . . I feel like it’s my fault you’re out here. I know it isn’t, but . . . And I know you feel that way too.” Kite looked out towards the forest, hoping Chiren would return soon.

“Sometimes. And I’m sorry. I’m trying to do better. I miss him,” she said.

Kite raised his eyebrows in surprise. This was the first anyone had spoken of Tom Shaller since he was covered with dirt. He hated talking about serious things. Kite studied his worn boots and mumbled, “I’m sorry.” He tried to get back to work, but Mistress Shaller placed her hand on his shoulder once more.

“I know it isn’t your fault, and I know the situation would be a hundred times worse

without you. I wanted to say thank you, and let you go. If you throw away that bow and those crow feathered arrows, there's no reason for them to suspect you had anything to do with it. No one even knows your real name. Don't try to tell me it's Kite, I'm a mother, and I know no good mother could give you a name that silly." Kite stared at her indignantly and she laughed, "And your mother must have been good to you, and taught you right. If you want to stay, we would be happy to have you. You've worked very hard to help us get everything running, and having you here would make farming much easier. But I can't imagine that a lone traveler willing to kill soldiers would be looking for a home. What are you doing out here?"

Kite sighed and returned his gaze to the dirt. "I'm not entirely sure. The only thing I know is that I could no longer stay where I was. There was a slight, um, problem, in my village, and I left. But no, I'm not looking for a home."

"Well, if you don't want to say what happened I won't ask you, but maybe I could help if I knew what you were looking for," Mistress Shaller said. Kite thought she looked all the world like a mother soothing a child with a scraped knee.

Kite didn't know how to answer her question. He had just left, not to find something else, not to be somewhere new, not to find other people. He had no more idea where he was headed than she did, so he was surprised when he answered, words tumbling past his lips softly. "A purpose."

Mistress Shaller sighed, as if that was what she had been afraid of. "Well, Kite, I don't think you will find that here." He nodded slowly, and Chiren stepped out of the woods, waving what appeared to be nothing more than a bundle of grass.

"I got the ravensfoot!" she yelled.

Kite brought Wek with him to hunt one day, partly because the young boy wanted to learn and partly because Kite rarely caught anything and he needed a distraction. Wandering the woods was much more entertaining with Wek accompanying him, if less productive. The boy would spend about five minutes creeping through the undergrowth as Kite did, then he would get bored and dash off in a random direction, pretending to see a deer, or a wolf, or a bear, and once Kite thought he heard that a Goodelfetch was close by, whatever that was. Being so late in the fall, there was not much game to be found. Kite had caught a few rabbits, and brought down a few of the larger, slower types of birds, but he and Wek agreed that they really needed more meat. Mrs. Shaller and Chiren were perfectly happy with their vegetable stews, breads, and whatever they could find growing still this late, but Kite was decidedly tired of it. The Shallers had been in the midst of preparing for winter, so they had a decent stock of food that would keep. But that wouldn't last forever, and Kite had learned that men needed to eat meat. They came across some tracks, luckily at a time when Wek wasn't chasing down forest creatures with his hand scythe, so Kite could motion to him to stay quiet and low. Apparently one lonely deer was still grazing in spite of the cold, and Kite planned on putting it out of its misery. At least he hoped it was miserable; then he could feel like he was doing the creature a favor.

The pair stalked the creature for quite some time. Kite was immensely proud of Wek for not yelling, or running, or banging rocks against other rocks just to see what would happen. Wek seemed to be as intent on the hunt as Kite was, if not more so, since Kite was spending some of his attention on his companion and not the trail. Maybe Kite's belief about males and meat was true.

They caught up with the deer in a dense thicket of trees. The leaves were brilliantly colored, shining under the gaze of the afternoon sun. Some light slipped through in patches

where the leaves had lost their hold; the light and shadows writhed together as the wind shifted the canopy. The creature stood perfectly still, though the whole copse appeared to be shifting and swaying under the folding light. The deer stood in shadow as motes of dust and grass fell and rose to the whims of the wind. Wek stood as still as their prey next to Kite; the boy didn't move to breath. Kite drew his bow as quietly as he could, but the animal heard something of it. It stood at attention, ears twitching and head swiveling. Both humans held their breath; their blood was pounding in their ears, a deep thump coming with each second. Their hearts sounded like drums, beating deep inside every vein. Kite slowly put an arrow to the string and drew, like water dripping from a leaf, sliding along slow to make you sure it would never fall. He sighted his shot, and released.

The beast bolted as the arrow struck its flank, and Kite took off after it at a quick jog. Even a deer can't run too far or fast with a bleeding lung. Wek kept up with Kite for a little while, but his legs were too short, and he dropped behind. Kite was sure the boy would be able to follow him, though. The animal seemed to realize that it would not be escaping after a few minutes of running, and he caught up to it in an open field. It lay down on its side, heaving. Kite rubbed a hand along its flank in time with the creature's labored breaths. Those breaths slowed, as Kite whispered nothings to his prey, trying to calm the animal in its last few moments. Wek appeared next to Kite; maybe his legs weren't so short. Wek began to pet the creature in the same manner, as Kite pulled his knife out. Wek looked at the knife, and Kite couldn't tell what the boy was feeling. Wek lay his head down on the deer's chest, felt its heart beating for a few more moments, and closed his eyes as Kite drew his knife across the deer's neck. Wek sighed and straightened his back, then pulled Kite's arrow out gingerly, checking the arrowhead for nicks and chips, then cleaned it off in the grass. He jammed it back into its quiver, and stood. Kite

waited a while to let the blood finish seeping out of the creature, before shouldering it and beginning the walk back to the cabin.

Wek shook off his somber mood and began again to run and chatter as Kite trudged back with his kill. The animal was heavy, but the thought of grilling the meat over the fire tonight gave him a new kind of strength that emanated from his stomach. Wek hopped up beside him, and asked, "Will you make me a bow like yours?"

Kite thought for a moment and said, "To be completely honest with you, I don't know how. I never got around to learning that part."

Wek frowned thoughtfully. "Well, will you teach me how to shoot?"

"We can try, but this is a big bow and you're closer to little than you are to large. But I'll at least show you how," Kite said with a smile.

"It can't be that hard to do. I've seen you draw it back plenty far, and you aren't that big or strong," Wek said innocently.

"Heh, you sound like your sister and your mother. You are right though, archery is more about technique and concentration than it is about strength. That's why soldiers use crossbows," Kite laughed, "They have no strength and no skill."

"Is that why you beat the soldiers you fought before?"

Kite was quiet for a moment. "No, I killed them because they didn't see where I was shooting from in time."

"So it wasn't because you were better."

"No."

"Were they better fighters than my father?"

"No, they weren't. They had weapons and there were more of them. Your father was better than any of them."

"If he was, shouldn't he have won?"

"Skill and strength don't have much to do with it. They killed him because he didn't have a chance."

"In the stories Mother and Father told me, the good guys always won, no matter how many there were."

"I think those stories are from another world. Ours is never like that."

"It is sometimes, I think," Wek said.

"How's that?" Kite stopped and looked at his friend.

"Well, I think if you asked Father, he would tell you that we won."

"Huh. Maybe so."

A week later, Kite sat at the newly stabilized dinner table, eating a bowl of soup that Mistress Shaller had prepared. He supposed now that there were different types of herbs that looked like grass but tasted much better (and sometimes worse) than what he normally called grass. Chiren was feeding the baby from a bent spoon, and Wek was trying to draw pictures with the herbs floating in his bowl.

Mistress Shaller said, "Kite, we don't have quite enough to last all winter, even if Chiren can keep finding herbs in the dead of winter." Her daughter smiled at him, proud of her ability to locate food when his hunting had yielded little. "So, I need you to go buy some dried meat, grains, and other such things. I made a list. Do you think you can make the trip alone?"

He nodded with his spoon in his mouth, and responded, "Should I leave tomorrow?"

Mistress Shaller nodded. Chiren spoke up, “He can’t go alone. What if he decides to shoot some soldiers?” Kite choked on his soup and tried to splutter a protest, but she kept going, “Plus, he doesn’t know enough about herbs to buy medicine for us. He told me my ravensfoot was just grass!”

“Chiren, people in Tregin know who you are. They will be looking for all of us. They may even be looking for Kite, but certainly for you.” Mistress Shaller responded.

“I’ll wear my cloak, and keep the hood up. No one will pull my hood off this time, not with Kite right there. And you know someone has to go get medicine, your cut isn’t healing the way it should, even with your Thiya necklace.”

Mistress Shaller sat quietly for a moment, then looked at Kite and said, “If I let her go with you, I can trust you to be a gentleman, yes?”

Kite swallowed hard, and responded, “Yes, I’ve never laid a hand on her!”

Chiren joined in, “Mother, he won’t even look at me if he can help it. I think I make him nervous.” She laughed a bit at that.

Mistress Shaller nodded her head, but kept her gaze on Kite. “All right, you can go too. But whenever you are anywhere near the town, keep your hood up. You know what would happen if the soldiers caught the two of you. Kite’s a good shot, but I don’t think he would face up to a squad of soldiers if it were up to him.”

Kite looked between the two women with his mouth hanging open. Neither had even pretended to ask if he would like to have a traveling companion.

Chapter Three - Cloaks and Daggers

Kite leaned his bow against the wall of the house and reached to shoulder his pack. He and Chiren were standing outside the house, readying to leave. Mistress Shaller placed her hand on his shoulder as he reached for his pack. Chiren already had her cloak on, but Kite had left his buried with his namesake somewhere miles from there. Mistress Shaller turned Kite around and pulled him back inside, saying "I finished it, just in time." She had been sewing all morning, but she did that every morning.

"Finished what, ma'am?" He was anxious to leave; the sooner it began, the sooner it ended.

"Your cloak," she said, as if he should have known the answer. She reached down to her chair and pulled it up off the arm. She handed it to him, and he felt the material; it was more finely woven than anything he had worn before, and light. He swung it around his shoulders; the black fabric reached the bottom of his boots, but no lower - it fit him perfectly. Mistress Shaller smiled as she saw. He reached up to fasten it around his neck, and felt carving on the dark wooden brooch. He looked down and saw the image of a bird with an arrow in its talons engraved on the wood.

"Wek carved it," Mistress Shaller said with a smile. Kite bent down and kissed her on the head, and mumbled,

"Thank you."

Tregin was a small town, nestled in the forest at the foothills of the Oreskil mountains. Chiren and Kite walked slowly, hoping to appear nothing more than crazy vagrants who couldn't bear to have people see their face. As Chiren pointed out, Kite didn't really need to keep his hood up, but he did anyways. He felt vulnerable to all those eyes when it wasn't. The main market street was crowded, and Kite could see the One Church at the end of the road, and he

knew that just outside of the town to the east was a barracks. Soldiers were in the crowd, and even though they had no reason to know Kite's face, and next to none to know Chiren's, he couldn't help but think they all saw through his hood and knew him for the man with crow-fledged arrows. Chiren, on the other hand, seemed to think that she was invincible as long as she kept her hood up. She didn't shy away from the soldiers, she didn't dart into the shops as Kite did, she didn't even cower against the side of the wall when they brushed past her, as everyone else in the town did. Soldiers were terrifying when the King's Edict meant they could arrest anyone who looked at them wrong.

Kite knew that soldiers didn't like it when soldiers were killed. War was one thing, but in their own jurisdiction, if a soldier died, everyone suffered for a while. Even accidental deaths made the rest of the group unhappy, which in turn made everyone else unhappy. The way they saw it, if any soldiers died on home soil, that meant that safe land might not be safe.

Everyone in Tregin knew that five soldiers had been killed. Many of the townsfolk knew the Shallers personally; some were even related. So, the town consensus was that the soldiers had most likely deserved what happened to them, and many of the townsfolk were impressed with Tom Shaller for taking on five soldiers, or whoever it was. They were worried about the wife and children, too, secretly. The official position of every loyal citizen was that there was a family of devil servants killing the good servants of the One God. And no one would be caught saying anything else where they could be heard.

"Yes, the Shallers apparently lost their minds. They were always such nice people, but killing soldiers. . . I never thought old Tom had that in him," the shopkeeper was telling a patron as Kite and Chiren walked inside. The store was bare and cold, with bags of meal and feed propped up along the walls. Kite walked up to the man, pulled his hood down, and ordered what

they needed, and Chiren struck up a conversation with the patron.

As the shopkeep got some of his boys to load up Kite's cart (with Kite praying that no one recognized the horse), Chiren was saying, "I heard that the soldiers were drunk, and that he was protecting his family."

"Well now Miss, I don't know about any of that," the unlucky patron she was addressing replied.

"I do. Tom Shaller was a good law-abiding man. It was those soldiers who broke the law." Kite grabbed her wrist, but she jerked it away.

"Soldiers don't break the law," the man said. "They have the King's Writ, and the guidance of God." The man looked around, fearing that some soldiers might hear him participating in such an unlawful conversation.

"Then God approves of drunk soldiers raping young. . ." Kite grabbed her roughly and pulled her to his side, cutting her off midsentence.

"I'm sure the soldiers were doing what they had to do, sister. Now leave the man alone," Kite said gruffly. Chiren tried to pull out of his grip, but he held the slender girl tightly. The man she was talking to turned away and all but dashed out the door. Kite gave the shopkeeper a tight grin. As the shopkeeper turned away and began gathering the supplies, Kite whispered to Chiren, "We don't want anyone to remember we were here, so be quiet."

"He said my father murdered those soldiers. I don't care if they know we were here, someone has to tell these people the truth." she hissed back at him.

"The truth is wonderful, but so is your pretty little neck keeping your pretty mouthy head." Kite flashed another smile as the innkeeper glanced at them.

"Don't be such a coward. I thought men like you were supposed to be brave and not

afraid of anything ”

“What do you mean, men like me? And I’ll be a coward if I damn well please, I’m not going back to your mother without you in one piece ”

“Strange men wandering through the forest, protecting maidens from evil men, fighting for justice and truth, defeating four men singlehandedly, heroes ”

“Well, I’m not, I just got lucky. And I don’t want to trust luck twice. There are more than five soldiers in this town and I don’t even have my bow ”

Chiren stared at him for a moment, then jerked out of his grasp and left the store. She tightened her hood around her face, and Kite started after her, but the shopkeeper was standing right next to him. Kite glared -- how much had the man heard?

The shopkeep said, “Your cart is all loaded up son, and tell Chiren that I said to be more careful. And I know of a good fletcher, if you need one.”

Kite’s jaw dropped as he watched the man walk back behind his counter. The shopkeeper busied himself dusting and straightening, and didn’t glance back at Kite. Kite walked out the door and saw the cart loaded with a few bags more than he had ordered and he saw no one waiting to take payment. Kite saw the tail of Chiren’s cloak dart into the blacksmith’s down the end of the street. He grabbed Misty’s reins and trudged after her.

The smithy was just as bare as the supplier’s, but not nearly so cold. A huge man stood by an anvil and held a hammer that seemed as big as Kite’s head. He had ceased work for the moment to talk to Chiren. The young girl had walked right up to him and apparently interrupted what he was doing. A piece of glowing iron lay on the anvil, and an apprentice was sitting near the bellows, apparently resting. The floor was packed dirt, with many shoe prints and scuff marks, and it glowed orange from the fire. The fire faded into the pale winter sunlight around

the edges and a cool gust of wind carried away the warmth. As Kite took a step inside, Chiren turned away from the man, nodding to herself. The huge man went back to work, his hammer pounding down on the iron rhythmically. Kite looked at her questioningly, but she ignored him. Instead, she hopped on the back of the cart and waited for him to move, to take her back home.

Kite stopped the horse outside the medicine shop, and was about to chide Chiren to get what her mother needed when the girl hopped off and walked inside unhurriedly. He sighed and leaned against the cart, and addressed the horse, “Misty, what does she want from me? You’d think a little more gratitude would be in order, and a little less making me feel awkward and slow-witted.” The horse looked at him like he was dim. “No use talking to you, women always band together.”

Chiren came back out of the store with a small pack of herbs and a wide-eyed stare.

“They’ve taken Nelgin prisoner. Because they couldn’t find us. My mother’s little brother. Alena must be so frightened for him. He’s a prisoner in the Church. She isn’t even allowed to see him.” She looked on the verge of tears.

Kite stared at her for a moment, seeing the hope in her eyes. Surely, she must think, this brave wanderer will save my family. She must envision black-feathered arrows in the eyes of all the guards and a lock picked without a sound. No alarm raised, no search sent out. No capture, no injuries, and a safe stroll through the main street as the villagers cheer our heroics, and her uncle can kiss his wife.

“Let’s go home,” she said as tears rolled down her face. She sat on the back of the cart and he grabbed Misty’s reins and led her through the cold town.

Chapter Four - Fletchings

Kite walked swiftly through the woods, retracing the path once more. Chiren was safely in her bed at the house, Mistress Shaller had her herbs, and Wek was snoring like a tiny little bear. The forest was thick, and the moonlight barely pierced the shadows enough to keep him from seriously injuring himself. Sticks, leaves, and gods knew what else crunched beneath his boots and seemed to echo in the forest behind him. Trees loomed tall, sentries against. . . Kite didn't know. Not every analogy could be perfect. Five days had been a good estimate for the trip with the cart and children, but alone he could make it in almost two days. He hoped that, if he traveled all the next day and didn't break till nightfall, one more day would net him a view of the village by nightfall the day after. He padded along quickly, ignoring the echoes of his footfalls.

Tregin was silent, and the moon lit it well. The only movement Kite saw came from the guards around the barracks and those around the Church at the north end of the town. He crept through the main street, staying hidden in alleyways and shadows of the buildings. He wrapped his black cloak tightly around him, and drew the hood as far forward as he could. He rubbed the little kite carving on his brooch for luck.

Killing the soldiers at the farm was a different matter than this. They had broken every sort of moral code that Kite knew except the law of the King. Others would have died if he had not killed, and he could plainly see that. The thunk of the arrows into flesh and bone still haunted him when he closed his eyes, but the smiles on the face of the Shaller children could counteract the nightmares.

Two guards stood at the entrance of the Church. The door was high and thick, wooden painted white that would shine brightly in the daytime. The guards held spears, and had swords

buckled at their waists. The high windows bore the Eye of the One God, watching the village and judging it. Kite stared at the Eye, wishing it were real so that it would feel his hatred. Compared to the sparse furnishings of the town, the Church was extravagant. The paint wasn't chipped, the timbers were all straight and fine. The doorknobs and window panes were gilded, though nothing else in the town showed a hint of gold. The glass was clear and flat. Kite wanted to see those windows shattered.

But these guards were doing nothing but their duty. They were not drunk, and they seemed well kept. They were simply talking lowly, and watching the surroundings. Guarding the church was no hard task, though it kept the soldier from a good night's sleep. Kite knew that these two wouldn't be the only ones working tonight, but he hoped they would be the only ones awake. The warden could be dealt with inside, likely without raising an alarm, but any sort of calamity out here would alert the barracks, and Kite had no illusions about his chances against fifty men.

Kite circled the church at a good distance, but there seemed no way in that didn't involve shattering windows or killing guards. The church had no need for storage space, so there was no cellar and thus no cellar door; they needed no back door for the clergy because the priest always came in the most public manner possible, to accentuate just how wonderful he really was. All those people kneeling down and praying as he walks in... There it was.

Kite walked to the middle of the street and took a deep breath. This would take a good deal more spine than he thought he had.

"What are you doing out here this late?" The soldier to Kite's left asked. The other guard seemed fairly disinterested. Both showed signs of a late watch, with red eyes and drooping eyelids.

“Must pray. God has called me to this church to commune with him tonight.” Kite kept his hood up and spoke in a gravelly voice. He had never tried to be intimidating before, and he was in no way certain he could be.

“No, it’s too late. Sun’s down, no one enters.” The guard yawned, and waved Kite away down the street. “In fact, you shouldn’t be out anywhere at this time. The captain doesn’t like vagrants and wanderers. Get on home.”

“God has called me, and his word is supreme. King’s Edict, everyone must follow God.” Kite’s voice was beginning to ache from the amount of gruffness and grittiness he was putting into it, “And there is no rule against going inside at night. God must be worshiped always, not only when the sun is high.”

The guard began to look a little less sure. Kite couldn’t believe his luck; there may well have been a law holding the Church closed in the dark. “Well, I still don’t think the captain would like it. Not that I care what you pray or when. God must always be worshiped,” he added hurriedly when Kite tilted his head slightly. Being wrapped up in that nightdark cloak, Kite could be anyone, priest, magistrate, or general. “All right, go on in, but we will be right here waiting when you come out. And don’t think you won’t be searched when you leave, so keep your hands pocketed ” The guard opened the door a bit and motioned Kite through. The other guard yawned and fought to keep his eyes open. Kite heard him mutter, “Nothing worth stealing in this town anyways. . . let him try to take those candlesticks, see if I don’t thump him good before we take him to be hanged.”

Kite walked inside and knelt at the altar. It was nearly pitch dark, only moonlight and starlight filtering down through the Eyestained windows. Light from God, Kite could do without. The soldier saw him kneel in the halfnight, and closed the door. Open doors would lead

to questions from higher ups that would keep him from his bed.

As the door thumped shut, Kite threw back his hood and looked around. There was only one door in the sanctuary other than the one through which he had entered. He walked to it slowly, and carefully pried it open. It was unlocked. A flight of stairs leading upward greeted Kite's eyes, and he began to slowly climb them, keeping his feet to the side edges hoping that would squeak less. The stairs only covered one floor, and at the top was a trap door. The light did not reach up this far, so Kite had to feel it manually. He found the hinges and gave the other side a light push. There was a slight resistance, like pushing against an animal that didn't want to move, but didn't really want to fight either. Kite kept pushing, and a flopping sound accompanied the resistance being removed. The warden was laying on the floor, unconscious, and empty bottles lay beside him. At the far end of the attic, under the eaves, lay a dirty man, sleeping curled up because that was all he had room for. Kite could see Wek in the man's face, and Mistress Shaller, through the dirt and grime and bruises that smeared his face.

"Hey! Wake up. Nelgin," Kite called softly across the room. The captive man blinked his bleary eyes open and settled his gaze upon Kite. Nelgin closed his eyes and rolled back over.

"Hey, Do you want to be rescued or not?" Nelgin stirred slightly, then jerked his eyes back to Kite.

"You're not a dream?" Nelgin's mouth dropped open slightly, and Kite could see blood smeared on his lips and cheek, and his eyes were dark and bruised. Apparently, confinement in a cramped cell wasn't the only punishment for being related to a criminal.

"No, I'm not. Where are the keys?" Kite glanced around the room, but the light from the moon outside didn't illuminate everything. Nelgin pointed to the passed out warden.

“They’re buried somewhere under his drunken bulk.” Nelgin was on his knees at the gate of the cell, his hands gripping the bars. His clothes were torn and dirty, days spent either curled up or beaten showing on the dark wool.

Kite stood over the warden and sent a short prayer to whoever might be listening. Then he reached down and flipped the fat man onto his stomach in one quick gesture. Kite clenched his teeth and held very still as the warden thumped and settled into his new position, but the unconscious man had not noticed even a little bit. The front of his shirt was still damp from poorly aimed whiskey, and the keys were lying nicely across his ample stomach. Kite unhitched the keys from his belt, and the warden didn’t so much as snore to acknowledge it. Kite poked at his excess with the toe of a boot, and the man lay as if he was dead. Kite started to poke him when Nelgin cleared his throat, loudly.

“Feel like opening the door? I mean, if you want to play with the passed out fat man, I suppose that’s your business, but I’d sure like to go home.” Kite jumped up and hurriedly unlocked the cell door, which squeaked like a mouse with his tail caught in a door when he opened it. Still no response.

“You think he’s even alive?” Kite mused.

“He was alive two hours ago, spitting his drink at me.” Nelgin glared at the still figure, and his hands twitched and clenched as if he wished he had a knife. He crept out of the cell and stood, stretching and working out the days of cramped confinement from his muscles. He was built solidly, a body accustomed to working the fields, but no food and no movement had sapped all the strength from his muscles. He was not wasting, not yet, but he looked... hollow. Like he wasn’t quite as he should be, like an apple just turning from fresh to old.

Kite grabbed the warden’s sword from the floor where it had fallen and handed it to

Nelgin. The farmer held it awkwardly - he knew the basic idea of sword fighting, namely sharp end in them, soft end in hand, but past that he looked as uncomfortable with the sword as Kite would have looked with a Book of Holy Law. Nelgin's eyes went to the unconscious man, and he stepped towards him. Kite's breath caught, worried that his new companion might do something excessively violent. Nelgin stepped over the snoring stomach gingerly, and looked at Kite, ready to complete their escape. The trap door burst open, and the door guard lunged up the ladder, his eyes searching from under the steel helm.

"I knew you weren't praying! I haven't met a priest yet that doesn't give his rank right off." The guard realized what he was seeing, and he froze. The churchgoer and the prisoner standing there armed, with the warden unconscious on the floor. He drew his short sword and stepped towards Kite with a growl. Nelgin stepped between the two, and Kite scanned the room for a weapon that was more useful indoors than his bow - an empty teapot or a heavy book would have fit that description. In the short seconds before battle began, Kite found himself amazed at the uselessness of a room intended for armed men to use to hold dangerous criminals. Nelgin was holding his borrowed blade in front of him, held in both hands, arms extended almost fully, trying to keep distance between him and the man who knew how to use a sword. The soldier slowly advanced, grinning at the clumsy farmer he was about to skewer and the hatch that he had climbed through slammed shut, the clap resounding through the room and causing everyone awake to jump. The three combatants froze after the sound and looked around a bit, and the guard shrugged, then lunged at Nelgin.

Kite began fumbling at his bowstring again as the farmer awkwardly dodged to his left, swinging his blade into the soldier's as he moved. The flood of heat and flame into his veins was remarkably absent, and the bowstring wouldn't loop right. The guard was swinging fast and

hard, switching his angles of attack and his own position, feet shifting fluidly. He also gained enough presence of mind to yell for his companion, and Kite cursed as he bent the bow to finish stringing it. Nelgin continued backing away from his fearsome opponent, and his boot planted on the bottle of drink that the warden had left on the floor. It rolled out from under him, and Nelgin landed square on his back, the air leaving his lungs and the sword leaving his hand.

“Hell!” Kite tried to draw his tall bow in the closed room and his elbow hit the cell door.

Nelgin’s eyes opened wide, staring at the armored man approaching him. The sword lay on the ground a few feet from Nelgin like so much dead metal. The moonlight bathed the room lightly through the shaped glass, an eye fighting back the shadows, reflecting off the soldier’s armor and sword, illuminating him like a wraith. Kite saw his teeth flash in the feeble light, glowing a dirty white as he grinned.

“Yoran! Get up here! They’re trying to escape.” The guard followed his call with a chuckle. Kite could feel the emphasis on trying. The soldier re-gripped the hilt of his sword, and held it pointing downward in his fist, ready to stick Nelgin to the floor. Kite stepped back into the door of the cell, and dropped to one knee. The opening gave him enough room to draw the bow fully without coming into reach of his opponent’s harsh steel. The string drew taut, quivering in the cold dry air, and Kite held his breath. The arrow leapt from the cell and drove home into the soldier’s chest. The sword clattered to the floor as both hands clutched the shaft and the man let out a howl. He fell down to his knees, then crumpled sideways to the floor. He curled up around the arrow, clenching it and moaning.

Nelgin stared at the dying man laying on the floor a few feet away and his mouth worked soundlessly. He had never seen a man killed before – he’d seen them die, as had all but the youngest citizens of Bresalon, but never anything like this. He watched as torrents of blood

rushed down the steel breastplate, still shining in the light of the eye. He saw the outline of that eye, watching the good citizens, protecting them; he saw that eye resting on a dying soldier, watching, as the man poured out his life onto the rough wooden floor of a cell in the attic of a church.

Kite turned his back on the death and horror in a futile attempt to escape it. He walked to the window, hoping that a glimpse of stars and clean air might disrupt his picture of the man, and the men at the barn. He wanted to forget those dead bodies – they deserved it, and much worse would have happened if he hadn't, but he couldn't wipe them away. This guard, though. He only did what he was expected to do; he had a job and he did it, and now he was staining the wood in the attic of his church. He probably sat every Holy Day not far from where he was now. Kite heard Nelgin rising and shuffling behind him and let out a sigh – he could see the other guard running down the street towards the barracks. Kite closed his eyes for a moment, relishing the darkness that required nothing of him. Then he put his boot through the Eye of the One God and notched another arrow. Kite had long since given up on Raspin, the true name of God, but he hoped someone was up there to hear his murmured prayer.

The guard ran in a straight line down the street. He was sticking strictly to the rules – at least one must escape to alert the authorities, so that the King's criminals can never escape cleanly. Kite steadied his stance. The shards of glass left in the window would have silhouetted him for the running guard, had he cared to look back. The jagged remnants of the Eye were sharp, a maw closing around Kite as the arrow streaked through the darkness, which the running guard may have seen, had he cared to look back. Of course, he wouldn't have enjoyed turning back. The arrow thudded into his backside and he slid into the dirt, and began hollering at the top of his lungs. Kite turned around, and Nelgin stood over the fallen guard with the sword in

hand and the warden's leather armor in the crook of his other arm.

Nelgin glanced up at Kite, and out the window, his eyes finding the source of the noise. His dirty face broke into a grin, and he murmured, "Nice shot. Now, where do we go from here?"

Kite unstrung his bow and smiled back at the man standing there, armed and waiting. Kite pulled his hood down, ran his fingers through his hair, and shrugged. "Honestly, I never thought I'd get this far. Where's your farm? I don't think the Governor will be kind to the kin of a fugitive."

The stocky farmer lost his smile. "Just a few hours walk from the town. Come." Nelgin opened the hatch and began to scramble down the stairs. Kite donned his hood again and followed, as outside the villagers congregated around the bellowing guard. The man yelled for someone to get the guards, but his audience was busy stifling their chuckles, and it took a good long while for anyone to saunter over to the camp and explain what had happened. Kite and Nelgin had a nice head start.

Chapter Five - Stumbling Stones

"Why?!" Nelgin's wife had gotten over her elation at seeing him very quickly. "You featherbrained vagrant, they would have let him out in a week or two! Now, we have to leave our home, our farm, our friends? Nelgin, you should have killed him where he stood and turned yourself back in!" Mistress Kirada shook her finger under Kite's nose, her plump face burning red with hatred for the man her husband had brought home. Kite backed away from the angry woman, til he pressed up against the wall. She had a kettle in the hand she wasn't gesturing

with, and Kite wasn't the least bit certain he could take it away without getting a series of lumps for his effort.

"Alena, listen to me now, the man was just trying to help," Nelgin held his arms out towards his wife in a pleading gesture, but not quite close enough to get in range of the kettle. "Maybe we didn't think it through the way we should have, but they weren't doing right, holding me like that."

She spun on her husband, eyes blazing, "Of course they weren't, Nelgin, and no one said they were, but don't you try to get out of this! Our entire life here is over now, and we've precious little to show for it. I could have done without you for two more days!"

"Aunt Alena, you don't mean that at all. I know better, and so do you," Chiren walked through the front door with a pack on her shoulder. "Now, there's nothing left for it but to pack and move, quickly. I've already gotten feed for the horse for the journey," she said as she dropped her pack on the floor, "I didn't want to interrupt your reunion." She smiled slightly at Kite. He could not readily see what was so funny, and he was sure she saw some sort of joke.

Alena whirled back to face Kite, and he flattened himself against the wall once more, eyes on the kettle waving from her hand. "I suppose you did save my husband at that. Even if a blindfolded cow could have seen it wasn't needed."

"Um," Kite looked around for some assistance, but Nelgin didn't look to step in between his wife and the source of her ire, and Chiren still seemed to think she had discovered a particularly clever joke, "you're welcome, ma'am?"

Alena looked at him as if he had tried to set the house on fire to warm it up, then claimed victory over the winter. "Well, get to packing! You two men go out and get the equipment needed for farming, and don't forget plenty of seed for the spring. Don't expect to

make a second trip; anything the soldiers don't take, they'll burn out of spite. Chiren, go get your cousins out of bed and get them set to packing some clothes as well."

Alena had turned away from Kite and set to ordering the packing quicker than he could blink. He looked to Nelgin, who simply shrugged and went outside. For some odd reason, Kite wanted to make doubly sure that they didn't forget the seed. Not that he was afraid of Alena, she was a small woman, it just seemed like that thing to do, not forgetting seed. After all, everyone's got to eat.

Chiren smiled at her cousins as they began packing in earnest. The twin girls were not much younger than her, but the few years between them were important ones. Ferry and Lana had taken her news without much more than happy smiles that their father was home, and both seemed to have inherited their mother's tendency towards efficiency and level-headedness. Chiren headed back towards the kitchen, but she couldn't help but feel at the handles of her knives that were strapped to her belt. The blacksmith had been awake anyways, what with Kite maiming that soldier's backside in the middle of the street, and he hadn't minded fetching out her ordered weapons for her. She hadn't much money, but Farres had been a family friend and none too happy with what had happened. The blades were slender, but strong. Longer than daggers, the dirks could be used for puncturing thin armor or finding the gaps in thicker, but Chiren liked the idea of throwing them even better. One of her favorite fireside stories as she grew up was about Lelly and the Magic Stone, with the heroine protecting her love from a distance, one-two blades punching into the Horseman, driving him away. Hitting a moving, armored target may not be as easy as it sounded, so a good deal of practice would be needed; she may have her head in the clouds sometimes, as mother said, but she was pretty good at moving

those clouds down to where she wanted them.

She walked into the kitchen to see Kite still looking around dumbfounded. He didn't seem to have a real good grasp on what was going on around him. She wondered how he could possibly expect to challenge the Governor when he couldn't even face down Alena. Though her aunt did have a good argument; Chiren knew she should have explained the situation to Kite better when she first mentioned it, or when he was stalking through the forest to the town, but she wouldn't have felt right trying to stop a man from doing the right thing, even if it was aggressively stupid. Few men seemed to know the right thing, and those that do know don't seem too concerned with following it, seeing as everyone else wasn't anyways.

Kite glanced at her as she entered the room, then he headed towards the door: quickly, as if he was afraid she might give him a tongue-lashing as well. She smiled at him reassuringly, and he gave her a quizzical look in return. He really didn't seem to understand much. "Will you please see to the horses? And don't forget the seed, of course." His questioning look turned to a slightly harsh stare. Chiren couldn't see why; it wasn't as if he had never forgotten anything, and she knew he didn't want Alena to have another excuse to berate him later. She smiled again, and he walked out the front door. She resolved to teach him at least a little bit of his new role in this family. He seemed to still think of himself as the younger sibling who was up to no good, whenever he wasn't off trying to find the best way to agitate the authorities and get himself poked full of holes. She began humming a happy tune as she set about packing everything they would need at the cabin.

"So, what do we do next?"

The sun was shining kindly on the group as they walked through the hills towards the

cabin. Birds would sing out every few seconds, and others would answer. The leaves that were left seemed to brighten for this new day, and the leaves that had fallen made a patchwork carpet for the sleepy travelers.

“Walking some more, I guess. Unless your wife decides we can take a nap,” Kite said hopefully.

Alena had a decidedly different opinion on naps. “Not until nightfall. We can’t be anywhere near our house. If they find us on this trail, they’ll know where to find Mrs. Shaller and Wek too.” Kite found that arguing with a woman using that particular tone of voice was next to useless. But, on the other hand, he was bored.

“If they find us, they’ll find the others anyways. Doesn’t matter what trail we happen to be on at the time. Here, girls, don’t you think Uncle Kite deserves a bit of a sleep after stealing your uncle away from the bad men and ruining your lives?” Kite appealed to the twins riding in the wagon in the back of the group.

Both girls erupted into laughter, and Kite realized what he had implied about himself. He looked at Chiren, horrified. She grinned back at him and mouthed “*Uncle?*.” Alena continued to refuse any sort of break, though she seemed a mite friendlier about it when Kite’s face was blushed full red. Lana asked, in a voice too innocent to be anything but contrived, if “*Aunt*” Chiren had remembered to pack her favorite bowl. She had.

The rest of the trip was fairly uneventful, in Kite’s mind, primarily because he had kept his mouse clenched shut for fear of saying something else stupid. Alena allowed a stop the instant nightfall made traveling dangerous; too many roots and rocks were ready to snarl an ankle or break the horse’s legs, she said, and Kite was all too ready to agree. Or, he would have been if there was a smaller chance that he would say something ridiculous. As it happened, he simply began unpacking his bedroll and casting about through his pack for something to eat. He

found some smoked beef and was about to begin when Chiren took it away and informed him that dinner would be ready approximately half an hour after he had the fire nice and hot. Nelgin had already been set to fetching sticks in the undergrowth, and Alena seemed to be wondering why Kite was so lazy. Even the twins were gazing at him as if he needed some chivvy to be on his way. Kite set to the work with no little grumbling, which Chiren affected not to hear, of course. *He* had slept just fine without a fire on the way down, and the food wouldn't taste any different after he'd eaten it anyways, so why waste time and energy heating it up? But, arguing would have only gotten him into trouble with Chiren and Alena, who had, he realized, taken charge of his rescue mission. The Tales never told of anyone being badgered to start a fire on a perfectly... well, a reasonably warm night, by the very people he had intended to help. And they certainly never told of those people not wanting the help that the Hero had risked life and limb to give. Kite knew that he would have to try something different if he ever wanted to be included in the Tales. The Scribe would never include a story where the good guy gets poked in the eye by a low hanging branch because he was too busy dreaming about his Tale.

Ceran knew that he had gone a bit further than justice demanded. He knew that the King had not ordered such repercussions as he had dealt. But the magic was just so *delicious*.

Below his vantage point on a jutting stone on the side of the mountain, the King's Mage watched the town of Gerrin's Shade burn. The King had wanted a bit of fear instilled in the far reaches of his domain, a little reminder of what happens to those who displayed reluctance in following the King's Law. This little village in the far south had decided to ignore a law that they found unjust. Something about taxes; Ceran hadn't bothered to ask. The thatch roofs had caught fire quite nicely, sending smoke in billows to join the clouds. The pillars of smoke were a

dark gray, and writhed like serpents as they rose to join the fluffy white clouds lingering over the scene. Ceran thought the day must have been quite nice, before he appeared. Now, it was beautiful.

He had walked through the main street of the village, stiff necked in his uniform, ignoring the entreaties of the villagers. They apparently had heard enough stories to recognize a Wildfire, as the King's Magi were sometimes known. The mayor had been nearly shaking when Ceran handed him the Writ of Recrimination. For such an old man (he had to be almost seventy!), Ceran was surprised he hadn't had a heart attack on the spot. The old man read quickly through the paper, and seemed to relax. As long as the... whatever it was... was supplied to Ceran, no one would have to die today. He sent men to fetch whatever he was supposed to give Ceran - whatever hadn't been paid, likely tripled for being late - and three young men presented the Wildfire with a small cask each. The mage didn't even crack the lids to look inside. He stared at the villagers with a slight smile on his face, tantalizingly silent. He savored their eyes growing wider, wondering why he would not accept the proper repayment. How could they think that the King would not bother punishing them, just because they were a tiny flyspeck nothing village on the edge of his rule. The King often gave situations like this to reward his Wildfires, those who had pleased him particularly. Once Ceran reported the situation dealt with, no one would come down this way for a good while. After all, what good were soldiers if they thought they should arrest the King's own men?

Sanga stumbled slowly through the grasses on the outskirts of Gerrin's Shade, making his way towards the rest of his family. There had been nothing left of their house for him to retrieve, nothing left of the entire village worth salvaging. His young wife looked at him from

teary eyes, her fingers running through the hair of his younger brother. A slight wind rippled the remaining leaves above them, a wind that felt like a gentle aftermath of the storm that had destroyed their home. As the Wildfire had stood silently in the town square, smiling at their attempts to placate the King's order, the townsfolk had come to realize that perhaps this particular collector was looking for blood and fire. The grasses under his feet had begun to steam, all the water inside of them boiling away on a chilly autumn afternoon. Winds began sweeping from the mage, whipping cloaks and hair to the appearance of fleeing from the fire building. The Mayor had ordered everyone to flee; Sanga thought he must have seen something in the eyes of the Wildfire, because the order was given before anyone else really understood what was happening. The grasses burst into flame around the man, fire licking at his dark red cloak, black leather boots. The Wildfire's smile grew into a madman's grin as the townspeople grabbed up their children and ran. A laugh sounded in the air, and a pillar of flame enveloped the Wildfire, streaking so high that Sanga couldn't make out the peak, as he pelted down the road towards the fields outside the town, one arm around his wife and the other gripping a younger sister. More would have died, he thought, if everyone hadn't been there to watch the King's Mage refuse payment.

As it was, some of his more foolish friends and family were burnt to a cinder with their arms wrapped around some possession they had valued more than safety. He would grieve for those unwise souls, but those most important to him were safe for the moment, if without shelter, food, or means to make a living. All that would have to be addressed, but the only thing he could not replace was sitting under a tree, soothing her younger brother-in-law. God had provided for him and his own, and the faithful had not been abandoned. The forsaken Wildfire who had done this to them would be brought to justice, in time. Smoke drifted from the broken

village, different plumes winding together towards the sky. He turned his gaze north, towards Lensath, and drew himself up. It wouldn't do for his wife and siblings to see him worn down by the destruction. He must present a strong front, a man truly *faithful* to God, trusting in Him for protection and guidance. And he was guided, he realized.

He would take his family north, and appeal to those in power, up to the King himself if need be, and see this wanton destruction repaid upon that faithless wizard. The wind stirred the dying trees once more, and the sun sank to the horizon, illuminating his old home and his remaining family in a dull orange. Birds flapped towards their nests, readying to wait out the coming night, as they had since they first had feathers enough to reach the sky. Far away, wolves watched their prey, moving together in a way that men cannot match, silent and unified, working without desire for more than a full stomach, without the lust for gold or power, gems or finery, seeking only the successful hunt, facing the cold wind that brings winter. There was a church somewhere that would not accept this travesty, and Sanga would find it. He would see his holy vengeance satisfied, and no longer would his parents be able to say the Church was unjust. The One God was justice itself, and nothing could go against that. Either it was just, and with God, or unjust and against God. The Wildfire was against God, and would get what he deserved, if only Sanga could find patience. Determination set his jaw, and he began packing what little he had left. He told his family that they would be heading north, and the cold seemed to grow with every step taken.

Games could be played when the work was done, but by the end of the day, Grubby's family only wanted sleep. Those that weren't hungry for their pillows didn't really want to spend their few precious free moments getting beaten by the youngest. Fishing was a fine way to

live, if there wasn't anything else, but even reading the currents and finding the schools couldn't match playing Scribe. Grubby had the mat set out on the dinner table, all the discs placed perfectly for battles. A good portion of the map was dyed slightly blue, to represent the ocean; as much as Grubby loved water, he wished his father had given him more terrain to place the pieces. Not being able to have your men make boats to traverse it seemed rather silly, but that's how the game was played. Though, Grubby had never been particularly fond of rules that couldn't be changed. Rules that don't bend get broken.

The Brown Army had good position, up in the hills away with cavalry in position to flank any enemies that might try to get around behind, and to reinforce the pikes or archers should they need it. However, the Black Army had made them pay dearly to get up into the mountains; that was one of those choices Grubby still hadn't decided was wise or not; how much can one sacrifice for position, and how strong a position can one trade for taking pieces? Of course, in some proportions the answer was obvious; Brown could not have sacrificed the pieces required to hold the mountains taking the mountains, and Black could not have let Brown move there if Black did not take a third of Brown's pieces. Now, they were at an impasse. Brown could not safely maneuver out of his defensible position because Black outnumbered him in an open field, but Black could not move Brown out of the mountains because an attempt on the position would undoubtedly leave some aspect of his army flanked by Brown's cavalry. In a real war, Black would split up a few of his units, leaving enough to pin Brown in, and let them hike unseen through the trees, maybe in groups of five, then burn the stores of the Brown, harass them from the trees, then form up behind Brown's forces, feign an attack to draw the first-response cavalry, and move his main force when the cavalry is elsewhere. Of course, Brown would have tactics to counter that as well, but none of them were relevant to Scribe, because his pieces were

carved discs of wood, etched with either a spearhead, an arrow, or a horseshoe. Or at least, as close as the maker could get them. Grubby set to figuring out what would happen next in his game when his mother began picking up the pieces and putting them away.

“Manfred, clear the table, we’ll have dinner in a few minutes. Soup’s almost ready, doesn’t it smell good?” The soup did smell good, and his mother was kinder than most people when breaking him from his daydreams. It would be nice to be able to finish a game though, at least once.

“You do realize what this will do, don’t you?” Alena did not agree with Kite’s decision.

“Yes, and that’s why I’m leaving here before I do it. Neither the Governor nor the Church will put up with this, and I don’t want to inconvenience you any more than I already have,” Kite said with a smirk. Nelgin stood up from the table and stepped between Kite and his wife.

“Alena, I’m doing this with him. It’s the right thing to do, even if they do come after me for it.” Nelgin looked a man stating simple fact, not at all a man about to be bashed in the head by his fiery wife. Alena cast her gaze around the room as a growl built up inside her; Kite thought she was looking for something heavy enough to change her husband’s mind. But that’s not how Nelgin operated; if he had made up his mind, it was because he had looked over all sides and considered all the possibilities, and decided on the correct course of action. If he had been unsure, or still thinking, he would have kept his mount shut. Alena might have hit him anyways, just to make herself feel better, but Chiren spoke up,

“You are throwing away your lives. If you just leave well enough alone, you could live long enough to remember the good ol’ days living in this hovel in the woods. But if you spit in

their faces like this, they won't forget about it."

"Well, that's kind of the point. I'm going to do something they won't be able to forget. And hopefully, everyone who hears about it will remember." Kite grinned at her, and continued, "I'm pretty stealthy, when I need to be."

"Like hell you are, I've tracked you before and I'm a seventeen year-old girl," Chiren replied.

"What? No you haven't. You just knew where I was going and followed me."

"You wouldn't know, you didn't even notice me tracking you! Either way, you know those soldiers would catch you in a week if you didn't always have a day or two headstart."

"Care to make a wager?"

Kite and Chiren were near to shouting at one another, and the display had spared Nelgin's head a good whacking, at least for the moment. Nelgin stepped out the front door, and his wife followed him.

"There's no reason for you to go with him on this Nel, and you know it. The boy can nail his laws to the wall without you there to carry the hammer for him," Alena said. The heat had gone out of her visage, replaced with concern and love. Nelgin shook his head.

"He needs someone's help, or he will die within the month. He is doing the right thing, and he deserves at least a small chance of being rewarded for it."

"Rewarded?" his wife responded.

"With living to see the next full moon, or further. Without someone to guide him, he will decide one day that death makes a grander gesture than running, and he won't think twice," Nelgin said. He sighed and glanced back at the cabin. Chiren's laughter drifted out the windows, followed shortly after by Kite's. "He seems happy enough now, but as soon as he gets

alone he'll be back to what he was when he freed me. The boy didn't care if he died then, and he won't begin caring any time soon."

Alena shook her head vigorously and said, "No, you must be mistaken. The boy doesn't want death. Look at him, flirting with your niece; I think he went fishing with Wek today!"

"Yes, he did. Caught some brush and some bait, I heard. But just wait, he'll be gone within a few more days. It's the nights that get him. He won't show anything in front of the others, or you and I, but I would bet all we have left that he doesn't sleep much." Nelgin pulled out a pipe and twig, transferred some fire from a lantern, and began puffing away. The sky was dark. The moon was dwindling down to new, and clouds blotted out what light the stars would have given. Nelgin scanned the tree line and asked, "Why do you think he wants to nail those laws on to the church doors? It's not because he looks forward to being somebody's granddaddy."

"In my experience, boys never know why they do anything. Maybe he wants to impress Chiren," she said.

Nelgin interrupted with a laugh, and said, "If the boy were trying to impress her, he'd be too red-faced and lightheaded to even find the church. You women never really seem to grasp the effect you have on young men."

"Oh come on, you were never flustered by me when we were courting," she said with a smile.

"Because you never gave me a chance to be. If I had thought for a second that I had a choice in the matter, I would have been stammering at just the thought of you." Nelgin smiled down at his wife. Her eyes were filled with sadness.

"You don't have to die with him. Please don't go," she said, grabbing her husband's

arms for support.

“He’s a good man, and no good man should have to die alone. Sometimes, you have to do the right thing when it won’t accomplish anything. Sometimes a good action does not make a positive impact in any way, shape, or form, but you do it anyways. I know you would do the same thing in my position, though you’d probably be better suited for it than I am, dear.” Nelgin smiled at his wife.

“We’ll have to see. I do not believe that rebellion is very ladylike, but I shall have to give it a chance. I can’t have you sitting there thinking you are the only one making the world a brighter place, no matter how idiotic your methods might be. I’ll talk to Chiren as well, and maybe between the two of us we can give you and that misguided boy a few more weeks of life.” She stalked away from her husband purposefully, looking for all the world as if she would walk right through any armies that came her way. Nelgin worried that he wouldn’t be able to talk her out of this decision, and Chiren would be almost as bad. Kite would help him, but neither of them had a particularly good record of persuading a woman whose mind was made.

The Gods Are Late

The grass crunched underneath Kite’s boot, and at that moment he knew it was too cold to seek justice. The snows had begun, early and heavy, like always in that part of the world, and Kite, Chiren, Nelgin, and Alena were trudging slowly through the forest. They had waved goodbye to Mrs. Shaller and Wek that morning, and as evening had begun to close in, the snow started. And Kite was cold.

Chiren didn’t seem to notice the temperature, or the gravity of Kite’s mission.

“Why are you always so glum, Kite?” She asked, as if she could read his mind.

“It’s cold, it’s wet, and when we get where we are going, we’ll all probably die. That seems reason enough for me,” he replied.

“Now that is just silly,” she said, “If we are going to die when we get there, which I doubt, then shouldn’t you be enjoying your last day or two?”

“Well, I would, but as I said, it’s cold, it’s wet, and we’re going to die,” Kite said as he brushed the falling snow off his coat. Chiren watched him dusting himself, and laughed.

“It’s better than being dead now. And I thought you grew up in the mountains; surely this little bit of snow isn’t any more than what you are used to,” she said, and she smiled, just to annoy him. Nelgin and Alena were walking behind them, grinning. The snow was not bad yet, and though it was falling thickly, it didn’t stick.

Nelgin chimed in, saying, “Our prospects are not so bleak as that Kite. And I don’t even believe you feel that way, or you wouldn’t let Chiren follow along.” Alena laughed as Kite jerked his around to glare at Nelgin. Nelgin just grinned and said, “What?”

Well, I believe he is upset because you implied he has feeling for the young lady. At least, that’s what it looks like. The voice surrounded them, a young man’s voice on the verge of laughter. Kite had already notched an arrow to his bow and was frantically scanning the forest for a target. Nelgin had his sword bared, and Alena had her long butcher’s knife in her hand. Chiren, however, slowly spun, eyes wide, searching the falling snow for a source.

“Hello?” she asked in a soft voice, “Who are you?”

I am immortal. I am more than a simple ‘who,’ and those who feel cold would do well to question me not. The voice grew somber and deep, the voice a young boy uses when imitating his father.

“It’s a simple question,” she said, “and if you can be an ‘I’ then you can be a ‘who.’”

Hah, I like you. But are you not afraid of god?

“You expect me to believe you are God?” she replied.

Kite hissed under his breath, “What are you doing? Don’t talk to it!”

Well, a god at least.

A boy appeared in a leafless tree, directly behind Kite, and the voice became simple and natural. “I’m Chance,” he said, causing Kite to spin around, nearly falling to the ground in the process. As Kite regained his footing, he said a short prayer, hoping everyone else had been focused on the apparition. The boy looked down at him and winked.

Chance appeared to be about twelve years old, with all the mannerisms of the little boy who enjoyed tying a knot in the cat’s tail. He grinned down at the group, and waved his hand in a circular motion. The snow stopped, and the sun broke through the clouds to shine in a little circle, surrounding Chance and the others.

“A little symbol of divinity,” he said with a chuckle. “And, my friend, I would put that arrow away, if I were you. I like you, but shooting at gods is never wise.”

Kite lowered his bow. “What do you want with us?” he asked, trying to sound confident.

“Well, for one part, I like watching you pretend that you are some fantastic hero going off to save the world from ‘evil.’” Chance jumped down from the tree onto the melting snow. “Also, I have a lot of fun watching you pretend to be the lone wolf when anyone with eyes could see you like Bubbles over there,” he nodded towards Chiren, “but lastly, and most importantly, because I want to help you. We’ve all been away for quite a while, and this looks like it could be fun.”

Kite looked around, taking in the face of each companion. No god of the wilderness had

been seen since the establishment of the Church. The King and the priests had nearly convinced the people that they didn't exist anymore, but legends are not easily forgotten.

“You're serious? You want to help us change the Kingdom?” Kite did not trust the little god in any way.

“Why not? Also, you aren't changing the Kingdom, you're rebelling. There's no 'change' in the Kingdom. The gods have been taking a vacation for a reason - nothing fun was happening.” Chance had pulled a lute out of the air and was idly plucking the strings.

“Fine, rebelling. Why would you help us?”

“Didn't I just say, nothing fun has happened in two centuries!” Chance was watching a bird flutter around in the trees. Alena snapped her fingers to draw his attention, and his gaze slid back onto them.

“Well, yes, but why us particularly? Surely you could find some civil war to start, or a typhoon to direct towards a shore,” Kite said.

“I'm Chance, you understand? For the most part, even odds are the best and fairest way to go about life. But every now and then, you have to take a long shot. Life is no fun if every risk you take is sound, is fair, is a good decision. Everyone needs to at least once place their money on the ten-thousand to one underdog, bet on the team that has no chance, and pour blood and tears into the losing effort. Winning safe is good, if you just want to turn a coin, but for real living, pick the losers. And, being the god of bad bets, I can maybe mark a few cards, or weight the dice,” Chance said, and dropped down out of the tree, walking up next to the party. He barely came up to Kite's chest. “Either way, they can't hurt me. I'm a god,” he said as he grinned. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a playing card, then handed that card to

Kite.

The card had a young boy on one side, wearing a white shirt and brown woolen pants, with a knobby stick held in his hand like a sword. He stood with his feet planted wide, his chest puffed out, and a massive grin across his face. On his head was a coxcomb, or jester's hat, with bells sewn in, and his face was painted white, with patches of red on the eyes and cheeks. All in all, Kite had never seen a little boy that he wanted to avoid more. He flipped the card over, and on the back were two numbers which looked vaguely like the odds which gamblers had kept in the cock fights Kite had seen.

"This is my first little contribution to your rebellion. The back of that card will show you the odds of whatever you are contemplating. See, try thinking of killing me. See, the numbers come up infinity to one! Now you know not to try it," Chance giggled at his own joke, "But on this side, you can, well, fix those odds. Now, this will only work once, and I'll have to come replenish it. The rather creepy fellow on the card is Luck, and if you throw the card to the ground with the intention of summoning him, you'll get something to change the tide in your favor. It may not always be something you want. . . I've seen Luck throw thunderstorms around like a ball! Anyways, good luck!" And with that he disappeared. Kite stood staring at the spot where he had been, with his mouth hanging open.

"What the hell?" Alena was looking around the clearing, as the snow started to fall around them again. Nelgin shrugged and re-shouldered the pack which he had set down for the meeting. Chiren looked at her companions and laughed.

"Kite, what does your card say the chances of you being completely dumbfounded right now are?" she asked. Without a thought, he flipped the card back over, and looked down; he frowned hard at her, and slipped the card into his pocket as the sun was covered up by clouds.

Nelgin walked up beside Kite and said, "Luck sure looks a lot like Chance to me. But then again, he also looks like Wek; likely to get into trouble."

The Awakening of the Elements

Earth goes deeper than any man can comprehend. The deepest mines of the dwarves barely scratched the surface of the dark reaches of stone. Water seeps through earth to pools untouched by the sun, and fire sits in the molten womb, waiting to be born. Here, Sarion sleeps with his brothers and sisters, granting peace to those creatures that strive to control him. For centuries mankind has harnessed earth, fire, and water unhindered. The hands and minds of men have grasped the natural forces and bent them to human designs while the Charn slept. Learned men classified, experimented, defined the basic elements of their world, and with such knowledge they felt as if the elements could be controlled. Even wind could not avoid mankind's domination, though the winds did not sleep as others did. The Charn, the spirits and manifestations of the basest elements of this world, were lulled to sleep by the god Persuasion, as the other gods were distracted and drew away from the world. And in that break, mankind grew. Many would say they flourished, but the wise old men would point out that mushrooms and ivy can flourish as well. Men began to believe they could understand Fire; men traversed the Sea without fear; men dug deep into the Rock and ripped out what they wished. The Charn slept fitfully, and earthquakes, volcanoes, fires, and floods struck out at man in a dreaming manifestation of the Charn's unrest. Some Wind Charn, Iyren, escaped the wiles of Persuasion and resisted being subjugated; tornadoes ravaged towns, hurricanes wiped out entire coastlines, and windstorms tore down anything less than stone. But they were outnumbered, and humanity bred faster than the few remaining Iyren could handle.

Now, after three hundred years dormant, Sarion wakes. The dark of the Stone enfolds him, and his brother rock and sister earth slumber gently on either side. Water drips down and Fire burns slowly, and Stone dreams. The great Huern was slow to wake, and slow to realize what had happened. Stone does not change quickly, but over three hundred years, it changes. And Sarion saw those changes, and knew what Persuasion had done.

Far above, on the surface of the Stone, the ground shook. Thunder roared beneath the feet of prideful man, and rock crackled like lightning. The earth pitched and heaved underneath the unfortunate town of Polridge, and the sky grew black as the Iyren congregated over the awakening of the Stone. Thunder above began to speak to the thunder below, and the cries of the frightened children were drowned out by the rumbling of the elements. The stone walls of the Church began to sway and bulge, as Sarion took back the strength that mankind had captured. Lightning struck the steeple in a blinding explosion, blazing white against the darkened sky. Wind whipped through the heaving town, ripping away everything it could carry, raising dirt and rock into missiles, tearing holes in the flesh of the townsfolk. The joyful Iyren stole even the tears from the face of helpless humanity. The wind spirits screamed a welcome through the rumbling of thunder and earth, piercing the sound and dark with sharp songs perched on the edge of human hearing. Dogs heard the Iyren and bolted, sprinting across the uneven ground to escape from the dreadful noises and the dreadful creatures.

Houses shaken to the ground, collapsed on those still inside and onto those who stood too close. Thatch fell, and eager Iyren fanned candles and stove fires onto the waiting tinder. The heavy stone walls of the Church began to bubble and drip, strength deserting the structures of Persuasion. Priests stood slackjawed, looking at the walls that had held for hundreds of years droop and buckle, sliding away in rivulets down to the earth as the roof crashed down upon

them. A crack appeared, running through the middle of the town up to the doorsteps of the Church, then splitting the floor to run out the back of the collapsed building. A snap like the breaking of bone tore through the town, but beneath the rumbling of the Charn and the song of the Iyren, no creature heard it. The crack through the town split wide open, forming a canyon where mainstreet had just been, widening. The fires and rubble and injured townsfolk disappeared into the belly of Stone, and the rumbling ceased. The Iyren called off the storms and the sun resumed her function.

Sarion growled as the earth closed over the spot where Polridge had once been, now nothing but a patch of bare dirt, silent and dead. The human gods and wizards would have felt his awakening, and such retribution as the swallowing of Polridge was neither proper nor sufficient. Humanity was too strong, and Sarion could not break enough Stone to kill them all. But no man, he vowed, would ever forget the Awakening of the Charn.

Planning Fear

The Charn slept heavy, but when Sarion forced the rock to open up and swallow Polridge like a shark devouring a guppy, the Charn heard it, and many woke. They met in a cave deep under the skin of earth; Stone, or Huern; Wind, or Iyren; Fire, or Rathe; and Lorin, water. Each had a representative to speak for them, as the Charn of each element had very little in the way of differing opinions.

For the Rathe, young Garne spoke, “We must tame these beasts as we have all the others. When Wind howls, when Earth shakes, when the Sea roars, and when Fire blazes, humanity must flee as all the other breathing creatures do.”

For the Lorin, Cere spoke, “These humans are not the same as those beasts you terrify

Garne. They build with us, rely on us. Sarion has already punished them enough, though perhaps he was slightly misdirected.”

For the Huern, Sarion replied, “My outburst was poorly aimed, but not uncalled-for and not sufficient. Persuasion has tricked us, and we have slept for three hundred years. Humanity now crawls all over the face of the Earth, and they take what is ours without fear or respect. In the past, we Huern have sheltered them in caves, grown them food, and even given them metals to facilitate their needs. But now they do not even remember the Charn, or respect our elements. They must be retaught their place in this world, and Persuasion must be destroyed as well, to the extent that a god can be.”

Mithea spoke for the Iyren, saying “My brother Sarion is right. The Iyren have not slept as the rest of the Charn; nor could we wake you, as we cannot penetrate the deep stone where you have slept without the assistance of the Huern. We have watched as humanity grew, and the Charn slept. We have sustained their fears, somewhat. As you know, my brother and sister Iyren are easily distracted, and we do not readily work in unison, but the stronger among us gave rise to hurricanes, to tornados, to huge swaths of storm which broke among the humans as they progressed. Cere, we were able to teach them fear of the great waters, as typhoons and sea storms were stirred against them, but their ships still ply across the great oceans. Garne, we have fanned flames where they grew, but without your assistance they do not fear fire as they once did. We could not spread fire quickly or widely enough, and Sarion, we could do nothing to help you. They have harnessed Stone to build great cities, they have harnessed Fire to smelt metal into steel, and they have harnessed Water to allow them to spread, taking you with them, Cere, wherever they wish to plant. The humans do not fear us, siblings, and they do not respect us. We must teach them that we are the rulers of this world - but their gods and their magi will crush

us where they can. Sarion's path of retribution will quickly lead to our eradication. We must topple Persuasion, and teach the humans to fear us, but we cannot openly war against them.

They are too many, and too strong."

"Too strong?" Garne bellowed, "Not for the Rathe. We will burn every village, scorch the very fields where they have plowed into your skin, Sarion. Their magi and their gods will starve, and not one Rathe shall fall. These humans may speak and write as we do, but they are beasts. Less than beasts; the deer and the wolf at least know their place."

"Agreed Garne. No Huern fears a wizard, nor a deity of these humans. The natural gods will not interfere, and those of human making will be crushed as easily as their creators," Sarion said, pounding his fist into the rock for emphasis. Bits of rock and dust fell down around the congregation and a boom echoed, Sarion's frustration echoing with the slam of his hand.

Mithea spoke up once more, saying, "Brothers you have slept and these humans have grown. They are more numerous than the leaves in the forest, than the waves in the sea, than the stars in the sky. You cannot possibly defeat them all, for the Charn are so few. If each Charn killed a thousand humans, we could not eradicate them. Even if their magi do nothing, enough men could halt us, and we would be forced to run. How many defeats at animal hands do you think our brethren would stand? I would be surprised if they accepted even one; they would not retreat, and these beasts know how to kill. With their magi and their priests, they would not have to kill us, and neither could we run. They would bind us to them, as they have bound Stone, Water, and Fire. Would your mind hold out long as a pet to these beasts?"

"You think they could control *me*? Candles and forges, stoves and fireplaces, yes. But no human, wizard, priest, or god can tame me," Garne hissed.

"I have watched them! Their magi wield fires as great as I have ever seen from the

Rathe; they burn each other alive, entire villages engulfed in minutes, and the magi *laugh!* And they would laugh at you as well, if there were enough of them. And there are, Garne. There are so many; the Iyren span the world, and humans do as well," said Mithea.

Cere thought for a moment, then spoke; "Show him. Garne will not believe it until he sees. Neither will Sarion. And, Mithea, the Iyren must know as well that we cannot allow the humans to remain as they are. Whether or not we are to exterminate them, we must remember how we came to be here. Persuasion led us to sleep, and Persuasion leads these humans. It is he that we must eliminate, then all can be returned to the way it once was. We can decide nothing more until we know more. Each faction will send representatives to Persuasion's land, to better understand the situation. Then we can bring them fear.

Daniel

Daniel had always been a good boy. Not just obedient, though he usually was, but really *good*. He was one of the rare youths who was possessed by a desire to do good, an even-though-no-one-is-watching good. Needless to say, this drove what few friends he had crazy. None of his older relatives trusted him. They had been deceived by so many cousins they simply thought Daniel was the best of the best at not getting caught.

Every young man knows there is a difference between his good and his parents' good, and Daniel was no exception. Daniel had seen a neighbor girl be banished into the wild to fend for herself because her fiance thought he had seen her kissing another man. The Kingsmen had stopped Daniel's village from lynching a group of merchants with whom the mayor had squabbled over prices. And, always in the back of Daniel mind was the knowledge that no one believed he could be what he was. It takes an unhealthy mind to believe that no one would put others before themselves.

But, as young men are wont to do, Daniel had much more pressing issues at hand than the boundaries of good and evil. [The next village over] was going to be holding the Hilgen festival to mark the beginning of spring. And Daniel was in charge of Drawern's delegation for the Layman's Joust. Workhorses were being taught to charge, and every boy in town had turned his walking stick into a sword. Daniel, being the captain, was forced to use the mayor's old tourney sword, chipped and splintered though it was. For now though, Daniel used the sword he had made three years ago at his first tournament, a worn, broken-in friend that he called Slayer.

Slayer cracked against the attacking stick, turning the overhead blow down to the left. Daniel's brother Hig was stronger, but he had no direction with his attacks, and Daniel deftly turned away the blows with minimal effort, leaving Hig unguarded. After the third redirection, Daniel decided that Hig simply wasn't going to get it; so, after the next predictable overhead attack, Daniel let his opponent's blade slide down Slayer to the right, stepped slightly left and in, and then delivered a rap to his brother's gut.

"Ow! This is why no one will practice with you Daniel," Hig rubbed his injured stomach.

"You did the same thing four times in a row. What did you expect?" Daniel hated this part of practice. The problem with younger brothers was that they were younger. They didn't know as much, and they didn't pick up new things as quickly. Daniel sparred with Hig whenever he could convince his ox of a little brother, but, well, no one likes losing, and Daniel suspected that little brothers liked it less than most people.

"Look, you can do this. You just have to adapt your strategy depending on what I do, like I did for you, see? You kept attacking overhead with a lot of force, and I could deflect it without too much effort," Daniel said, showing Hig the posture and blade positioning he used to

brush off the attack.

“No, you can do this. I apparently cannot,” Hig turned away and went back towards the house. *He’s probably hungry*, Daniel thought. And, though Hig was in fact hungry, Daniel knew his brother was just tired of training. No one seemed to see the games quite the same way Daniel did. Every boy looked forward to the Layman’s Joust, and every peasant across the kingdom revered the lucky four who won the People’s Tournament, and were raised to the nobility, free from work for the rest of their lives. But everyone else saw those four as legend, instead of simple farmers or village folk, as Daniel did. And so, when the local tournaments rolled around, Hig and the other villagers like him did not think they had a chance.

Daniel’s father had said to him a year ago, “Son, you can’t win that tournament. None of us can. There are four winners each tournament, and the People’s Tournament is held every four years. That’s one man a year, out of the whole kingdom. And not just out of the farmers and village folk; there’s soldiers competing, mercenaries, bandits. Men who would slit your throat in the tent the night before. And you are nothin but a little country boy. Give off ‘training’ and go cut some firewood, the forge is gonna get cold.”

The rest of the village held that same mentality. No one from Mattern province had ever won, and of the sixteen that were elected to attend each People’s Tournament, only two of the four teams would ever go. And of those, Daniel wasn’t sure how many had made it back. So, the Layman’s Joust was a fun distraction for the locals. Every young man wanted to hold the gilded hunting horn trophy, and though every young woman claimed to disdain the tournament as bestial foolishness, no one missed it that could attend. The more competitive of the men took it quite seriously, and prided themselves on their supposed prowess, though in Daniel’s opinion the local tournament was more about brute strength than anything else.

At least, that was why he had lost the past two years. His mother had been very reluctant to let her boy go fight against all those horrible, rough men from the village over, but Daniel finally persuaded her with the argument that he was fifteen and nearly full grown. And it helped that all those horrible, rough men from the village over were actually his mother's cousins, and were no bigger or more violent than the men in their own village. And so, Daniel had gone on to compete in his village's tests, in which all the competitors vied for a spot on the village's Warband, which was the team of four fighters that was the focus of the Tournaments.

Daniel had also entered in to the Swords contest, which was a bit of a side attraction in between the main events, but Daniel was best in that arena. Simple enough that Daniel could understand it fairly well without any experience, and because it was one man versus another, Daniel thought he would be less susceptible to their greater strength. In the Warband melee, he would be crushed by the sheer force of the attacks, and would not be able to shield his comrades. He remembered that day, the anticipation and fear he felt knowing he would enter into combat with a full grown man, with a beard and everything. Beards are not particularly effective in combat, but Daniel couldn't wait for his to come in just for the intimidation factor. That wad of hair surrounding the mouth and chin looked like just that much more armor that an opponent would have to circumvent to get at the wearer.

Daniel shook his head, trying to get on with his memory. He had been replaying those earlier fights every day, looking at his own mistakes, and the tactics used by his enemies. Luckily, the villagers did not seem to use particular styles; they mostly fought as wild animals, trading blows and attempting to pounce on any weakness in their adversary. There was very little in the way of plans, tactics, and strategies. In such close quarters combat, thought was less important than action. Daniel remembered the heat of it, the sweat coating his fingers (which

had prompted him to wrap Slayer's hilt tightly in cloth), the burning instincts that drove out his plans with the irresistible urge to *MOVE LEFT NOW*. Daniel had tried to plan, to know what he would do next, and his mind took those plans and threw them to the dusty floor of the makeshift arena.

This, he knew, was the real problem. No matter how much he practiced against his brother, or how long into the night he thought and planned, when big Rog the stableman was swinging what appeared to be most of a tree at him, Daniel knew he would flinch away and do nothing but try to avoid the blow. He had won a few matches, where his opponent had given him room to compose himself and launch an attack or two, but against a simple head-on charge, Daniel always flinched. For his entire life, he had been able to do most anything he set his mind to. That attempt at flying when he was five, and trying to marry his cousin Hena at nine both failed pretty miserably, but Daniel didn't really count those.

Who a person is changes every few years; Daniel didn't think of himself as the one who had jumped off the roof while holding two live chickens. Nor did he think of himself, the Daniel currently inhabiting his body, the one who wanted a beard, as the Daniel who proposed to his older cousin because all grownups he knew were married, so he might as well get it over with. This Daniel did not understand why everything couldn't be a matter of effort, of willpower. That was the only way that seemed fair; those who tried the hardest and practiced the most should be the best. That only stacked the odds though. For the most part, the winners of the Joust were the strongest and the fastest. And that wasn't Daniel.

Daniel's hands were numb by the time he wrapped them around the ax and began chopping wood. The snow clouds had moved in-between Drawern and the sun, and thick snowflakes landed on Daniel's bare hands and melted into tiny water droplets, running down his

arm to wet his sleeves. The settling dark made it colder than his family cared to be out working in, but Daniel was willing to sacrifice a bit of comfort to watch the snow fall through the trees, the brilliant white of the blanket curling up with the darkness made by the clouds and the setting sun. The shadows of the trees became less and less until they disappeared into the shadows that swallowed up everything in sight. Behind Daniel, his house glowed a meek orange, and intermittent strands of noise drifted up to him as his family prepared to eat; but he preferred to stare off into the forest, and to strain his ears with all his might, to try and hear just one snowflake land on a tree. He was amazed every winter, that the cascade of countless snowflakes falling from clouds way up in the sky could all crash simultaneously into the earth, and make not one single sound.

At times like these, he could let go of the Tournament and just enjoy existence. The snow would fall on and off for a few months more, but Daniel knew he would not feel them as he did that night. Once he went down from chopping firewood, he would remember the other Daniel; the one who wanted to prove himself at the games every year, the one who needed to succeed at every endeavor, to show himself at every moment that he really was worthwhile. Ah but the Daniel who turned his back on that house and those people, who stared through the trees, hoping that if he looked long enough, he might see a path to the other side, that Daniel was happy. That Daniel wanted nothing more than to walk forward into the darkening trees and keep this contentedness until the moment he breathed his last. But it was cold, and his family would need a stock of firewood to keep when the snow dampened all the trees. A good son would never shirk on his chores, and he wouldn't get lost in the woods, or eaten by an animal. A good son lifts his axe, and gets to work. The thud of the axe and splintering of the wood broke the magic of the snow, and Daniel could have wept.

Strategy

Fishing was so boring. Grubby couldn't imagine a pastime with less actual action. He understood it took patience, and skill, and a training, but he did not particularly want any of those things, especially when his opponent was a fish. Net fishing wasn't that bad, you actually spent most of the time doing something, but angling? Sitting in a boat or on shore with a rod and line, hoping some idiot creature would bite a hook so that you could eat him? Once your line was cast, there was nothing for it but to wait. And people did this for fun. His family caught tons of fish to provide food and money; work did not have to be entertaining or engaging, it had to pay off. But Grubby didn't understand fishing at all. That and staring at the ocean were both beyond him. Of course, the ocean is beautiful, but after a certain point it does nothing new. In his eyes, the ocean had been there for generations before he came to look at it, and it would be there for generations afterward. His staring at it wasn't going to change anything.

Being twelve, he did not have a whole lot of opportunities to change anything, which his parents thought was one reason he played so many games. In there, he at least had control over the little brown pieces. And so, when Grubby was out with his father, fishing or just watching the ocean, he developed an unusual talent; he could play Scribe against himself, in his head. He only had a few cloth maps to actually play on, and his family would not play with him very often. He had begged his father multiple times to build a third set of pieces, so that he could play two of his siblings at once, but his father wisely decided that Grubby was too small to give his older brothers one more reason to beat on him.

So Grubby played alone, in his head. This of course made him a terrible sailor. His father would have to scream to get Grubby awake enough to perform simple tasks; he would fall off of

the boat, he got so caught up. Eventually his father started leaving him at home, just not waking him when the sun started to rise. He ended up helping his mother and sister around the house, preparing food, salting and preserving the catch, mending nets and clothes. But even then, he was no good at it. Sitting on a bench weaving nets allowed him to daydream with no real distractions; if his mother didn't constantly keep him focused, he would be gone, disappearing into his own head.

And so Grubby packed up his game board, two weeks worth of dried fish, some biscuits and vegetables, a change of clothes, and three canteens full of water, and left. He went right after his father and brothers left to go fishing, so that his father would see him staying at home, and his mother would see him rushing to catch up with his father. That way, he had a good twelve hours before anyone discovered he was gone. He only regretted leaving his sister Dera, the one who had taught him how to play, and had painted his maps. He left her a note, and small Scribe playing piece he had carved, which had a marking she didn't recognize as either Cavalry, Archer, or Pike; it seemed to be a little house, two lines making walls and two more slanted on top of them to form a roof. The letter said,

"Thanks for teaching me to play, and for playing with me all those times. I always thought it was strange that there were only three types of piece, so I made a new one just for you. Each side gets one, and they must protect it. If this piece is captured and destroyed, the army lives on, but that side can no longer win the game. Tell mother and father that I'll be fine, they don't trust me like you do. I promise I'll come back soon, once I find something that I can really be good at. I'll make up a whole new set of rules while I'm gone, and then we can play again.

I love you,

Grubby."

He hoped she recognized the carving as a house.

The road started out great. There were strange people, large, smelly animals, and new geography for him to analyze. The dirt felt fresh, the grass was bright, and the wind ruffling his hair was refreshing and cool. In fact, the entire first day away from home was wonderful, and the little twelve year old wondered why everyone didn't run away from home. As the sun began to set, though, the strange people stopped looking intriguing and started looking dangerous; the animals remained smelly, but their droppings became much easier to step in as the light failed; the new landscapes were no longer full of possibilities, they were full of unknowns. And so, Grubby's first night away from home was spent cowering against a hay bale in a farmer's field, shivering with cold and fear, wishing for his boring bed and his boring mother. Bed was far away, and safety was not to be found. The stars lose their beauty when the gazer realizes that they could be the only witnesses to his death, if he were not to see the morning. The constellations are no longer pretty shapes in the sky, but distant gods glaring down with a blinding apathy to the fate of one small boy.

The next morning, he realized that the long and enjoyable walk he had taken away from the fisher's hut had bestowed quite a soreness to his legs, and sleeping in a field had rewarded him with more than just freezing temperatures; everything he owned was wet from dew. Each of his maladies were simple enough when dealt with alone; he could hardly avoid getting wet every now and then while fishing, nor could he avoid being forced to sleep on the floor when a relative came to visit and he was unceremoniously removed from his own bed. His province of Rale on the western coast of Bresalon was not particularly cold, but it did not escape winter as the Kearl

and Berem provinces did, and waking up chilled was nothing new. But, before that night, he had never been forced to endure all of them at once, and by Grubby's estimate, the afflictions somehow mated and spawned a host of little copies, which nestled in every inch of his body. Then he was hungry, and broke out the ration of food he had packed for the morning's breakfast, which was still quite good despite being cold and slightly damp. The sun rose quickly and warmly, displacing the cold that had preyed upon the land, and when Grubby began to move about, his legs felt much better. He walked around for a few moments, trying to get his bearings; the food settled and chased off all the maladies which weren't fixed by the movement. And little boys do forget quickly. Grubby set off down the road, heading north because he'd already seen south once.

Grubby had never been particularly good with other people. Even as a baby, he would only let his mother or his sister hold him; being a baby, he couldn't so much physically determine who held him, but shrieking worked just as well most of the time. So, walking up the road, which he could only assume connected to another road, which probably connected to a bigger road, which would eventually lead him to somewhere important (for all the maps his father drew, Grubby had never seen a real map of Bresalon, only the maps of the ocean near his village), Grubby didn't try to talk to any of the few travelers that he ran across. But, after a few hours of walking in silence, he began to wonder that no one had yet asked him why he was out alone. He had heard of street urchins, but surely he didn't look so unkempt after one day away from home that people thought he was an orphan. He had gotten lost at the fair one day, and after a few minutes of wandering idly looking for his mother, a friendly woman and her silent husband had taken him under their wings until they found his parents. And now, after a day and a half, not one person thought that he might have needed help. Or maybe they did, but he didn't notice

anything more than wistful glances from a few travelers.

When he had been lost at the fair, he never felt particularly afraid. It was a fairly small venue, and he had only been away from his parents for a few minutes. But, the goodwife who helped him had hushed him as if he were bawling, and given him a bit of honey cake. They wandered around the fair for what couldn't have been more than five minutes, but she talked to him the whole time, asking his name, where he lived, what his parents looked like, progressing into questions about who he was, and what his life was. When they found Grubby's family, his mother was overjoyed, as if he'd been gone for a year. She thanked the strangers profusely and the two women had embraced like sisters. Grubby assumed that was what happened when a child lost his mother, or a mother her child, and it seemed right. After all, the reunification was so happy that everyone around left that street smiling, none more so than the kind stranger and Grubby's mother.

The apathy of the passersby felt like a travesty to Grubby. He wanted to shout at them as they averted their eyes, that he was someone's little boy and his mother was missing him. He kept his mouth shut, because he could not reliably predict what someone who left a twelve-year old fend for himself without so much as a "can I help you" would do. He did, however, make an about face and head back down the road to his house because he was his mother's little boy and she must be missing him.

He camped out in the same farmer's field as last time, and the cold didn't seem nearly so bad when he was heading home. He ate well for his next breakfast, because he had packed a week's worth of supplies and didn't see any reason to come home with extra. He walked the short distance back to the road and began the rather short journey home, already planning the strategy he would use in the welcome home game of Scribe he hoped his brother would play

with him. As his village came into sight, Grubby noticed a small group of men marching out towards him, which was very strange because he had only heard of marching in stories, and no one he knew had ever had occasion to march. But marching they were, twenty King's soldiers followed sloppily by a group of fifteen or so young men from the village. A sergeant was marching at the head of the villagers, watching them over his shoulder and barking directions at them. Grubby hurried off the road and climbed into a rather prickly hedge. The soldiers at the front must have seen him, but they didn't appear to care that he was there, or that he had hidden. The soldiers looked like they were sick of tramping around chief port of nowhere, and the villagers looked as if they had been blindsided by the boom on their own boat.

As they walked past Grubby's prickly hiding spot, he recognized almost all of the villagers. Even those that he could put no name to, he knew their faces. He immediately recognized the face of his brother Feron, and saw the pack on his back was filled to bursting. Feron seemed to have gotten the hang of marching already, better than any of those around him at least; most were too busy looking back at their little village to even notice the sergeant bellowing orders and degradation. Feron kept his head locked forward, muscles tensed as if he were manning the rudder in a winter's storm. Grubby had seen that look before, once, on his father's face, which was not too different from Feron's.

They had been out all morning, pulling in catches so large they had to worry about the nets breaking; a monstrous sea beast called a prame found the same school as Grubby's boat had, and did not feel like sharing. It began ramming the small craft, coming close to tipping them over, swamping them, or tearing a hole in the bottom of the craft. Grubby's father sliced the nets immediately, letting that catch flop back into the water, and steered straight for shore. A prame was usually a death sentence for fishermen; if the boat retreated, the prame sensed that it was

stronger and could devour the boat. If the boat stayed, the prame would attack until it actually did devour the boat. Perhaps it was luck, or perhaps his father was just a better sailor than those who had been lost to prame before, but they made it back to land with only minor damage to the craft. The look his father had worn when fleeing from the creature was nearly the same as that which Feron wore now, except that Feron appeared to be heading further out to sea.

Kite waited outside Tregin as the sun ambled down towards the horizon. Winter is the perfect time to start a rebellion, he thought, because it gets dark early, and no one wants to chase bandits through knee deep snow. Snow also can cover tracks, and when the sun sets hours earlier, people have nothing to do but talk and a new rebellion is quite a story. Chiren, Nelgin, and Alena were sitting round a fire and looking over Chance's card, presenting it with increasingly bizarre situations and laughing quietly over the odds.

"All right, I'm thinking. . . what are the chances that Alena will try to tell you how to use your sword in the middle of a battle," Chiren said, and flipped the card over, then began giggling. "Yes, that's about what I would have guessed," and she handed the card to Alena, who forced a smile.

"She's already told me that I need to lose some weight if I'm going to fit into my armor properly. I don't even have any armor yet, and I would think that if we do get some made, the armorer won't have some sort of prejudice against a bit of a paunch," Nelgin replied and grinned at his wife.

"I wonder what the chances are that you two survive the night," Alena replied with a wicked grin. The card changed numbers again, and her smile withered. Nelgin and Chiren leaned in to try and glimpse the number, but Alena whipped it behind her back and said, "No, I

think that's bad luck to look. Anyways, the odds are pretty good, just not as good as I'd expected. There must be some sort of trouble ahead, more than just nailing some laws to a door." She stood up and walked over to where Kite was standing at the tree line, watching the stars replace the fading day.

Fortunately, the night would be clear and they would have decent vision. Unfortunately, the night was clear and there was a chance of being tracked. Alena tapped Kite on the shoulder and asked sternly, "What is your plan anyways? I don't want to let some boy make all the decisions and get someone hurt."

"You know, I was just thinking that over. How did I get this far without remembering there would be guards at the door? I don't think there's anywhere we can put them that the townspeople will see them, without the guards seeing us. How's that for a plan?" Kite stared out over the coldshriveled grass and sighed, his breath making the only visible cloud.

"You had better be kidding with me young man," Alena placed a hand firmly on his shoulder and turned him to face her.

"I wish I were. I think you all should go back home, and I'll figure something out. I shouldn't be more than a few days out here, and then I'll meet you back at the cabin."

"No, we are not letting you dig our graves any deeper; at least not by yourself. For some reason my husband," she gestured back towards Nelgin and Chiren, who were watching but unable to hear, "thinks that he must accompany you on this inane quest to change the world. And because I am a dutiful wife, I must accompany him. And I do not intend to be sleeping out in this damnable snow any longer than I must. So we are going to *something* tonight."

Kite didn't really like being threatened by a woman a full foot shorter than he was, but it was probably better than being beaten by said woman. "All right, what do you suggest we do?"

There are guards in front of the Church, probably a lot of them after what I did freeing your husband," Kite paused for effect, but Alena did not show any signs of gratitude, "and that's really the only place that we can be sure that everyone sees what we've written."

Chiren raised her voice slightly, and suggested, "Perhaps we might be of assistance. With whatever it is you two are discussing. Because I'm fairly certain you didn't bring me along to be the muscle."

Nelgin snorted a laugh and poked at the tiny fire a bit more, and pretended he could not hear anything. The smoke rose up from the fire in a pathetic wisp, not even enough to choke on if he had opened wide and tried to eat it. Nelgin quietly listened to the other three, enjoying the slow scent of woodsmoke and formulating a way to complete all of Kite's goals without getting anyone unnecessarily dead. A confused bird chirped somewhere deeper in the forest, and Nelgin prayed to Thiya that it would regain some of its sense before the cold or hunger froze it. The sun had better uses for its time than to thaw out the corpses of birds who didn't know to fly south for the winter, but sometimes those birds just couldn't bring themselves to leave the white forest beauty and death.

Early the next morning, Kite, Chiren, Nelgin, and Alena walked down the center street of Tregin. Mudslush covered the cobblestones and the townsfolk began to gather along the sides of the road. Some of the villagers were drawn to the appearance of the Nelgin, Chiren, and Alena on main street in broad daylight, and a few noticed that the stranger with them had a quiver full of black feathered arrows. The sun was weak, and the night's cold had not yet receded. As they passed houses and shops, people were yelling for those still inside to come see. Kite hadn't thought that their very presence would draw the attention he wanted, but apparently Chiren and

Alena knew these people well. Of course, no one called out to them; for all appearances, the four were walking straight to a gallows, if they got that far. Chiren was smiling at the people she knew, and her step seemed lighter than the it had any right to be. Nelgin walked the same as he had down the mountain, not showing any hurry but not wasting any time. Alena had her jaw set, and she was flipping Chance's card around in between her fingers, but other than that she looked ready to bite someone's head off; Kite wondered at their ability to look normal under these circumstances. He felt himself a mess. Even though the air was still biting, sweat ran down his neck. He felt as if every other step was a stumble, because he could not bring himself to glance at the ground. His eyes were fixed on the Church at the end of the road. Two guards were stationed there, just as they had been the night he freed Nelgin.

By the time they reached the end of the street, the entire population of the town was congregated behind them, close enough to see and hear clearly, but far enough away to remove any possible hint of association with Kite or his party. The two soldiers stationed at the Church actually appeared a little nervous to face them, which seemed a bit odd. The soldiers were wearing thick chainmail and each had a well made spear along with the shortsword and shield strapped to their armor. Kite had nothing but his bow, Chiren appeared to be holding some long knives, Nelgin had a longsword, and Alena had a large stick that she found in the woods on their way into town. All in all, they were not what one would expect from the founders of a rebellion, no matter how small that rebellion might be.

Chiren stepped forward and addressed the soldiers, "I have an accusation to make. A few weeks ago, some men came to my house, assaulted my family, and murdered my father when he

attempted to protect us. These men are dead, but I demand that you pursue the full course of the law, and remove these men from their military graves, and strip them of all property and honors."

The soldiers stared at each other for a moment, then the soldier with three black bars on his uniform, as opposed to the two on his companion's, responded, "You are all under arrest in association with the murder of the King's soldiers. Chiren Shaller, Nelgin Kirada, and Alena Kirada, you are not accused of committing this crime, and as such will not necessarily face execution," the soldier turned towards Kite and gulped, "provided you surrender this man and yourselves into our custody immediately."

Kite thought they must have come on a bad day, because the soldier addressing them was making no move to apprehend anyone. He was constantly glancing over his shoulder, as if to reassure himself that his partner had not run away. And the man behind him looked like he was regretting his decision to become a soldier. Yes, it was four against two, but with two women and no armor, but Kite had expected these men to attack them immediately, rather than engage in any sort of discussion, especially with the town watching.

Chiren's face darkened, and her words came out like whips, "My father did no wrong, and neither have any of us. You, and your ilk, have no such defense." She raised her voice and it carried to every ear in the village, "Those soldiers who you claim were murdered by this man," she thrust a finger towards Kite, "were drunk and intending harm to myself and my family. My father was complying with their unfair demands, until they threatened me. What is the law for rape in this kingdom?"

The soldiers stood dumbstruck, unable to find an answer for her words or her eyes. The villagers behind her were murmuring and bubbling, and if the soldiers had seemed nervous before, they were rabbits under a winged shadow now.

"That's enough. Arrest them," a voice boomed from behind the crowd. A troop of soldiers stood in the street, headed by a gigantic sergeant who was staring right at Kite. There were about twenty foot soldiers, fully armed and armored. Apparently someone had alerted the barracks to the presence of the fugitives.

"How confident do you have to be, criminal, to walk right down my main street? Unless you have an army hidden in those woods, and if you do I'd signal them soon, you are trapped."

"These people should hear the truth, from someone who actually saw what happened. You have no more information than that some soldiers died, and you tried to arrest everyone who was nearby. Do you really think Tom Shaller attacked them without just cause?" Kite replied over the crowd. The soldiers began pushing through the milling villagers, but there were around two hundred spectators and few were feeling much sympathy towards the soldiers.

"Those soldiers were following the King's Edict, as should every citizen of the Kingdom. And as such, whatever they requested was within their rights. They are the King's hand in this realm, and the King is God's hand. There can be no excuse for killing the agents of God." The sergeant was not moving towards Kite, but simply locking eyes with him over the crowd, Kite on the Church steps and the sergeant standing taller than anyone else.

"Everyone must be held accountable. You, me, and God, all are responsible for our actions, as were those soldiers. And I am responsible for killing them, as is Tom Shaller," Kite looked down into the crowd and said, "You do not know me yet. My name is Kite, and I killed a handful of the King's soldiers, to protect those who had sheltered me. I will submit myself to the consequences of my actions, if I can find a neutral party that is capable of producing justice. For now, I ask that you each decide whether Tom Shaller is a criminal for attacking soldiers who were assaulting his family." The soldiers were nearly to the Church now, weapons drawn and

wearing wolves grins. "I ask you to help us hold these men accountable for what they have done. Do not let these men get away with murder," Kite gestured to the sergeant, who appeared content to let him finish his little speech, "and do not teach your children that those with power are always right. Stand with me!" Kite bellowed his last sentence and nocked an arrow to his bow. Then, like a lightning bolt, the townspeople as a whole held perfectly still. Kite drew the arrow back to his cheek and sighted the sergeant. Chiren slipped her knives out of her belt and Nelgin readied his blade. They stood at Kite's flanks, and Alena hefted her stick and shoved between Kite and Nelgin, scowling something fierce.

"None of you? I know the faces in this crowd, and you all know mine! Your mothers taught you better than this. You all knew Tom, and know that we aren't lying to you!" she yelled at her friends and neighbors. The soldiers had finally broken through the packed crowd and formed a semicircle around the group. The two Church guards had slipped away and joined the ranks of their fellows, fear gone and replaced by hunger.

Someone in the crowd yelled back, "Tom was protecting his family, and so am I!" Murmurs of agreement rippled through the crowd, and the soldiers had the group pressed up against the Church doors.

"You said this would work," hissed Kite under his breath.

"It should have! These are our friends!" Chiren replied.

"I cannot blame them," said Nelgin. "If they try and fail, their wives and children will suffer."

"Maybe they were right not to try," Alena said, "But it's too late now for us to follow their lead!"

The sergeant began walking through the crowd, which then parted before him. Everyone

in the street understood exactly who was the victor and exactly what would happen should they try to change that. Alena glanced down at the card and saw the odds. "This isn't good," she whispered. She prepared to throw the card as Chance had said but just as she raised her arm, Nelgin spun around and kicked the doors open with a boom.

"Hell," said Kite, and he loosed his arrow directly into the chest of the sergeant, just as he cleared the crowd. The soldiers bellowed and lunged for them, as Nelgin jerked Chiren and Alena backwards into the Church. The sergeant fell to his hands and knees at the foot of the Church steps; he opened his mouth and blood fell out, and he collapsed, lying on his side supported by the shaft protruding from his chest.

Kite jumped back. The soldiers obstructed each other as their semi-circle collapsed into a smaller space, giving Kite enough time to get in the Church. Nelgin tried to slam them shut, but a soldier shoved the head of his lance in between the two doors. Behind them, Chiren raced down the pews to the last rose-colored window and smashed it with the hilt of her dirk. Glass shattered and shattered again upon hitting the floor. Chiren and Alena jumped out of the window, followed immediately by Nelgin. Kite reached the broken window and fired another arrow into the group of soldiers pouring into the sanctuary, then followed his companions without seeing if his shot had hit.

A handful of the more intelligent soldiers had circled the Church, predicting this. Four charged them as Kite hit the ground. The soldiers went for Kite and Nelgin, two each, and as the first brushed past Chiren, she plunged her knives deep through his armor and into his stomach. She spun out of the way as his momentum carried him another two paces, then he fell clutching his wounds. Two had reached Nelgin and were attacking synchronously, which yielded him a slash to his ribcage, but the one who had shouldered Alena out of the way received a hefty hunk

of wood to the back of his head, and he crumpled. His partner glanced to his side to see what had happened, and Nelgin delivered an overhand blow to the point where his shoulder met his neck, and he fell the same as his companion had, if with a good deal more mess. Kite was battling the last of the four, using his still strung longbow as a bent quarterstaff. He turned away a thrust of the pike and stepped closer to his adversary, and dealt him a swift kick to the groin, which was unfortunately met by a solid metal codpiece. Kite's foot bounced back and threw him off balance. The well armored soldier stepped closer and gripped his weapon tightly for a final thrust, but Chiren had covered the distance between them and thrust both her knives through his armor and into his back. The soldier fell, and more began pouring out of the Church.

The forest stood half a mile away from the Church, and in between was a stubbly field of dead and dying grass. Chiren, Alena, Nelgin, and Kite took off across that field like so many rabbits from the baying hounds behind them. Their feet pounded across the uneven field and their breaths formed a little trailing cloud behind. The soldiers sprinted after them, pursuing vengeance on the ones who killed their comrades. But they gained no ground. The soldiers wearing their chain mail and carrying their spears and crossbows could not outpace the four fugitives; five of the fifteen pursuers unslung the crossbows that had been slowing them down and ratched them back into firing position. The remaining ten kept up the chase as five bolts flew over their heads and ricocheted off the frozen ground after flying past their quarry. The crossbowmen planted their weapons to pull back the bow string, and the lighter rebels were not far from the treeline.

Kite heard his lungs battling the cold air and his feet pummeling the frozen ground, he saw Chiren and Alena in front of him, their feet barely touching the ground, and he saw the nearly barren treeline ahead of him. Nelgin was not far behind Alena; he positioned himself to

be between his wife and the following crossbowmen. The soldiers were falling behind slowly; the remaining brush in the forest would give the unarmored runners further advantage against the heavier pursuers. Bare branches leaned down and gnarled roots reached up, snow piled in between the trees and dying leaves fell; quarrels flew over the pikes and helms and split the air between hunters and hunted. Kite heard the high whistle and felt the ripples in the wind as bolts went on both sides of him. Another went over Chiren's head, a fourth went off to the right of Alena, and the fifth thudded in Nelgin's left shoulder. Kite felt a heat build up in his chest. His eyes became sharper, his breathing became smoother, and his teeth were bared. Chiren and Alena made it to the treeline and continued into the forest, and Nelgin continued right behind them, ignoring his wound for the moment. Kite reached the treeline well before the pursuers, but as he stared into the gray shade of the sleeping trees, the heat inside him roared into a fire, the same as it had in the Shaller's barn.

Nelgin turned to find Kite standing on a stump at the edge of the trees, with his bow drawn. Nelgin drew his sword and winced, then ran back to assist his insane friend. Kite roared at the pursuers and let an arrow fly, through the eye of the leading soldier. He drew and fired again, downing another of the charging soldiers as the shaft pierced the chain mail to enter the target's lung. Again he drew and loosed, as Nelgin reached his side. The soldiers were charging with renewed vigor, and the crossbowmen had let another volley fly; one quarrel went straight at Kite's heart, but as Nelgin watched, Kite flicked his bow around and knocked the shot up and into a tree. Kite drew once more, and held the string tight against his cheek, and the soldiers slowly came to a halt not ten feet away. They were breathing heavily as the crossbowmen caught up to them.

"Go back home. No one more needs to die today," Kite said in a lowpitched growl, as a

beast guarding the boundaries of his land.

The soldiers saw the criminal silhouetted by the winter forest, trees forming a frame around him and snow a background. The wind picked up and whipped his cloak and hair viciously, but he neither blinked nor flinched. His eyes roamed between each soldier, locking with every one of them. The two women emerged from the forest, stalking silently as wildcats, flanking the injured man and the mad archer. The trees danced above his head, bending and bowing; the forest behind him ran deep, sucking the light out of the blinding snow; shadows flitted around the treeline, dancing in and out of sight; and the madman stood still as stone, but for his eyes searching theirs.

"You know we have done nothing besides defend ourselves. Tell your superiors that we escaped into the woods."

"We should ignore the deaths of our comrades? You have deaths to answer for, and many more today. You are avoiding capture, and defying the orders of the King's soldiers. You will surrender to me now, or you will die," responded the lieutenant. The archer turned slightly and fixed his eyes on the Lieutenant.

"Good, so you want to die first?" The archer tensed, and the larger swordsman placed a hand on his arm to stop him; the archer turned and bared his teeth at his friend, with fire in his eyes.

Nelgin stared back at Kite, matching his intensity with a look of blanketing snow, cool and heavy. Kite looked like his namesake for a moment, his eyes seeing nothing but prey and his body tensed to kill. Nelgin whispered, "I don't know if you think you really can kill them all, but

you can't. And if you try, maybe you get what you want, but Chiren and Alena will get hurt too. And I'm not leaving your side, so whatever you decide, you have more than your own life in your hands. And that man over there," he gestured towards the soldiers, "probably has a family too. He may be in a bad position, but what about his wife, his children?"

Kites voice came out as a hiss, "He continues their lies, their injustices. He was going to imprison your wife, if we hadn't stopped him. They beat you, they starved you, and they killed Tom. They must die."

Nelgin gripped Kite's wrist tighter, and said, "Maybe some of them do. But these do not need to die. They will not pursue us any further. You think your cause is right, and I do as well, but don't forget that they think the same. You must decide who to kill and who to protect, but do not err towards violence. Better a few evil men live than a few good men die, if we can ever tell them apart."

While they were speaking, the crossbowmen had moved closer and leveled their weapons at the group. The wind and trees and snow still gave Kite the backdrop of a mad spirit, and the soldiers were frightened of the sudden change in weather and the warriors that had killed so many already. But they outnumbered the criminals greatly, and only one of them had a bow. Each soldier sent up a small prayer that someone else would find the crow feathers sticking out of their chest.

"Surrender now, or we fire. One bolt for each of you," the lieutenant said, looking between Chiren and Alena, "and two for the murderer with the bow."

"We are not going to surrender. Better to die here in the snow than be taken by the King's soldiers," Kite said. He felt the warmth throughout his body, in every muscle and every bone, burning and ready to find a target.

The lieutenant yelled "Fire!," and Kite released his arrow right into the lieutenant's throat. The crossbowmen pulled their triggers, and a blast of snow and wind swept from the forest under the soldiers, and up under the crossbows. All five quarrels went over the heads of their targets, and no one moved. The heat had gone from Kite, and his clumsiness had returned. He knocked another arrow in his bow, but didn't draw. His hands shook, and his heart began to race.

The next soldier in the hierarchy stared at Kite, seeing a demon out of the Story. All of the soldiers backed away, and the now-leader said, "You escaped into the woods. We were unable to track you. We do not believe you present any immediate threat to Tregin."

Kite nodded at him slowly, and then turned his back on the soldiers and walked deep into the sleepy forest. Chiren drifted back into the shadows, and Alena tried to support Nelgin as he followed Kite away.

They ran into Chance on their journey home. He sat in a tree branch as before and was whistling as they came upon him. He smiled down at the weary group, and said, "Now wasn't that fun!"

Kite glared up at the little boy god and shook his head, then said, "We almost died. And we killed those soldiers. I don't see how that could be fun."

Alena interjected, "Or lucky; I thought you were supposed to help us."

"Oh now that is just ungrateful! Why do you think the clumsiest soldier was in the front when they all lunged for you? Why do you think that Kite's blind shot in the Church hit the best crossbowman that they have? Why do you think the wind picked up and the forest got all scary for you? Why do you think Kite started burning and stopped being so clumsy? All of it was me!"

Or rather, it was all luck. Which is a lot like me," Chance shrugged and grinned. He studied the long faces before him; each looked tired and hungry and sad. "Come now, this is a victory! Greatly outnumbered, the valiant heroes stood their ground and sent the enemy flying! Huzzah!" he yelled, and pumped his fist in the air. None of them followed his example. "All right, you're going to have to get used to kissing death if you are going to lead a war."

"Well, maybe you have the wrong people then. I'm not leading anything. Tregin showed me that only a handful of people will try to overthrow the King, no matter how unjust his rule is. They prefer right and wrong as ideas instead of practices, and I am having a hard time blaming them. I will lead no war," Kite said.

Alena stepped forward and held out Chance's card, and said, "And you can have this back as well. The card told me that the odds of the people rising up against the soldiers were twenty to one. It obviously doesn't work."

"Oh, it works. You may have read it wrong, or you may have just been the unluckiest rabblers I've ever come across. Though, with Kite's speech, I'd say maybe you read the odds backwards," Chance said with a grin.

"There was nothing wrong with my speech!" Kite blurted.

"I actually thought it was pretty good," said Chiren. Kite's face turned just a hint red.

"My dear," said Chance, "to the gods, everything you humans do seems a bit ridiculous." He vanished into the snowy air.

Wraiths

Githrun's room was freezing. The maid had built a blazing fire in the hearth, and he sat leaning into it, wrapped in a thick fur blanket. The maid herself was sprawled on the bed; Githrun couldn't tell if she was asleep, unconscious, or dead. He was running out of money, for

the room, the maid, the liquor. The kingsroom, which most upscale inns kept, cost more than he could afford, but lenders couldn't touch him now. And who would dare try to collect from Captain Githrun, the most feared pirate in Bresalon? He shivered and pulled the fur closer. He ached, in every muscle that he could still feel. A feared captain was tame without a feared crew, and his crew was running scared to every corner of the waking world. If he had known, he could have opened the letter in private, and perhaps his crew would never have known. But no, he thought perhaps the King wished to bargain with him, because no one in Bresalon could catch Captain Githrun. The maid coughed violently on the bed, shaking and thrashing in her dark state. The messenger moaned and begged, pleading to be released back to shore. Of course, Githrun had planned to oblige him, provided the messenger could swim without hands or feet, and the sharks weren't hungry. He made his threats, his boasts, and watched with a smile as the messenger quaked. Then, as he opened the letter, the messenger dropped his charade and grinned back at the Captain.

Githrun dropped the letter to the deck as the man began to chuckle, then Githrun drew his cutlass and removed the messenger's smile, along with the rest of his head. The damage had been done. That very night, three crewmen took a lifeboat and were never seen again. The night after that, Githrun found two of his men dead on the deck, another lifeboat gone, and seven more men gone with it. Githrun gave up. He ordered the boat back to shore, and as soon as they docked, the rest of his crew disappeared like ghosts in a fog. So he sold his cargo and took this very nice room and the very nice whore that cost about the same. Githrun also found some expensive bottles in which he spent the next week of his life. And now his money was running out. Even with all the luxuries and women he had purchased, the last week had been the worst of his existence. And tonight the worst of that. Amelia probably wouldn't wake up, not after the

amount she drank, mixed with those special things that the innkeeper had given him to try. If she did wake up, she'd leave him as soon as the sun came up. Her contract was up then, and she would disappear too.

So Githrun sat and waited for the Wraith to find him. Or rather, to do something about him. He was sure the Wraith already knew exactly where he was, may even be watching him now, if the thing has eyes. He pulled out the letter once more and ran his hands over it; at the top was the seal of the Prime Magus, a glittering sun rising over a castle, and underneath was his death. Beneath the Prime Magus' sigil was the faded hand print of a Wraith. Spindly fingers reached longer than a mortal man's hand, and the hand itself was slimmer. At the end of the fingers, nails came out another inch or so. The paper of the letter absorbed these details as if a shadow was sitting on it, as if the hand was poised right between the letter and the light, but holding it up to the noonday sun could not erase that mark. That was why his crew had left, why he had given up his life, and why he had not spent a moment sober since he reached the shore. A Wraith was after him; he had probably captured and killed a relative of someone important in the Capital, or disturbed something the King or Prime Magus had wanted left alone. Even now he didn't know, and he supposed he never would.

Githrun tossed the letter into the fire, and drew his belt knife, then pressed it stiffly against his throat. "No more fear," he whispered to himself, and began to draw it across his veins. A hand with fingers like spider limbs gripped his wrist and pulled the dagger away from his throat as only a trickle of blood poured onto his shirt.

Oh not yet, the Wraith whispered, *you have so much more to give me.* The captain's strength gave out. His knife clattered to the ground, and he let loose a sob. The Wraith drew his own blade with its other hand, and brought it into Githrun's view. The blade flickered like a

candle flame; it looked like pure steel but moved like a wisp of breath on a dead winter's eve. Githrun kept his eyes locked on the blade and his head locked forward, unable and unwilling to look back and gaze into the eyes of the Wraith. He died that way, his eyes locked forward, his mouth contorted in a scream, blood pouring out of it. If you don't look at it, maybe it isn't real.

That Winter

Kite, Chiren, Nelgin, and Alena went back to the cabin in the mountains with Mrs. Shaller, Wek, and the baby. The snow came in heavy and deep, across the Oreskil mountains and the flatlands beneath them. The soldiers of the garrison of Tregin were dismissed after allowing the criminals to escape; their tales of a demon archer and the trackless forest did not buy any sympathy with their commanders. The loss of so many soldiers to one group of near-civilians was unacceptable. The soldiers were informed that they should probably line up another means of employment, because as soon as their replacements reached Tregin, they were no longer in the service of the King. But the snow came in too suddenly and too hard, and the replacement garrison didn't appear. Weeks went by and the soldiers were stuck just like everyone else.

Tregin was covered completely, as it was most winters. The northwestern province of Bresalon, Oreskil shut down every winter, and the only travelers were merchants making exorbitant profits off the cooped up populace for dried fruits and other such memories of summer. Every now and then, some crazed mother or father would decide that the children needed to visit with their distant relatives a town over; most of the townsfolk thought this desire was caused by a temporary insanity brought on by weeks indoors with annoying children or spouses. The weather was too harsh to spend much time outside, and only so much work on a

farm can be done in the house. And so the people of Oreskil found other ways to entertain themselves. Some farmers decided to go through their stores of alcohol, which helped chase away the cold. Some had hobbies to focus their energies into. Some simply used the time to catch up on the sleep that was denied them throughout the rest of the year. But the best way to keep from going mad was to tell stories and sing songs. They would gather at the inn and listen to old tales, of the coming of the King and the Wars. They would play songs of ancient heroes on worn guitars, singing along because everyone knew the words. When the clergymen joined them, generally after the Service, they would sing praises to God and to the works of His servants; these were widely considered less fun than the stories of the wild gods of nature and of man.

When the sun was memory and the fire was getting low, when all the children had been taken to bed and all the clergy had locked themselves away for a night of prayer and grooming, the older villagers began telling stories of those old gods, the ones who had never existed, according to the law. They told each other stories of the love of Thiya, the goddess of life, and the miracles She worked to protect those who loved her. They would tell of the great battles between Shorn and Meren, and the forces they each gathered to themselves. They would tell of the birth of the human gods, from the womb of Thiya and the seed of Pedrid, or Knowledge. Then, after most of the village had gone home, they told stories of the beginning of that winter, and the death of Tom Shaller.

Mard stroked his beard as the fire burned lower. The inn at Tregin held only seven patrons; the rest had departed for their blankets to wait on the sun. He motioned to his grandson, Gerif, to put another log on the fire, and nodded as the boy obeyed. His daughter had raised her

son to respect his elders. Or at least his grandfather; Mard was fairly certain Shari did not know her son wasn't at home, though the boy was sixteen and old enough to be let off the leash. The fire popped and cracked, and the other patrons all looked at Mard patiently, waiting for the old man to begin his story.

"You were all there too, you saw the same thing I did," he said gruffly.

"Still, we want to hear the story from you, Mard. When you tell a story, it's clearer than my own memory," replied Nerry, one of the remnants.

"That's because you kill all your memories with ale, Nerry," said Mard, which brought forth a chuckle from the small crowd. "But alright, if you say so. Just the short version; even my skin feels old at this time of night." Mard knuckled his brow and closed his eyes, then took a deep breath and began.

"The man with the black feathered arrows came walking through the town, his hood pulled back and his face out in broad daylight, for everyone to see. Tom's daughter was there with him, and Nelgin with his wife. The only four people in the whole of the province, walking down the street for everyone to see. Word spread real quick that they had come to turn themselves in, but no, when I first laid eyes on him, I knew this was not a man who surrendered. I'd bet he hasn't given up anything in his whole life that he didn't want to, so hard he looked. They walked right up to the Church, and that man grabbed the guard by the front of his shirt and pulled him up real close, and said to him, 'We're here to see the Captain, and to give justice to those who murdered Tom Shaller.' The guard looked so scared that he had to make a great effort not to dirty his linens. The guards at the Church were ready to give the man whatever he wanted, but as soon as the rebels had shown up in town, someone," Mard ran a venomous eye over the listeners, "ran and alerted the barracks. We still don't know who.

But the Archer had expected this; it was just the way he wanted. When the Captain brought out the whole garrison to arrest them, he got to say his piece in front of the whole town, instead of in the barracks or Church. He wanted us all to hear what he would say.” Mard continued on, re-telling the victory of the Archer, of his feats of magic at the edge of the forest, and of the villager’s shame. Mard spoke at length, as the fire dwindled and the snow piled up, and every listener remembered what they had seen, and what they hadn’t done.

Mard finished his story and closed his eyes. This wouldn't be the first night he spent sleeping in his chair at the inn, and he was much too tired to walk home. As he drifted off and the others drifted out, he muttered, "Maybe he'll give us a second chance. We could use some good in the Kingdom.”

Over the next few weeks, some of the soldiers began showing up at the inn for song and drink, and stories of times recent and long past. With the snow settled in like an unwelcome cousin, the townsfolk were forced to get to know them. At first only one or two would join the villagers, but gradually the soldiers realized that they had no reason to maintain the same sort of distance and threatening posture towards the citizens. With a pending dismissal, some even began asking around after different means of employment, though most were preparing to return to their homes, which were scattered across the four corners of Bresalon.

When a few of the arms-men became regulars, they were asked to fill in their portion of the storytelling. Initially they just retold the same old stories that the clergy favored, and none of the villagers wanted to risk trouble by telling any overly wild stories of the gods before God. This quickly bored everyone to the point of tears, and the soldier who had been third in command on the day Kite had been in town, the one who had agreed to let them escape, decided

that he was in such deep droppings with the King and clergy that no story he told could possibly make anything worse. His name was Tirrod, and when the storytelling was passed to him again, he announced that he would tell a tale of old gods, and the wildness of Oreskil. The audience ceased the dull murmur that generally accompanied a soldier's tale and seemed to back away from him slightly. Even mentioning one of the old gods around a soldier would have gotten at the very least a whack with the spear haft, and around a clergyman, the offender would likely be given a couple years of damnation. The King and Church decided that the memories of the old gods must be erased; perhaps they were afraid of some sort of return.

Tirrod sat back in his chair and twisted, trying to loosen the muscles in his back a little. "Yes, that's right, the old gods. This is a good one, too. My grandfather told me this story when I was a boy; probably played a part in me becoming a soldier. I'll be a bit rusty, and I'm not a great storyteller, so bear with me," Tirrod looked around at the expressionless faces and coughed into his hand. "Yes. Well. A long time ago, in a year before we kept track of years, the armies of the Warlord Amator were moving against the forces of Meren in these very mountains. Wait, hold on. Umm. . . I don't remember why Shorn and Meren were fighting again, but they were. One being the god of War and the other being the god of Conflict, on top of one being human and the other being natural, they probably didn't need much reason," Tirrod said with a smile. The audience stared back blankly still. "Oh wait, I know now. The men were expanding in the Oreskil mountains, and Meren claimed them as his territory. When Amator sent a battallion to clear out the mountains for settlement; oh! it was because of the iron found in these mountains that Amator wanted to take them. Sorry, anyways, the first settlers to this area disappeared. The second group of settlers that Amator sent also disappeared, and the third.

So he took a battalion of his soldiers, early in the summer, and marched to the foothills.

At the edge of the great forest, Meren himself came out and met with Amator. He just appeared in the Warlord's tent, so no one knows what Meren looks like, except for the other gods of course. He told Amator to leave this place alone, that he owned this forest, and would not allow anyone to pass through them. Meren claimed that he had no dispute with the humans, provided they stayed out of his territory. As you all know, Amator was not one to be deterred so easily; being the favorite son of Shorn, he called upon his patron and told him what Meren had said. Shorn led that battalion into the shadowed forest that very day, floating at the head of the column, calling out for Meren to come and face him. They marched for hours, and all the while Shorn yelled insults and accusations into the quiet wood." Tirrod paused for a minute, resting his voice.

"The sun sank over the horizon, and Shorn began to shine like a bonfire, giving light enough for every man to see. The moon came out just a sliver that night, and the wind whispered quietly. The soldiers did not tire, because Shorn was with them and gave them strength, but they did begin to fear, just a little. For they were not gods, and even Shorn's power cannot make a mortal into a god. From the birth of humanity, night has brought fear, and that night, Meren brought even more. Wolves howled on every side of the battallion, and the shadows surrounding the men took on a deeper hue, and became more solid. They found a valley large enough to hold them, and started to clear the trees to make fortifications. Most of the army was formed into a tight square, with rows of pikemen on the outside in an attempt to cover the soldiers assigned to clearing the interior trees to make stakes and space.

"Meren did not know war, but he wasn't stupid. He did not give the humans time to make fortifications; throughout the battle between Meren and Shorn, the god of Conflict had learned that once humans dug themselves in, almost nothing could dig them out. So, like the

beast he is, Meren attacked head on. Wolves poured out of the forest like a rushing river, sliding around trees and rocks like water, to tear out the throats of men. Howls still sounded, in every direction, drowning out the commands bellowed from officer to soldier. Shorn's blaze gave off enough light to fight by, but the darkness and the beasts and the forest brought with them the most primal fears of man. The screams of the wounded filled the air, mingling with the howling wolves. But the lines of men still held. They had nowhere to flee, and at their back, Shorn stood shining. As the noise of battle rose, so did the light from Shorn. He flickered and roared like a great bonfire, and the creatures of the forest fell back. Trees burst into flame as he expanded, creating torches that burned high above the heads of men, destroying the shadows that surrounded them. The humans cheered him, and slaughtered the creatures that had not escaped back into the darkness. But the cheering fell short when burning branches crashed down amongst the soldiers; the fire began to spread throughout the valley, and the men called on Shorn to stop the fire, to protect them. But in War, sacrifices must be made. Shorn would not allow Meren to survive this fight, and the fire spread further. The fires grew and the air began to cook.

“The shadows ceased falling back. Shorn grew brighter and the fires grew hotter, but the darkness around the edges of the valley did not fade. Meren had joined the fight. Shorn's light began to dim, and the fire in the treetops dissipated. An icy wind swept through the forest, and many soldiers removed their helmets to feel it sweep the heat from their skin. After a few minutes, the fire was gone from the forest, except for the beacon that was Shorn, in the center of the confused human troops. The soldiers crept backwards, closing the gaps in their line and shrinking towards the protective warmth of their god.

“In a clear voice, Meren said, "This place belongs to me, and to the wolves, cats, and bears of these mountains. You will not displace us. We have no quarrel with man, as long as he

understands his boundaries."

"Come, show your face, coward! Do you take refuge behind these shadows, and these beasts?" Shorn bellowed in reply.

"My beasts know their place, Shorn. Yours are wild beyond comparison. Do you come to this place for food? For shelter? Are you threatened by these creatures? These are all reasons to invade these mountains, but they are not why you are here. You have molded these men so much to your liking, they are here to find rocks that will allow them to kill other men," said Meren.

"Does that matter Meren? Should we turn our backs and flee now? With iron, these men have crushed the other tribes, who have long since driven off your wolves with stones. They are stronger than your beasts, as I am stronger than you!" With that, Shorn leapt into the forest, after the shadow of Meren. Torches were quickly lit, but could not drive off the shadows. The wolves returned, howling from the trees. The men could hear the panting and growling of the wolves from ten yards away, but their fire was not strong enough to illuminate them. And, for the first time in his life, Amator succumbed to his fear and ordered a retreat.

The humans kept their formation as they marched back the way they had come. All through the night they marched, as quickly as they could. Behind them, never abating or fading away, they could hear Meren and Shorn battling. Growls would rumble through the dirt, causing the ground that the soldiers stood on to quiver. Shorn bellowed his fury and screamed his pain as they fought. The mountains shook when one would throw the other. Even the wolves quieted as the two gods battled.

The soldiers made it out of the mountains, into the foothills, still encompassed by the great Oreskil wood. The wolves stopped trailing them, and their fires seemed to bring more light

to the trees around them. A few beasts remained, flicking in and out of the corner of men's eyes, shepherding them back home. When the fears of night and fang and claw subsided, Shorn reappeared in the midst of the soldiers, still burning brightly. He called upon Amator, lamenting that his chosen would retreat from anything, let alone the simple beasts of Meren. Shorn claimed to have bested his natural counterpart, and commanded the battalion back into the mountains, to mop up the remnants of the lesser animals, as they had so many times before." Tirrod again rested, ordering another drink and clearing his head.

"As soon as the soldiers took a step back into the woods, the shadows returned to their attack on the fires. The trees once again held a myriad of dancing shadows, each with bright eyes and hungry jaws. For the third time, the howling recommenced, immediately reaching a fever pitch. The wolves were joined by mountain cats and huge forest bears, hissing and roaring at the intruders. The entire mountain range had emptied and congregated at the call of Meren. Wolves began darting in under the pikes of the human, ripping weapons from hands and limbs from bodies. Amator held his men together well; every time a rank was broken, gaps were filled. He bellowed his war cries, and led his own guard into the ranks when they seemed close to breaking.

A deep black appeared above their heads, blotting out the stars and sliver moon. Meren let out a screech and swooped down towards Shorn; he had taken the form of a black winged bird, massive, with eyes that glittered like the stars he had hidden. The men watched in awe as their god, the mighty Shorn, the undefeated lord of all battle, fled the field. The bonfire that was the human god of War disappeared, not to return to these mountains for generations of men. The wind from Meren's passing put out the torches of the soldiers, and would not relight. The beasts attacked with a renewed vigor, and, like their god, the humans broke. Among the ranks, all order

was lost. Each man threw down his weapon and ran as fast as he could. Even the elite guards of Amator were seen sprinting for their lives in a little clump around their leader.

A third of the battalion made it out of the forest. We learned later that not all of the soldiers were killed by the wolves; some, who had run deeper into the forest, or simply been unable to escape, learned to live by Meren's rules. Those that weren't eaten, that is. Those soldiers became the backbone of the Kymati tribes, who lived here hundreds of years ago. The battle of the Oreskil Wood provided enough reason for humans not accustomed to Meren's rule to stay out. Until the King came of course, and God became the only one. At least, that's how my grandfather told it."

Tirrod ended his turn there, and another villager began a story. He refilled his tea, and listened.

The snows melted, as they always do. The replacement soldiers had still not arrived, and the people of Tregin began to assume that they would not. Much of the remaining garrison departed, for home or greener pastures. Those who remained were mostly those who had developed some connections in Tregin, even as little as sharing stories at the inn. As the snows disappeared, clearing and plowing began for the largest part of the community; those with other trades also went back to work, as soon as the farmers did. Tirrod assisted where he could, primarily because the garrison was incredibly unstimulating. The only points of interest remaining in the barracks were the rations they had stored up. Those were dwindling as well, because none of the dismissed soldiers would take on the unpleasant job of collecting from the nearby area. Most reasoned that since no new soldiers would ever show up, there was no reason to carry on with their duties. Tirrod agreed, though he did keep in contact with five other

soldiers who liked Tregin and planned to stay; he wanted to be prepared in case anything untoward happened.

Tirrod wasn't the only one suffering from the effects of weeks trapped in a small area. Kite had sneaked away from the little cabin in the woods, leaving Mrs. Shaller, Wek, Chiren, Alena, Nelgin, the baby Tom, and the twins Ferry and Lana. That was quite a few people in quite a small living space. He had been tempted to risk freezing to death for just one night's sleep away from them. And now that the snow was disappearing and the spring replacing it, he took his chance. He had been walking for a few days, wandering back and forth, watching the beginning of flowers and grass and leaves. But ultimately he was aiming for Tregin, and he arrived there in the early afternoon. The sun was high, and everyone seemed to have a little extra kick in their step, probably because of how few steps they'd been able to take, from one wall to the other. At least, that was why he was so sprightly.

Another man in Tregin was also happy to be out and about. Ceran had spent the winter in the capital city, Voldest, and had very few situations to release some of his energy. The King's Magi were always well taken care of, with expensive quarters, food, and women, but all of that was laughable next to Ceran's true needs. All the Wildfires had the same urges as he did; they lusted for an opportunity to unleash themselves, to stop holding back, to prove what they were truly capable of. And this time, the Prime Magus had given him permission to act as he would. Apparently, the Duke of Oreskil no longer found it feasible to garrison and supply a town so far north, and so, after the request passed from the Duke to the King to the Prime Magus, Ceran was given orders to destroy the town. He understood their thinking, really. The town had become nearly useless, and the Duke could not afford to send any more supplies or soldiers so far out. And, some criminals from the area had apparently killed off a few Kingsmen, which of course

could not go unpunished. The reason that lent Tregin to annihilation, however, was that there could be nothing in the King's domain that the King did not control. Cutting the little town loose would have created a tiny, insignificant, unimportant counter to the King. In simpler terms, Ceran thought, *He's given them their own nation, and then declared war on it. Unfortunately, they won't know until the enemy is at their doorstep, burning down the house.* He smiled to himself, and appeared right in front of the Church. He was to give the clergymen a chance to return home with him, but he sincerely hoped that they refused.

He banged on the door, and when the Churchman recognized him, the man nearly needed an excuse to change robes. Ceran sent him to fetch the ranking villager and commander of the garrison. No sense spoiling his meal by wolfing it down all at once. The appetizers must come first, or the meal is over much too quickly.

Kite watched the stranger from the edge of the forest. He felt slightly nauseous when he looked at that man, unlike any he had ever felt before. He felt as if his gut was trying to pull him away from the stranger in red robes. Kite had felt his own fear many times before, but was unaccustomed to his insides having a fear of their own, and frankly he thought that he didn't need any more fear; his own had served him well so far. On top of that, his skin was tingling, and Kite felt as if he were on the brink of whatever it was he had experienced before, when he and the others had fled Tregin. Weeks of different mental exercises had not yielded any results, but staring at this new man set him on an edge, teetering between fleeing and igniting his internal flames and... doing *something*. So far he had only become much less of an oaf when he burned, but he had begun to suspect that the gust of wind that deflected the crossbow bolts at edge of the woods had come from him, and not from Chance. Kite pulled up his hood and did his best to

pass across the open grass unnoticed, towards Tregin.

Pollit, the priest at Tregin's Church, burst into the inn, panting. The Church wasn't a hundred yards away, but the clergy didn't get a whole lot of exercise. Tirrod stood and walked over to the red-faced man, and said, "What can I help you with today, Father?"

"There's a . . . at the Church. . . a Wildfire. . . wants to see us both," Pollit said. *Perhaps it's fear more than exhaustion*, thought Tirrod, as his mind began to spin. *Why a Wildfire here? Surely the King had more pressing criminal matters than the Archer killing a handful of corrupt soldiers. Or maybe he's here for the garrison, as a further punishment for failure. Surely that would be a bit harsh.*

"Mard," Tirrod said to the old man he had been sharing a lunch with, "get everyone together and move into the woods. It may not be safe here. There's a mage, wants to talk to Pollit and me."

"And him," gasped Pollit, gesturing towards Mard.

Mard nodded curtly, and spoke to the innkeeper quickly, giving him instructions. "Well," Mard said, "best not to keep him waiting, I'd guess," and he walked out the door, limping slightly with his back straight and stiff as an oak.

"Ah good, a terrified priest, a decrepit old man, and a disgraced underofficer. Just the people I was hoping to see," Ceran said with a smile. He had always been one to savor. "As you can probably see, the King is unhappy with your actions in the recent months. You," he pointed at Tirrod, "have allowed a criminal to escape justice, and have lost many soldiers under your command. You have also failed to protect your superior officers from this criminal. You are

sentenced to death, along with the remaining garrison. You," Ceran pointed at Mard, "and your villagers, have rebelled against the rightful rule of the King's soldiers. And yes, you may say that only a handful of your citizens have done so, but I honestly do not care. You and the populace of Tregin are sentenced to death. You," he turned towards the cowering priest, "are incompetent and weasely. But I have orders to allow you safe passage back to your Duke, if you wish it."

The priest released a heavy breath, and began, "Surely you needn't kill all of these. . ."

Ceran cut him off, "*However*, if you decide to share the fate of those you tend, I will not try to stop you." The priest went silent. "Good. Now, old man, call forth all your villagers. If they are ignorant of their sentence, it is not really an execution."

Mard stared at the Wildfire without moving.

"All right then," said Ceran. "I have a good way of getting their attention." He winked at Mard, and smiled again, and the old man burst into flames, his clothes, his hair, his skin, his eyes all spouting goutts of fire. Tirrod lunged at the Wildfire, hoping to distract him, but Ceran thrust a hand at him and he was catapulted backwards down the street. The priest stood stock still in horror as Mard crackled and popped like a log. The first villager noticed what was happening, and her scream got all the attention Ceran wanted.

The people of Tregin began to stream out into the streets, mothers covering their children's eyes and fathers holding their families close. After a few moments, Mard was little but a pile of bones and ash, flames still lapping up what little was left. Ceran projected his voice over the throng, saying, "This is the beginning of your punishment. You have rebelled against your Duke and the King; loyal soldiers have died at the hands of Tregin's citizens. The remaining soldiers," he motioned towards Tirrod, crumpled against a building, "share your fate for failing

to bring these civilian rebels to justice."

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Ceran saw people running across the fields toward the forest; someone must have warned them. He closed his eyes for a moment, and conjured a thick wall of flame between those fleeing him and the forest. They skidded to halt and looked back at him in horror. Ceran's fire raced, forming a circle around the entire village. His voice still amplified, all he needed to do was whisper, "Oh no, you will not escape my justice, little ones."

Kite flinched as the wall of fire erupted behind him. He had passed those townsfolk attempting to flee, and held a finger to his lips for quiet. They had nodded and kept going, but now they were looking at him, crouching against the back of the inn, not fifty yards from the Wildfire standing in the street. Suddenly, Chance was crouching next to him, the boy god smiling viciously. "Here's your chance, friend," said Chance, "and time for me to tip the scales a little." He disappeared, and heartfire sprang up into Kite's chest for the third time. His vision was sharp, his movements were swift and agile, even his heartbeat was more forceful. Kite nocked an arrow to his bow and crept into the alley. The Wildfire had turned back towards the crowd, near to giggling at the fun he was about to have. Kite drew the string back to his cheek, took a deep breath, and released.

The encircling flame brought just the effect Ceran wanted. The townsfolk were now hoping for his mercy, instead harboring thoughts of defiance. That was the problem with executions; if the people thought that their life was already forfeit, many preferred a fighting death. So, Ceran always made sure to put on a display of power at the very beginning, to quell any heroes with thoughts of fighting the Wildfire. He stared into the faces of his victims, but

none would meet his gaze. Ceran loved that part. Without any magic, or even any words, he could taste the surrender of each individual. But as he moved his gaze, one young woman did not look away. She stared at him, with anger in her eyes! This poor girl would die first.

Pain ripped through him. For just a moment, his sight went dark and he fell to his knees. But the King's Magi are not frail creatures, and Ceran directed his heartfire at the point of searing pain. It ebbed, and the area around the arrow began to heal. The shaft remained lodged firmly, stuck between the remnants of two ribs, but he could see again. He turned towards his attacker, barely in time to send a surge of power at the next arrow and incinerate it. Ceran took a step towards the cloaked figure in the alleyway, and stumbled. The arrow would not kill him, but he was weak, from both the injury and the healing. The circle of fire dwindled into nothing; the silence was broken, and children began to scream, adults began to cry, and many villagers began to run away, with no particular direction in mind except away from their executioner. His attacker stepped out into the street, and loosed another arrow. Ceran once more fired the little burst of power he needed to deal with such mundane attacks; but this time, the arrow did not stop. He was met with a countering force, shielding the arrow as it sped through the chilled air. Ceran's heartfire enhanced reflexes allowed him to move slightly out of the trajectory, and it missed his heart.

Kite's third shot thudded into the Wildfire's chest, entering above the other arrow, puncturing near his shoulder instead of the kill shot Kite had intended. He had felt some of the heat leave his body and somehow surround the arrow. Kite had no idea how he had done it, and he had no idea what to do next. He continued towards the mage, who was slouching over his two wounds. With every step, Kite expected to burst into flames, or be ripped to shreds, or some

other horrible fate that always befell the enemies of magi. But nothing happened. The Wildfire stood up straight once more and glared at Kite. The mage had blood dripping down his robes, staining them a darker red than they were before. Kite felt a warmth encircling him, akin to that fire inside him, but wrong. He suddenly knew that the Wildfire was trying to ignite Kite's flesh, as he had done to Mard. But the force could not displace Kite's own fire, and nothing happened.

The whelp was a mage. Ceran couldn't touch his body with heartfire, not while the target was burning. And Ceran's own power was draining quickly, as he had to siphon it to keep his lung functioning with the arrow lodged deep inside it. But Ceran had spent seventeen years being broken and remade in the Academy, from the time he was three years old until he graduated as a full Wildfire, loyal only to the King and Prime Magus. This little candle of a mage was nothing after all Ceran had endured, and he would be crushed like a fly. Fire erupted all around Ceran, but this was his fire, and would not burn him. No, the taste of this fire was his own, the smell, the color, the sound, were all Ceran's. The flames shot high in the air, and the Wildfire grew bright as a bonfire on a moonless night.

Kite tried to draw more fire from within himself, to match that incredible amount being wielded by his opponent, but nothing would come. He felt already that his insides were melting from the heat he held. Kite could not imagine the heat that must be surrounding the heart of the Wildfire. He gripped his bow tightly and braced with what power he had inside, waiting for the storm that was about to fall down upon him. He locked eyes with his opponent, willing himself to at least see what would happen. He would die, but not as a child cowering in his mother's arms. And this view allowed him to see the two young villagers charge at the Wildfire, a young

woman with bright red hair wielding a broom and a young man with what looked to be a hoe. The mage's flames rose higher and higher, as if he were trying to obliterate Kite with such force that not even memories would survive. Kite drew another arrow and fired, protecting it as he had before, but the Wildfire motioned with a hand and the arrow disappeared in a flash, not even ash remaining. Kite fired again, the bowstring snapping barely audible over the crackling of the Wildfire. The very air seemed to blister and pop; Kite felt as if his own fire might as well go out, because there could be no competition with what faced him. He had never felt so helpless, like a newborn puppy whose eyes were still not open trying to fight a mountain lion. The Wildfire unleashed, and Kite held his ground for a shard of a second.

The onslaught ceased as the two villagers reached the Wildfire; Kite had a stray thought, wondering if all that had taken so short a time. The young man whacked the Wildfire in the side the head with the handle of his hoe, and the young woman swept his legs out from under him with the broom. The mage's eyes went wide as he crumpled to the ground with the two furious citizens belaboring his head. Then he disappeared, vanished out from under the two. All that was left were some blood stains and two panting makeshift warriors.

Ceran collapsed on the floor of the Healer's Ward in the Academy. Attendants rushed over to stabilize him, and the healer on duty began to soothe away his injuries. He kept burning, because that alone kept him alive against the loss of blood and blunt trauma. A day at most to get back on his feet, then that little village would be nothing but cinders. Ceran kept his mouth shut; a visit to the Healer's Ward was not always accompanied by an explanation. The King's Magi were not exactly a peaceful bunch, and the healers didn't want to know anything that might prove dangerous later on, so they didn't ask. As far as anyone else knew, Tregin was already

dust. However, if that were to change, if somehow another mage found out that Ceran had been bested by a puppy with a flicker and two adolescents with wooden sticks, destruction wouldn't be near good enough for that archer. The attendant gave him a warm cup of water mixed with something strong, and he fell deeply asleep.

The village burst into cheers. Kite stood shakily from where he had fallen into a crouch, and the two surrogate heroes rose and walked over to him. He smiled shakily at the two; they looked pretty much the same as everyone else. They both wore smiles. He stretched out a hand in greeting, but they stopped in front of him and knelt to the ground. The girl said, "We pledge fealty to you, Lord Archer. We will rebel with you against the King."

Kite stared. His jaw hung open and no words would form between his teeth. The townsfolk were all watching noiselessly, grins spreading across faces. "But, you fought him off, didn't you? I just shot him from behind, twice. Not very lordly at all," Kite stammered.

"We only took the opportunity you gave us, Lord Archer; you trusted in us to assist you against the evil Wildfire, and this time we followed you," replied the boy, his head still bent towards the ground in subservience.

"And for another thing, I'm not rebelling against anyone! I was just going stir crazy in the cabin, and wanted to see some new faces!" Kite flushed and looked around for assistance; everyone was still staring at him happily. "What is going on? Why was that mage here anyways?" he asked.

"He came from the King to destroy us for allowing you to escape, and allowing those soldiers to die," responded the girl. "He said he was going to execute those responsible, but Tirrod told Mard that he would kill everyone in the village. But you stopped him!" She looked

up at him, then immediately cast her gaze back down at the dirt.

"I don't know what you two are talking about, but for the love of God please stand up like a normal person. You are really confused, and that's making me confused. Who is Tirrod, who is Mard, and who are you two?" Kite stepped forward and pulled them upright by their arms.

"Well, I'm Tolly, and this is Hert," the girl said, "Mard was the village elder, and that's Tirrod." She pointed at Tirrod, and Kite knocked an arrow and drew a line on Tirrod, walking towards them.

Tirrod held his hands out in front of himself, palms up, showing he was unarmed. "I have no quarrel with you, Archer. You saved these people's lives, and mine. Thank you. But, that Wildfire didn't die, and if the stories I heard about them while I was a fresh recruit are true, we need to leave. You three wounded him badly, but if he had the energy to teleport, then he has the energy to survive. And he will come back to finish his job, with fire and screams. We all must leave, immediately."

A voice came out from the crowd, "Lord Archer defeated him once, and he will again!"

Another cried, "Let him, we'll show him what for! He won't escape twice!"

"You may be afraid, Tirrod, but the Lord Archer is not!"

Kite stepped in there, "Let me assure you, people of Tregin, the Lord Archer is terrified. If that Wildfire shows up again, the Lord Archer might need a new pair of pants." He turned towards Tirrod and asked, "Will he really be back so soon?"

Tirrod nodded and said, "As soon as he can. Who knows when that may be, but anyone he finds near Tregin tomorrow will be quite unfortunate."

"Well, that settles it. You all must leave. I don't know where you can go, but I would avoid the main roads for a few days, or weeks. If he finds Tregin empty, he will certainly scour

the highways, and umm, other places as well," Kite said, biting his tongue. "Please, I cannot defeat that man. These two brave citizens, Holly and Terts, saved me, in a most timely fashion."

Tolly whispered, "Tolly and Hert, sir."

"Yes of course, that thing that she said. But please, run! Gather your children, your relatives, and a heavy pack of food, and get out!" Kite was waving his arms, gesturing wildly, to absolutely no effect. Not one person took a step towards running. "Trust me, if the Wildfire finds me again, he will shred me into slivers and feed me to his dogs. Assuming he has dogs."

"Not to disagree with you sir, but he'll have to go through me first," said Hert, loud enough to be heard across the village. Everyone cheered him, and he waved. After all, if the Archer didn't want the glory, Hert might as well hold on to it for him.

"And also," said Tolly, "we're going with you. Remember, sir, we pledged our fealty to you."

"I didn't say you could do that! I don't want any feals, from anyone, let alone some villagers, brave though you villagers are," Kite added hastily after Tolly's eyes darkened with anger. "But I am not leading a rebellion. There is no rebellion. I'm just Kite. And not a Lord. I'm barely an archer," he said with a grin. No one else seemed to think it was funny.

Kite ended up taking every last villager with him into the woods. They packed lightly, and moved quickly. Luckily, Tirrod possessed a keen organizational sense, to the point of taking a decorated chair from a man's hands and dashing it in to pieces. So, they packed lightly. By the time the sun went completely down over the horizon and the group stopped for the night, they were well on their way to the Shaller's cabin. They posted watchers, drafted from the eager young townsfolk, and Kite sat down next to Tirrod to try and find a bit more information.

"So, not to sound rude, but what the hell is happening right now?"

"Well," responded Tirrod, "I think you just started a rebellion against the King. And don't worry about me, I've been dismissed, so I can be just as disloyal as anyone else. In fact, Ceran, that Wildfire, was under orders to execute every single soldier left in Tregin. Most of my garrison left after the dismissal, but there are still about ten of us hanging around. And I think every one will pledge to follow you against the King."

"Ok, one more time for the hard of hearing, I'm leading no rebellion," Kite said emphatically.

"Look around you, man, you have over one hundred fugitives from the law following you, we have guards watching the night, you have soldiers in that group, and to top it all off you showed up one of the King's best hit men. No matter what you call it, the Duke will treat this like a rebellion, and do his best to crush you like a bug. No duke wants the King showing particular interest in his realm, and if the Wildfire doesn't destroy us all in the next few days, the King might become interested. If he ever hears about us. I'd imagine Ceran is trying to keep it quite hushed," Tirrod said, chuckling deeply. Kite started to speak, but Tirrod cut him off, saying, "So you'd better treat this like a rebellion. Everyone else will, and if our leader keeps saying that he isn't, and that we aren't, that's just going to hurt moral."

Kite sat in silence for a moment. "This is really bad," he said.

Tirrod nodded, and said, "Yeah, it doesn't look good, does it, Lord Kite?" He laughed once more. "But, at least there's something to do."

Kite choked out a laugh, and responded, "Well, this winter was dragging on, wasn't it?"

Natural Vengeance

Sarion was quite happy with the plan they had developed. The Charn might be more accustomed to rampant destruction when they are roused, but this would work even better. He sat unseen in a dockside tavern of Lopinside, on the eastern coast. He watched the humans sit and drink, and talk and eat, none of it fulfilling any purpose other than keeping them alive for another day. So frail they were; three days without water and they would shrivel up and die. A bit longer than that without food. Sarion had seen how carefully they protected themselves, as if any little mishap might destroy them. The humans seemed afraid of everything, except some few things that they had learned to rely upon. They were afraid of betrayal from their partners and family members, they were afraid of beasts and insects, they were afraid of anything in the dark. The humans lit so many candles and lanterns, and the sun had not even disappeared completely. Anything they were not sure of was a source of fear. And when Cere had pointed this out, Sarion and Garne had dropped their objections. A widespread war may have depleted the humans, may have even crushed them, though Sarion was less sure of that than he pretended. But this, this plan, would obliterate them. There would be no humans left. They would hide in their forests, cowering at every clap of thunder, flinching away from the tiniest flame, fearing the very dirt they stood on. The Charn would change them from the masters of their world back into the servants.

Garne walked in the tavern, disguised as a human in a black, hooded cloak. Every flame in the room blazed as he entered, from the candles on the tables to the huge fireplace on the back wall. The humans all swiveled their heads, looking for any source of danger. Not unlike a herd of deer who caught a lion's scent. So scared these humans were. Garne sat down next to Sarion and grinned, "My Rathe are ready, as are the Lorin. I'm glad you decided to come watch, even though tonight, the Rathe will be doing the fighting."

"You cannot bait me, Garne. The Huern will wait their turn, as decided by the council. We do not want to alarm the magi until the populace is afraid to plow their fields," said Sarion patiently.

"I can try," said Garne with another smile. He swept his eyes over the contents of the tavern. "Picture these haughty creatures as the beasts they will become, Sarion. Picture them hiding in a cave because they are afraid of the rain. Picture them staring at the roof because they are afraid even of the cave! All beasts know fear, but they cannot understand their fear. They do not lie awake wondering what horrors will befall them. Humans do. That is why they have grown so powerful; they are afraid of the world, and so they band together, build machines, and make schools for their magicians. They want protection. They want safety. So much so, these humans submit to the laws of some unknown King, give money to his soldiers, and subject themselves to his whims. The writing beasts think he will protect them from something worse. And the worst part of it is, he does. They give half their production to him, and his soldiers don't burn their homes and rape their women. They obey him absolutely, and no other nation's soldiers slaughter their families."

"I cannot imagine that fear. The humans move in packs, but then are devoured by larger packs. It is no better than the solitary animals. At least those creatures are free before they are eaten. And you speak too much," Sarion looked out the window at the stars, determining that it was nearly time to begin.

"Ah, you speak too little. This is our night, Sarion. Enjoy yourself," Garne said as the pair stood. Sarion walked unseen towards the door, but Garne wasn't quite finished. He walked to the middle of the tavern and grew two feet taller, grabbing the attention of those still shallow in their cups. He spread his arms wide, and roared the crackling speech of fire. Those

dockworkers who had been drinking for longer noticed then. He stood still, every inch of him hidden by dark leathers embroidered with gold thread. The thread snaked all around him, continuously between all his garments, and it seemed to grow brighter the longer the viewer looked. As the stricken humans watched, the threads began to dance, just as a candle does in the wind. Then all the fires in the tavern went out at once, and only the thread remained visible, a pyre in the middle of the room. Then that too disappeared.

Outside the tavern, Sarion kept his stride as Garne appeared beside him. They walked down towards the dock, and Garne began to laugh quietly. After a few seconds, Sarion joined in.

The sun disappeared, and the starlight mingled with bright torches to provide few remaining workers with enough light to avoid falling into the bay. Twenty some ships sat docked at Lopinside that evening, mostly large trading vessels either unloading, loading, or simply taking a bit of shore leave. Most of the fatbellied traders sat low in the water, with huge triple masts looming over the water. The sea was calm, the ships rocking gently in the night breeze. A few sentries sat aboard each ship, some playing cards, some singing songs about women in other ports, some blatantly sleeping. The torchlight flickering along with the rolling of the waves made shadows on the sides of each hull; the shadows pitched and spun softly, telling a warm ocean story for those who knew how to see it.

As Sarion and Garne reached the dock, the torches all went out as the fires in the tavern had. Shouts rang out, calling for relighting and reinforcements. Then, slowly, fires crept along the decks of each ship. More shouts followed them, as the sentries on each vessel called out for assistance and scrambled to put the fires out. But the two Charn knew the fires would not go out. The sailors tried something them and dousing them, but the fires continued their measured

progress along the ships. Assistance began to pour in from the shore, as hundreds more sailors rushed out to their ships to try and save them.

When the fires reached the masts, they went up like backwards lightning. The sails burst into flame, and the towering masts shone brightly over the town as they snapped and crackled. Every citizen either saw the flames or heard the shouting, and all but the most timid came to the docks to see what was happening, as Sarion had predicted. Civilians lined the shore as sailors rushed up and down the docks, frantically trying to find some new substance that might quench their fires. Many gave up and stood on the docks like scarecrows, watching their livelihoods turn to ash.

But once more the fires went out, and darkness returned. The stars gave just enough light for the audience to see the ships as they began to slide underneath the waves in unison. No one had seen the fires touch the hull of any ship, and no one had heard or seen any sign of saboteurs, other than the unnatural fire. The water refused to hold the weight of the ships any longer. Sarion smiled as the Lorin pulled the water back, taking away the support and strength directly under the ships. The spectators immediately assumed that there must have been foul play of some sort from a rival country or town or some such; Sarion did not care for the specifics. The Charn did not expect the writing beasts to understand immediately. So long as they felt the fear, tasted the uncertainty, then the Lorin and Rathe had done well. Mithea thought this plan would be even better because the humans would not know where the attacks originated, and Sarion was beginning to see her point.

When the humans identify an enemy, they believe that they can develop a way to defeat it. When they see a foe, they can watch for that foe, they can set traps, they can find more ways to provide themselves with that safety. But the Charn would let them find no safety. Their

houses would crumble around them, their cooking fires would devour them alive, the very water they drank would freeze in their throats, and the air that they needed would abandon them. Oh yes, the Charn would assert their superiority once more. Sarion did not enjoy harming beasts as some did, and once these humans were suitably reminded that they were nothing more than beasts, he could let go of his pride and allow them to live. However, when the dog begins to think he is master, there can be no leniency. Cere was not sure if they could break the humans back into the animals that they once were; often, when a creature tastes dominance, the beast will no longer accept subservience. Those creatures will never be of use again, and must be killed.

The ships were now completely submerged, and the starlight was glittering over the still waters. The humans began hurrying back to their homes, except the mariners who were now homeless. A few captains had been lucky enough to offload their cargo before the night had turned against them, but the majority were now penniless. Most stood staring blankly at the ripples where their ships had been. Tomorrow, they would likely send swimmers to see if anything could be recovered. Sarion knew that nothing would. In fact, his Huern and some of the Lorin were working together at that very moment to open up the earth under the ships as well; that in itself wouldn't have been hard, but for the proper aura, Sarion did not want anything to show on the surface of the water. Let them figure out what might have happened to the ships tomorrow. Let the fear persist, and grow.

At first, they would suspect a freak accident. Then, they would accuse another group of humans, as if any of them could perform a feat of that magnitude. Next, they would cry witchcraft and magic, blaming some unknown wizard, or a forgotten curse; they might even invent a history for such a curse. Last, they would blame their gods, or themselves for displeasing their gods. Perhaps they had done something wrong, and were being punished.

Perhaps they had not made proper offerings, or followed whatever code their gods laid upon them. Sarion had noticed that there was very little mention of the gods he knew. All the humans he had heard speak of religion referred to a God, or a One God, or a True God; Sarion did not know exactly what they meant, though he supposed Persuasion probably did. Either way, that being would likely end up with the responsibility for this one catastrophe.

But where would the writing beasts turn when inexplicable occurrences sprouted over their country like weeds, when they suddenly were afraid of sinking through the floors in the houses they were born in? Can God be blamed for everything? Sarion thought that maybe He could be, though it would do the humans no good. They would be scavenging and picking berries again before long, no matter what they blamed. Sarion only hoped that by the end, they might realize why their world fell apart.

Recruiting

Sanga spent the winter at his father-in-law's house in Lurida. His wife and children seemed to be settling in nicely, and were happy to move on from their old life. There was plenty of room, and his wife's family was willing to let them stay forever, if they wished. They had even welcomed Sanga's mother and his siblings. No one spoke of the destruction of Gerrin's Shade anymore. The past was past, and nothing they could do would change what had happened. Sanga could not help but see it happening again. There had been no word from any of the higher authorities; no governor or priest had so much as condemned the action. The people of Gerrin's Shade had lost everything, from all their saved wealth, their mementos, their method of making a living. A few people had died trying to save something of those, and many more had died since or would be dying soon, both from the grief at losing them and the financial difficulties which accompanied the loss. His wife wouldn't listen to him. She told him that they

had suffered enough, and that seeking retribution would simply bring more pain. She didn't understand; he wasn't after retribution, he was after justice.

If the people let one atrocity like this go unpunished, then more would surely follow. Maybe Lurida would continue to prosper, and maybe his wife's family would never be struck by a crazed magician; but there was nothing to say that they wouldn't. Everyone else was hoping that chance would protect them from the world. Sanga was not satisfied with that. Every night in their new home, he lay awake next to his wife and saw their home being destroyed again and again. He pictured his family fleeing from fires, his children stumbling and scrabbling along the ground, crying and burning. He pictured himself impotent to help them against the wild-grinning mage.

So he didn't sleep. After a day or two of lying awake, or wandering the house, or doing some minute task that he could do by candlelight, Sanga would lie down at night and fall asleep from exhaustion. But even in his dreams, he saw the injustice of what happened, and more than that he saw what that meant. The King could not provide safety for his subjects; he would throw his subjects to his dogs for a minuscule offense. So Sanga could no longer support the King. There must be some safety somewhere. God would deliver His followers, but Sanga had seen too many good men die to believe that God would step in between a loyal man and an arrow.

After the burning of Gerrin's Shade, Sanga had been ready to march directly to Lensath and demand justice against the Wildfire. On the way to Lurida, where he had planned to leave his family, he had encountered a handful of assorted government officials. Not one had shown any surprise when he related his story. A few had offered sympathy, but none had offered help. He spoke to the leader of the garrison at Lurida, and the man seemed to think it was all a big joke. When Sanga lay awake at night, he thought on these men and their indifference. Everyone

he talked to said the same thing; there is nothing you can do, and trying will bring more suffering. Justice never entered the equation. The Church had taught him, from a little boy, that Bresalon was a place of Truth and Righteousness and Faith. God supported the King, and the King supported His people. But somewhere, Sanga knew, that system had broken down.

Of course, the fault could not lie with God. He was perfect, and He would not sponsor such injustice. So, the problem had to lie in the Kingdom. The servants of God were no longer faithful, no longer following His guidance. Sanga knew this, but he did not know how to rectify it. The mortal realm was inherently flawed, because in it, power comes before justice. Justice is a handout from those with power to those without. This was not the world of God, and Sanga knew that now. He could not find justice because he had no power. And until he had power, and justice he received would be arbitrarily dripped down upon him, by the few men in higher places who had both the means and the will to distribute it. So Sanga needed to find power, before he could obtain justice.

In Bresalon, power was not left lying around to be picked up by the citizens. Every scrap of power rested snugly in the hands of the King; beneath him, the dukes held pieces of his power, to wield in certain areas. Governors held shards of the duke's powers, and so on down to town mayors. The only man in the Kingdom who held enough power to stand against the King was the Prime Magus, and he was a loyal dog to the King. They had ruled over Bresalon for hundreds of years, and were set in their relationship. The King would deny the Prime Magus nothing, and the Prime Magus would give his power to the King. Magi were the crushing blow behind the King's power. He controlled the money, he controlled the trade, he controlled the armies, and he controlled the Church; but should all of those fall away, he controlled the magi. And they would be enough to solidify his grasp on any of the latter which decided to stray.

So Sanga had no path to power. The governing positions were either hereditary or appointed positions; they were not given to people of the area, the citizens who knew what needed to be done. They were given to those who could provide some valuable service to the appointer. The smaller towns were governed by those who could not survive in the larger cities; those offspring which embarrassed their family so much that they needed to vanish. The actual governing was done by the town mayor, and by the captain of the garrison, generally. The mayor had very little real power, but the people of the town would throw their support behind him, which was enough to get their own townspeople in line. The captain had a good deal of real power, because no one higher up cared enough to monitor him. The mayor had to keep a careful balance, and appease the soldiers while maintaining stability in his town. Sanga would never be able to become either mayor or captain; he was from another town, and he was too old to join the military, at twenty eight. The King's soldiers didn't recruit those who were old enough to have a strong identity.

Sanga left one day. He packed a few changes of clothes, some bread and water, and his travel cloak. He kissed his wife and children, and tried to explain why he was going. They didn't understand, and he didn't try too very hard to make them. Sanga went north, towards Lensath, looking for some way to change his world. Visions of injustice and pain followed him, but on the road he could sleep. Maybe the exhaustion closed his eyes, or maybe his mind could stop because he was working to fix something. The road was long and cold; nights sleeping under brush and under the stars were not pleasant. After years of living in a house with a bed, he had forgotten what it was like to be truly cold. Some days he stopped with time to make a fire, but on some days the weather hampered him or he simply could not find a spot to stop, and he

had nothing but his travel cloak to drape over himself. The cold would creep through his skin, his muscles, his bones, and down into his mind. His thoughts would slow, his emotions would diminish, his awareness would freeze; then he could sleep.

Sanga came to a middling town on the road, and he decided to remind himself what real food tasted like. He had been subsisting on dried meats, breads, and some scavengings, bought from farmers or merchants that he passed. The town's gate was rather run down, as was the rest of the town. One guard appeared to be dozing upright, leaning against the gatepost, and the other stood apathetically staring down the road. He didn't appear to even see Sanga approach, and gave him only a half-glance as he walked through the gate. The town, or city, or whatever it was, Sanga wasn't sure, was noisy. People were chattering in the streets, traders were yelling at one another, vendors were yelling at the citizens, who appeared to be able to completely ignore them. Not that there were a large number of street vendors. Most of the traffic through the town consisted of traders, and most of those traders kept a tight hold on their coin. That fact, however, made the vendors work that much harder when they saw an obvious traveler, even one who looked so ragged as Sanga. Since he wasn't begging, he had to have at least a bit of coin on him.

Sanga had to occasionally resort to shoving a vendor away from him, but for the most part his stern looks and low growls were enough to ward them away. He stopped at the first inn that he came to, and went inside. He pulled out his bag of coins immediately, to show he had business, and sat down at a table as far away from the other patrons as he could manage. The day was drawing to a close, and the inn was fairly busy, mostly with traders' guards, or the traders themselves, if they weren't locked away in their rooms. Many had been drinking for quite some time; a bit of celebration that their train had come to the town late enough that they couldn't make anywhere else before dark, but early enough that got a decent bit of leisure time. One

particularly large guard had apparently been leading the drinking, as he was easily the loudest and most annoying of the group. About the time Sanga's food reached his table, the big man started a hideously loud song about the finer points of undressing a woman.

The serving women at the inn looked disapprovingly at the raucous men; mostly at Big, because his friends were not nearly drunk enough to accompany him wholeheartedly yet. He noticed the frowning looks of one in particular, a dark haired woman slightly younger than Sanga, and laughed happily. Sanga tried to keep his attention on the food in front of him; fresh vegetables with warm bread and a tender cut of lamb. It was all quite good, but the noise and the antics of Big prevented him from enjoying it. Big had stood up and hobbled over towards the serving maid, his gut wobbling carefree, endangering those patrons closest to him. Sanga could see tattoos enveloping the man's arms, snaking up under his shirt. Strange symbols and pictures of animals, along with one of a woman with impossible proportions, covered most of his visible skin. He cornered the woman and wrapped his arms around her, and began dancing. The other servers and the innkeeper all watched and chuckled lightly, and the guards laughed heartily. The woman looked terrified to be in his grips, afraid of what he intended and afraid of what might happen on accident, should he trip and fall. He whirled her around between the tables, only knocking a over a handful. She started to scream, and the innkeeper stopped laughing. Most of the servers stopped as well; the joke was going a bit too far. She shrieked for him to put her down, to let her go, but Sanga would have bet that he didn't even hear her over his own awful singing.

The innkeeper walked over and put a hand on Big's hard muscled shoulder, and he stopped for a moment to see what had happened. The innkeeper told him firmly to put the girl down, but Big responded, "It's just a bit of fun! You can have her back tomorrow, I promise."

The guards roared in laughter, and the woman began shrieking even louder. The innkeeper grabbed Big once more and asked him once more to put the girl down, or he would be asked to leave. Big yelled, "Fine!" and did one more spin, belted out the end of his song, and let the poor woman go. He apparently had let her go a bit too early, and she flew out of his arms, and tripped over a chair. She flipped up over the chair, and ended up on her back with her dress crumpled up around her, her undergarments clear to all who cared to look. The guards cheered, and the woman hopped up and ran out of the room sobbing.

Big took a less than graceful bow, and his fellows gave him a hearty round of applause. The innkeeper scowled, but said nothing.

Sanga stared down at his meal, and visions began to run through his mind as they had before. What if the guards had shown up later, when the innkeeper and most of the servers were asleep? What if the woman had tried to fight back? Big didn't look like he would take that kindly. What if she had landed on her neck instead of her back? Sanga saw it all. The serving woman lying on the floor, broken. Her laying in the alley bleeding cold and used. Big still laughing, carrying her upstairs, her stabbing his neck with a table knife, him snapping her in half. Sanga saw her husband or fiance attacking Big in a flurry of vengeance, and being cut down by the man and his friends.

Sanga stood and walked through the chairs to the table the guards shared. The floor creaked at a few footfalls, the old wood worn down by years of drunken fighters who'd found their profession by the merit of their girth. Sanga surveyed the table full of merchant's guards; they were scarred and dirty, preferring drinking to bathing in their precious nights in town. Food was scattered over their table, liquid sloshed in between them from toasts and overemphatic storytelling. Weapons lay scattered between chair legs; daggers, axes, swords, whatever random

collection the guards could find. Most were of poor make. Merchant guards generally did better looking intimidating than actually fighting. Sanga had heard more than one story of guards surrendering their charge if the bandits looked to be the bigger dogs. The blades strewn about the inn weren't even sheathed; rust had found several already.

Sanga stood behind Big for a moment, then grabbed the man's shoulder. His greasy hair wobbled as he turned his head to look at Sanga.

"What?" asked Big.

"I want you to apologize to the woman you injured, and to the innkeeper. Your behavior was unacceptable," Sanga said.

"She's fine, 'cept a little bit snooty. I didn't hurt anythin'. Why don't you go back an enjoy your meal?" Big turned back to his food, finished with the conversation.

Sanga stared at the back of his head for a moment, unsure what to do next. Then he grabbed Big's shoulder again, and the guard jerked upright, sending the chair backwards into Sanga, then clattering to the floor.

"*What!?*" Big bellowed between broken teeth and half-chewed dinner. His face was quickly mottling a deep red, the color seeping in around his jowls and nose. Sanga stood nearly eye-to-eye with him; the southerner had always been taller and stronger than the people around him, but in sheer size he could not match the guard. Big hadn't drawn his weapon; in fact, Sanga saw what looked to be Big's mace laying in the floor between a discarded bone and an empty bottle. He thought it was Big's because it was, well, unnecessarily large. As if it were meant for crushing plate mail, which no one outside the King's Army could easily acquire.

"You must apologize. What you did was wrong," Sanga said, louder than he meant to. His heart beat quickly, but he steeled his features and muscles, to stand up straight against his

foe.

"I don't see that happening. You got one more chance to leave with your face lookin' the way it does now," Big snarled.

One of his companions joined in with a chuckle, saying, "I'd take it, friend. Ogen doesn't take kindly to bein told what to do." Several others laughed and nodded agreement. They were having a good time with just drinking and singing, and didn't need a fight to liven the night up.

Ogen stumbled forward, and a few of the guards snorted laughter, which was quickly drowned by cups or sleeves. Sanga took a halfstep back, and set his feet. His shoulders tensed, and his hands balled into fists. Ogen turned his head to see which of his friends had laughed, sternly at first but then breaking into a half smile at his own drunkenness, right as Sanga threw his fist into Ogen's face.

The big man didn't topple, didn't wince or growl. At first, he just looked confused, like the dog does when the cat runs up and hits it across the nose. As he stared at Sanga with drink and surprise slowing his thoughts, the southerner swung again, crushing Oden's nose and sending blood spray down Sanga's arm and Oden's shirt. The giant reeled backwards, crashing into the table of his friends. Several of them stood to help him take down the crazy man, but Oden wiped his nose and waved them away with blood dripping off his fingertips. Sanga held his stance, left foot forward, balancing lightly on the balls of his feet. "I just want you to apologize. Your actions were unacceptable," Sanga said, trying to sound reasonable.

His opponent shook his head briefly, sending another shower of blood droplets to the floor, then roared at Sanga and charged him. In his drunken state, Oden didn't see the chair that had fallen off to the side, and one leg caught his foot as he lunged. Sanga spun left and the giant crashed to the floor right where he had been standing. The big man lay flat on his stomach,

breathing heavily. He looked up at Sanga from his fallen position with eyes that were well into glazing over from too much alcohol. His hair sprawled across his face, some of the oily strands falling into the little streams of blood running from his nose. Sanga saw a few of those hairs were graying, perhaps more than that. The man had some tarlike substance in his hair to make it black. Oden's gut expanded out to the sides, and the man wheezed as he began to lift himself up. Sanga stepped closer and kicked him in the face, spraying more blood onto the floor. Sanga saw the crying woman, the broken woman, the humiliated woman, in his mind. He saw her dead, he saw her dead, he saw her dead. And each time he saw her, saw what could have happened, what certainly had happened elsewhere, he snapped his foot harder into the head of the man at his feet.

Then he stopped. Several of the guards were on their feet, with weapons drawn. Sanga backed slowly away from Oden. He couldn't tell if the big man was still breathing, but the thick mat of gore on Sanga's boot and the seeping warmth encasing his foot were not good signs. The guardsmen advanced slowly, but even those scarred and hardened men were reluctant to engage the southerner. Sanga wasn't sure if the men would attack him, but he was not afraid. He had finally stopped worrying and started fixing the problems. Perhaps this problem wasn't as great as those still prowling the world outside, but he had found a wrong and fixed it. He no longer felt helpless. He felt the spirit of God again for the first time since the Wildfire destroyed his village. Some things could be made right, and if some could then surely the rest could as well. Sanga turned his back and walked out of the inn. The door was slammed shut by the wind, and no one opened it to follow him. The night was strong wherever he was, and the streetlamps looked pathetic next to the shadows around them. Sanga would move on; this town was not the source of the trouble in Bresalon, and he could not afford to spend his energies here. Before he

left, though, he would need a weapon. The darkness in the world would not be easily lightened.

Grubby's home hadn't been the same since his brother had been drafted. His mother no longer sang hymns in the morning before the men went out, and his father didn't tell stories while they sailed. Everything got done, and everyone still smiled, but he was gone. Many of their neighbors told them how proud they should be of Feron, how he would keep his country safe, how he was becoming a man. Some of these neighbors had lost sons themselves to the "recruiters." Most seemed to be telling themselves that the drafting wasn't that bad, that their sons would come home in a few years stronger, wiser, and richer. Grubby's mother didn't receive these neighbors well. She would put the food up early, and start her knitting before the sun went down. Grubby no longer had anyone to play his games with. Even his sister Dera would no longer sit a match against him, even when he offered to help her, or give himself a handicap.

Grubby had never been particularly close to Feron. His brother was six years older than himself, and not taken with games or children. Grubby sat at the kitchen table, in the candlelight, moving his little wooden pieces across the little cloth board. His mother was mending something in her rocking chair near the stove, creaking slowly back and forth. Dera was already in bed, as was his father. Grubby would usually be in bed by this hour, but his mother had given up on enforcing that rule since Feron left, and Grubby had always wanted to see what went on after he went to sleep. So far, he had been wholly disappointed. He could understand why Dera went to bed earlier and earlier; the world was no better after sunset, just

darker, and quieter. His candle flickered lower, and the wood in the stove was dying out.

Grubby didn't want to be the one to fetch more from outside, even though it wasn't cold. Rain drizzled down from the sky halfheartedly. The silence was getting a bit too heavy, and he was sick of hearing nothing but snores and raindrops.

"Mother, tell me again when Feron will come home," he said quietly. They had discussed this many times before, but Grubby still didn't quite understand.

"The man who took him said three years. But it may be longer than that, or shorter. We'll just have to see, dear," his mother responded softly.

"Ok, why did they need him? Are we fighting anyone?" Grubby knew, at least superficially, that armies sometimes needed conscripts to bulk up their numbers.

"No, we aren't fighting anyone, yet," his mother didn't look up from her mending.

"But we might be fighting somebody soon? Armies aren't much use without fighting, are they?"

"The King might know something we don't. Maybe someone is about to attack, or maybe we are. Maybe one of the dukes thinks the crown would fit him better."

Grubby took a moment to ponder that one. He moved a black piece from the pile to the board, delicately. He shuffled a few other pieces in reaction to the new one. The clackings of his game were muffled by the cloth, but in the stillness of his kitchen they were clear, alongside the complaints of his mother's rocking chair.

"But Mother, shouldn't they tell us, since Feron will need to know anyways?"

"Maybe they should, but the King doesn't have to answer to us. If he doesn't want us to know, then we won't know. I'd bet almost no one knows, but when the King orders a draft, there's going to be a draft," she said, but she sounded faint, as if she were far away. Grubby

looked up from his game, and she was still just rocking and mending, not once glancing from her work.

"Hmmm. I know why we've got to obey the King, and I know why the King might need an army, but he should at least tell us. After all, Feron's going to be the one fighting, so he should know. I wouldn't think that soldiers would fight well if they don't know why they're fighting. At least, I wouldn't." Grubby was thinking aloud now, rambling, "Maybe he doesn't need them to fight well. Maybe he just wants to show how many soldiers he has, and whoever he's fighting will get afraid. After all, Feron wouldn't be very good at fighting if he didn't get much training, and training soldiers is really expensive. Or maybe he doesn't need them to fight well at all, maybe he just needs them to fight. But that wouldn't be very good for Feron, if the King just threw him into a fight without proper motivation or training. Maybe he wants numbers more than actual fighting ability?"

"That's quite enough, Manfred. Go to bed," his mother said, hard but still faint.

"Sorry, Mother, I was just thinking. What does the King want, that's what we have to figure out first. I'll go think on it in bed, then we can talk again tomorrow," Grubby said as he kissed his mother's cheek.

"I don't want to speak of this anymore. It doesn't matter what he wants, we can't do anything about it," she said, and her eyes stayed down as her son started towards bed.

Grubby waited till he was settled in his bed, his blankets laying lightly on his skin and the rain falling lazily out the window, to whisper to himself, "Even the littlest pieces are important, Mother. I've just gotta see where to put them."

A Bigger Cabin

Ceran returned to Tregin before the sun was fully awake. Light crested the horizon, but the yellow orb of morning could not yet be seen. He appeared in the center of town, near the exact spot he had left from. His head was still throbbing, and knots had formed all over. But the healers had knit his skull back together, and the arrow wounds as well, though they still ached as well. The attendants had told him that a good bit of rest and some painkilling herbs would make everything feel just right again, but Ceran had a slightly different plan of recovery. Watching these houses burn with those villagers inside would be quite therapeutic. And that little whelping hedge wizard would get to watch.

Ceran was burning hot, and had already put up a shield of heat around himself that would incinerate any arrows that he not see coming. The heat of his shield made his vision hazy, as the air around it was warped and boiling. Ceran looked slowly around the village, noting the open doors and discarded items littering the streets. It was nearly silent, except for the wind and a few birds calling. Ceran saw a dog peek out from behind one of the open doors, with a bit of bread hanging out of its jaws. The mongrel saw Ceran and darted back inside. Ceran walked through the middle of the town, his gaze searching for something to hurt. But there was nothing. His anger fueled his power, and the shield blazed hotter, distorting the entire town, making the simple shapes twist, the stone houses shifting before his eyes. At first, he suspected a trap. He held his shield hard and strong, waiting for a volley of arrows or the hiss of a throwing knife. But everything in the town spoke to a mass exodus. He reached the Church, and blasted the doors off their hinges. The heavy oak doors shattered many of the benches, flipping and bouncing across the floor like monstrous skipping stones, until they crashed into the back wall and fell still. But the Church was barren, except for the destroyed benches and speaker's stand.

The wall hangings and ornaments were all gone, along with the chalices and decorated candlesticks. The priests had even carried away the Book of Holy Law, which was never to leave the sanctuary.

Ceran's rage bubbled under his skin. He could feel it moving and writhing in his belly, energy growing without an outlet, trying to burst out of every pore. He took a deep breath, and swallowed all his rage, forcing it back down, compressing it into a ball inside himself. He felt as if his innards were vibrating from the fury. But not yet. He had to keep every ounce of his power ready, to show that street performer of a magician what real magic was. He circled the Church, and found tracks running away from the stable, deep wheel tracks, left by a heavily burdened wagon. Ceran followed those tracks quickly, running at a great speed, eating up a tiny particle of the power he was burning. The scenery blurred around him. Gray trees and brown grasses fighting their way out of the snow became just their colors, looking like brushstrokes from a painter, brown and white along the ground and blue and gray above. Ceran followed the wheelruts along the main road back to civilization; there were few other signs of travel, since the winter kept most people home and the snow covered up the tracks of those few who had taken this road out of Tregin. As he left the clearings around the village, he dropped his protective barrier; keeping it up was taxing, and any trap would surely have come in the village. And if they thought they could defeat a Wildfire who was burning hot and ready for them, he would gladly give them the first shot. He stopped his running and took a small breather, to gather his surroundings and to clear his head. The hazy shield and the blurred scenery had given him quite a headache, on top of the beating he had received yesterday.

Little sprigs of green were shooting up in a few patches, where the sun had snuck through to melt the snow. Those plants would die soon, whenever the next snow fell. So many seeds

thought that winter was fading, that the ice would not return. Ceran thought about burning them away, but he preferred to let nature run its course. No flowers would bloom for another month. Ceran studied the tracks, noting that there was only one horse pulling the heavy laden wagon; they couldn't have gone very far. Ceran broke once more into his run, and within ten minutes he heard creaking and swearing, and the heavy breaths of a worn out horse. He slowed to a walk; one of the first things a mage learned was that if one used his powers to hasten his desires, the attainment was not as satisfying.

He saw the two priests sitting on the wagon, bickering with each other about something. The poor beast pulling them looked about ready to collapse in the middle of the road. The wagon itself was quite simple, probably taken from some farmer's house after the family had departed. The bed was simple, flat with short walls to hold in the cargo, and another single plank of wood made the bench the priests sat upon. He laughed when he saw how much cargo the priests had taken; they had a mattress at the bottom of the wagon, and had piled blankets on top of that, followed by tapestries and wall hangings, which had candlesticks and cups, and writing sets and a golden plate, silver plaques and an assortment of other valuable trinkets. Well, valuable in the capital, not valuable out in the woods. They had one pack full of food, and were using the silver chalices to melt snow for water. And of course, the Book sat between the two men, who whipped their heads around and fell into silence at the sound of his laughter.

The one holding the reins, the one Ceran had spoken too the day before, pulled the horse to a stop. Pollitt, that was his name. Maybe. He hopped off the bench and scrambled over to the back of the wagon, unsure whether he should approach Ceran or not. He bowed deeply and said, "Master Wildfire, what a pleasant surprise! We are traveling, have abandoned the Church, because we must, um, report to the authorities in Fairbridge, to the Governor."

"Do not lie to me. You flee my return, and poorly." Ceran had always been one to play with his food. His mother used to scold him for it.

"No, my lord, of course not. But you see, all the villagers left, and we have no reason to stay at the Church. See, we've taken everything we could, to return the King's investment in us." Pollitt was shaking, and his companion was eyeing the treeline on the sides of the road, as if maybe he could escape.

"Where did they go? Where is your flock, shepherd? And more than that, where is the pup that wounded me?"

"I do not know. They left right after you did, lord, and did not tell us where they were going. But, for the criminal who shot you, I know a little. His name is Kite, he was a wanderer who happened upon the Shaller's farm, and killed some soldiers there." The priest's voice wavered and shook. Not many men could hold on to their wits when facing death, and Ceran felt himself much scarier than death.

"So that was the criminal I was sent to punish Tregin for aiding. Though it turns out the whole town was criminal. Tell me, priest, how did a town turn so much against its master? Are you not charged to teach loyalty to the King?" Ceran stepped forward, closer to his victim. He was always surprised at the effectiveness of such small gestures. He could obliterate this little man and everything he had ever known, but looming over him made the priest take a step back. As he did so, Pollitt bumped against the wagon and looked up at Ceran. He had a bit of surprise on his face; did the man not know that he had been acting like a frightened bunny?

"Yes, of course, and I did," Pollit responded, now sounding a bit more forceful. "But you were going to kill them all. I don't believe their loyalties go so far as to allow that. No one was supporting Kite against the soldiers; they were not traitors until the King ordered them dead."

The priest bit his tongue at that, but his face hardened a little. Ceran could see the man's mind churning; perhaps he knew now that no matter what he said, Pollitt was never seeing another warm bed.

The other priest had realized that as well, and lunged for the cover of the trees. Ceran was ready for him, of course, and a blast of searing wind knocked the priest into the wagon. The horse whinnied at the feel of the heat and the thud of the man against the sideboards, but had no energy left to bolt. The man groaned lightly, but Ceran had not intended to just wound him, so he would not survive. The wind had been hot enough to scour the skin from his hard, and hard enough to send a man his size quite a ways, and it would have if the wagon hadn't been in quite such an unfortunate place. And so heavily laden. The wagon itself had hardly budged as the man's seared head had crashed into the side. The wood was shattered at the point of contact. Ceran thought that it would leave a nasty splinter, had the priest any life left in his body to acquire one.

Pollitt drew himself up a little bit taller, now that hope had left him. Ceran found that quite interesting; some men broke when hope left them, some begged and pleaded, some even tried attacking him, but some people found their courage in their death. The man in front of him no longer sought to escape death, but rather to face it well.

"The Book of Holy Law does not give you the right to murder an entire town. The people of Tregin are not evil, and they were not traitors. The King appointed me to watch over them, but I never agreed to watch him execute them. They have fled, and will disperse amongst the province, living among the other people of Oreskil, and they will be safe from you."

"Then I will burn every city from here to Lensath. But I don't think they will do that. I think you are lying to protect them, even though they have no love for you. They didn't take you

with them, did they? They left you as bait for me, to buy themselves an extra hour! Do not fear, priest, I will wreak your vengeance upon them." Ceran's fire erupted out of his body, billowing upwards, the hot wind whipping his hair and clothes around him. "I will burn this entire forest if I have to. They will die, as you do now. Talk to your God and prepare a little bit of extra room in whatever pit Tregin has earned. I will not take long." Flames consumed Pollitt, his companion and the wagon. The wall hangings burnt to cinders, and the precious metals melted together and ran down among the ashes. The beleaguered horse found a bit of power he hadn't used up yet, and bolted off into the forest, the wagon inferno chasing close behind. Ceran wondered briefly if the harness would burn sufficiently for the horse to break loose; it didn't seem likely.

Alena was not happy with the crowd Kite had brought home. Mrs. Shaller, Chiren, and Nelgin had been greeting their friends and neighbors, helping them prepare a bit of food, or cobbling together some form of shelter, but Alena had been looking for a way to get Kite to herself. That boy had ruined her life, and now seemed set on getting her family killed. A handful of people living in a cabin in the forest was small; it was subtle. An entire village camping around said cabin was not. The noise alone would be enough to alert the soldiers from a mile off, and Alena knew someone was looking for them. A few days after Kite had left, they had seen huge pillars of smoke rising to the south east, near enough to where Tregin was located. Or had been located. She was sure that nothing remained of the town now. And now all hundred or more villagers were wanting to share their small plot of farmable land, to scavenge with them among the still sparse wildlife and growing things. They would all starve, every last one.

"What are you going to feed them," Alena gripped Kite's sleeve and pulled him around the side of the cabin, away from all the villagers clapping him on the back and relating to Nelgin how Kite had saved them.

"Huh? Well, they brought some food with them, I made sure of it," the boy said, as if he were somehow intelligent for remembering that people need to eat.

"Oh good, now I can just go back to my garden without worries for oh, about, three days!" Her daughters would not starve because of this fool.

"They were planning on staying there, and just going on! The Wildfire came back, I know you saw the smoke ----"

"A *Wildfire*? So they weren't just babbling? Nilly Harson came up and told me that you had fought a mage, but I didn't believe her. No, I thought, surely Kite wouldn't anger the King's *right hand*! We're all going to die now, I just want you to know that," she said. Nelgin joined them around the side of the shed, and Alena calmed herself. Screaming was not very ladylike, and even though Nelgin didn't seem to mind when she lost her temper, she always made a bit of extra effort for him. "Hello, husband. Were you aware that your little friend has doomed us all?"

"Well, my take on it was that he saved Tregin. I was going to congratulate him, but I can wait till you're finished with him," said Nelgin.

Kite's eyes widened and he said, "No, no, I believe I'm in dire need of congratulations, Nelgin. Don't leave me." Kite's pleading look caused Nelgin to grin.

"Alena, we'll figure something out. There's plenty of food for now, and the people Kite brought have subsisted on their own in Tregin for years. After all, we don't get many traders, and we definitely don't get anything we need to survive from them. We've lost the town, but

people still know how to farm, to smith, to weave, and to build. And we've got plenty of lumber." Nelgin waved an arm at the surrounding forest.

"But by the time we can clear the fields, plow them, plant them, and harvest them, people will already be starving," Alena said. "Farming is not a quick profession."

"I talked to Tirrod, and the townspeople brought enough supplies to last through next winter, if we ration carefully. Apparently his old captain had been collecting quite a bit more food in taxes than the soldiers ate, so the barracks had a substantial stockpile," said Nelgin. Kite stood beside him and grinned at Alena.

"Who's Tirrod?" she asked.

"He's the ranking officer from the garrison at Tregin. You remember him, he's the one that Kite spoke to at the edge of the woods. He let us go, after Kite killed his two superior officers. He doesn't hold a grudge though, he seems quite friendly."

"Soldiers?! You brought *soldiers* here? You are a scourge sent by God to test me, aren't you Kite? Admit it, there's no other explanation." She turned to Nelgin and continued, "And you, you like this Tirrod? Who fired arrows at your wife, your niece, and yourself? Who arrested you and beat you and locked you in the Church?"

"Now, there's no telling if Tirrod did any of those things. I definitely didn't recognize him from the arrest anyways. And if he did fire arrows, well, to be fair, Kite shot first. *And*," he continued as Alena made to interrupt him, "even then, he was just following orders. Now he says he's been dismissed, along with the other soldiers, and has grown rather fond of the citizens of Tregin. He wants to help."

"I hate you both," she said as she scowled. Nelgin and Kite both beamed smiles at her. "Well, don't stand there waiting for the trees to clear themselves. I've got to make sure that no

one tries to set up camp in my garden. And I'm going to make sure they have latrines dug well away from the house. And we've got to make sure everyone gets a decent patch of ground to work, so that no one starts complaining about. . ." her voice trailed off as she walked away, muttering.

Nelgin called after, "I love you sweety."

Kite followed with a short "Love you!" which he cut off abruptly as Nelgin looked at him puzzled. "Sorry, I uhh, I'm not sure why I said that."

Nelgin chuckled at him and walked away. Kite was left wondering why he couldn't just once sound like he had half a brain around the Shallahs.

It took all afternoon for Kite to rid himself of the villagers who wanted to either thank him, congratulate him, or ask him some specific question regarding the details of settling in. As if he was supposed to know where the best spot for a communal latrine would be. Kite didn't even want to think about something like that, let alone make decisions about it. He had ended up saying that it should be far away from the cabin, and the questioner looked at him as if he were dense. Which he probably was, not knowing the basics of starting a rebellion. All the great military leaders must have known instinctually where their followers should relieve themselves. That probably came first in the annals of war; the host numbered over fifty thousand, and their latrines were at the southwest corner.

They really thought he knew what to do though. Every last one of those villagers, from the old men to the little babies, seemed to think that he would keep them safe, and more than that lead them to a victory against the injustices they had faced. All he had ever managed to do was lead himself deep into this latrine of a situation. Kite thought about his home, a good deal larger

than Tregin but still small enough that most of Oreskil would consider it backwoods territory. Gah, he had hated being there. After Lira, he had simply packed up his belongings and left. Not even with a specific direction in mind, except to not head further inland and risk hitting Fairbridge. He hadn't even known Tregin existed; Kite had planned on wandering the wilderness, hunting for his food, until he came across a bear, or tripped over a snake, or stepped in a hole and broke his ankle. That was how it was supposed to end; no one to witness, no one to cry, no one to be hurt by his passing. He was to become a creature of the forest, live and die as one. But that was before spending a week of nights in the freezing rain, sleeping little and waking at every sound. The Shaller's barn had been a pleasant surprise. Kite had quickly lost his fervor, almost embarrassingly fast, and he had wanted comfort again. Just for one night, he promised himself, just one night out of the rain.

Well, that hadn't worked out at all. He was glad he had been there, to help Tom fight. He remembered the man, even though he didn't really know him. He remembered Tom fighting an unwinnable fight, seizing his own death and making something of it. By that example, Kite no longer wished to die a beast. He sat in the forest as the sun went down, savoring the solitude, his back up against an old ash tree. Chiren appeared beside him; she was quite good at moving silently, when she wanted to. She sat down beside him without saying a word. He gazed at her face, as he often did. Soft lines and pale skin, black hair like a drop of night falling down her shoulders. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, saw him staring and grinned. Her eyes were always so happy. Maybe that's what he liked most, that she always seemed glad to see him, glad that he was there.

"Alena says that you're out in the woods so that you don't have to do any work," she said, and turned her head to face him.

"She hates me, you know. Said so herself, just this afternoon."

"Nelgin too, or so I heard. She doesn't seem to care much for anyone, to be honest."

"Except you!," Kite said indignantly. "She loves you, and your mother! Even Wek, which seems a bit odd."

"Of course she does, I meant she doesn't care for anyone who isn't perfect," Chiren said, flipping her hair back and giving him a look that was supposed to convey perfection. They stared at each other for a moment, then he burst into laughter. "What, you disagree?" Chiren said with mock severity.

"No ma'am, I would never. I've learned not to disagree with any woman whose last name is Shaller."

"Well, all jokes aside, that's probably wise," she said with a smirk. "So tell me, did you really defeat a Wildfire? Are you a mage, or a god? Or possibly both, though that claim seemed a bit redundant to me."

"You've been listening to the wrong people. I shot him twice, I think, then Tolly and Hert ran up and beat the fire off him with sticks. I'm telling you, those villagers are crazy people. They wouldn't listen to me. They wouldn't even leave town until I told them we had a secret base out here in the forest. They thought I could finish the Wildfire off when he came back! A *Wildfire!*" Kite snorted in disbelief.

"Well, could you? After all, you did something at the edge of the woods. Maybe you didn't want to talk about it before, but you can't deny it happened. And it sounds like you did something again at Tregin. Normal men can't defeat mages."

"No, I couldn't defeat him. I can't defeat him, and if he comes back I won't defeat him. He will burn me to a cinder, and everyone else soon after. That's why I'm out here. I don't know

what to do, and I can't stand having everyone looking at me as if I have the answers."

"If it's any consolation, I know you don't have any answers," she said with a small giggle. Kite didn't find it very funny. "But you haven't lost yet, maybe Chance is still around somewhere helping you out."

"Oh, yah, I saw him right before I shot the mage. He did something to me, like he did before. What was it he said that day at the edge of the woods? He set me on fire?"

"Yes, that's what he called it. So, answer my question. Are you a mage?"

"I'm not sure. I've never been a mage before, and I don't know how it's supposed to feel. I felt something though. And I think I fought the Wildfire with it. So, probably." Kite looked away. Mages were rare, and all of them came from the Academy. Regular people, like Chiren, didn't know much about them. They were closer to monsters under beds than to actual people, except the adults were scared by these monsters.

"Hah, I knew it. Show me! Do something with magic," Chiren said, and Kite was a bit taken aback. Magic was not commonplace, and it was not safe. Wielders of heartfire were few and far between. Children were told stories about wicked wizards that turned disobedient children into snakes, or kidnapped young townfolk, making them slaves. Worse than the stories were the rumors, the hearsay, the news from the town over that a wizard had come from the capital to exact vengeance. In every story, the mage was a villain. Something about the power to destroy just brought out the worst. Chiren should have been excusing herself to run screaming. But she wasn't. Chiren was rarely afraid of anything, and definitely not him.

"I don't know how. I don't even know how to hold magic. I think Chance called it burning; I don't know how to burn."

"Figure it out! After all, you might want to be able to use it if that Wildfire shows up."

She grinned at him, watching him for some sign of magical power.

Kite sat still for a moment and did as she asked. He felt around inside himself, looking for that little spark that would grow into something more. He had been practicing while walking back from Tregin, but had only managed to make a small flame, and then only twice. As soon as he could actually feel something burning in his stomach, like he had when Chance had helped him before, he got scared and somehow dropped the light inside of him. Even those two tiny fires had terrified him, and falling back into the coolness of normalcy had been too tempting. So he had only tried a handful of times. Kite knew that even if he could control that candle of a fire, it would do nothing to save him or his followers from the Wildfire.

But tonight it felt different. He found the spark almost immediately, and it swelled to a soft glow. Kite didn't fear this fire. He saw Chiren watching him eagerly, not worried that his power might burst out of him, might start a fire, might... any of the terrible things Kite had seen happening. He felt a new channel for this power; he was calm now, relaxed. She trusted him.

It wasn't a fire, exactly, though Kite could understand why Chance used those terms. It churned and flickered in his stomach, never still, but consuming nothing. The power was warm, but not scalding. It would not harm him or anyone else unless he forced it to. Slowly, it spread throughout his body, bringing heat and life from his fingertips to the hairs on his head. He felt wonder for the first time since he was a child.

He recalled the way he had felt the first time he'd really watched snow fall, the first time he was old enough to see the beauty of it. He thought of the thousands of tiny white feathers floating down gently, landing on the windowsill with not so much as a whisper. He remembered the first night he'd spent out in the forest alone, and the million sounds that surrounded him. That night, the cold and the wet had not bothered him, and the noises of the forest had not

frightened him. Each chirp and crackle, drop and snap had been a possibility that sent his mind whirling, imagining what could be happening in the dark. That was how he felt now. The fire caressed him, brushing against his skin, giving him a new sense of possibility. He could make the wind sing, he could make the trees dance, he could make the ground thump tempo, and he could make fire light up the night; he could make Chiren laugh now.

She had been sitting patiently as he thought. She still smiled, and had watched confusion, frustration, fear, and happiness play across his face. His eyes met hers, and he wondered what of his new world she would most like to see. Slowly, he reached out a hand, and turned his palm towards the sky. For a minute they both sat perfectly still, eyes fixated on his unwavering hand. Slowly a flame grew out of nothing, an inch above his palm. The light was soft, and the flame was wrapped neatly in a ball. It was blue, like a summer's sky. Slowly, Kite unwound the ball, shaping it and molding it. It flattened and unrolled, two sides spreading wide and the middle growing longer. Slowly, the fire twisted into the shape of a tiny butterfly, which flapped its wings and flew away from Kite's hand.

Chiren and Kite both watched the creature with open mouths and wide eyes. It circled above their heads, leaving behind wisps of flame that disappeared as they fell. Chiren held out her palm, beckoning the butterfly to land. Kite smiled as the creature of flame fluttered down and perched upon her hand. She laughed lightly, and whispered, "It tickles," softly so as to not frighten the butterfly away. She brought the creature up to her face, to try and get a better look. When she brought it close enough to feel her breath, the butterfly launched off of her hand back above their heads. They watched it float lazily, both smiling like children with honey. Through the barren tree branches, they could see the stars looking down, peeking through the last vestiges of sunset, between the sleeping trees. Kite's butterfly drifted upwards, flapping its fiery wings,

until it didn't look much different from the brightest stars. Another minute, and Kite lost track all together. He was searching the sky, trying to bring the creature back, when he felt Chiren kiss him lightly on the cheek.

"Thank you for my butterfly," she said, then stood up and walked away. Kite lay back against his tree and watched her disappear into the deep dark of the woods. He closed his eyes and saw once more the beauty of the world, in the snow, in the rain, in the magic he somehow could access. The trees were quiet around him, but what little could be heard had so many possibilities. The night wasn't so cold, for one who could listen.